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Issue Brief

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Understanding Trump's Policy Approach to Pakistan

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Nothing seems to be new in the Pakistan and US ties, and the latest set of allegations towards Pakistan come as no surprise.



The Trump Administration has accused Pakistan of being selective in its approach towards fighting the Taliban

and allowing Taliban-linked insurgents a place to plot deadly strikes in Afghanistan and regroup after ground offensives.¹ After President Trump took office, Islamabad appeared confident about a more “substantive” and mutually “advantageous” engagement with the new administration.² However, Pakistan's optimism which was established rather swiftly after a brief phone conversation between Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the US President Donald Trump, followed by Islamabad's direct contacts with the Trump team,³ seems to have come to an end earlier than expected.

President Donald Trump and his administration is hardening its approach towards Pakistan to crack down on Pakistan-based militants launching attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan.⁴ Pakistan, a front line country and a major non-NATO ally of the US in its war on terrorism is once again faced with a 'do more' mantra all over again. Pakistan, it must be said, has categorically and repeatedly denied taking up any policy which favours a selective approach to terrorists.

The Trump Administration has started to look back at Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan, reviving the AfPak dogma; and as a consequence, pushing the relations back by years again. The hardening stance is also visible in the recent report published by the US State Department, characterising Pakistan as an influential external actor that is directly involved in affecting Afghanistan's stability.⁵ The US, in its

¹ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Trump administration eyes hardening line toward Pakistan," *Reuters*, June 20, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-exclusive-idUSKBN19B0C8>

² Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Upbeat About US Ties Under Trump; Critics Skeptical," January 19, 2017 <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-upbeat-about-us-ties-under-trump-critics-skeptical/3682634.html>

³ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Upbeat About US Ties Under Trump; Critics Skeptical," January 19, 2017 <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-upbeat-about-us-ties-under-trump-critics-skeptical/3682634.html>

⁴ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Trump administration eyes hardening line toward Pakistan," *Reuters*, June 20, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-exclusive-idUSKBN19B0C8>

⁵ Country Reports on Terrorism 2016, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/>

ritualistic manner, now threatens Pakistan that it will take away the country's status as a non-NATO ally⁶ - merely a symbolic title with little or no benefits - and to significantly cut down on its foreign aid⁷.

The Trump Administration in its utter ignorance fails to understand that the foreign aid that it threatens to take away from Pakistan does not come as an accounted favour. It is accompanied by a vicious cycle of conditions and technical lingo which the donor country exploits to put undue pressure on the recipient country. The foreign aid assistance which the US harasses Pakistan with has been used to fight the extremist groups and terrorists that the US is endeavouring to eliminate. Also, the billions of dollars of US military aid to Pakistan eventually ends up in buying US made weapons and other equipment.

Furthermore, to throw more weight on Pakistan, the Trump Administration has proposed to restart and broaden the drone strikes inside Pakistan.⁸ Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff, General Qamar Bajwa has criticized this approach as "unilateral actions" and "counterproductive, and against (the) spirit of ongoing cooperation and intelligence sharing being diligently undertaken by Pakistan."⁹

The US National Security Adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster, in an interview, has also asked Pakistan to change its "paradoxical" policy of supporting selective terror groups. Towing the line of Pakistan's two neighbours - India and Afghanistan – Gen. McMaster has accused Pakistan of being selective in its war against terrorism.¹⁰ The accusations made by the US just reflects its obtuse attitude towards Pakistan's and the sacrifices it has made in the war that was brought to its doorstep, incidentally by the US itself.

This significant change in the US stance comes after two major developments; firstly, after President Trump granted unrestricted powers to the US military in Afghanistan, and secondly; post Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to the US in June 2017 and signing of numerous defence deals between the two countries. In spite of growing US-India strategic ties, many officials in the Trump Administration are

⁶ Anwar Iqbal, "US bill seeks to revoke Pakistan's major ally status," June 24, 2017
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1341421>

⁷ Andrew Natsios, "What Trump's Foreign-Aid Budget Means to the Rest of the World," *The Atlantic*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/04/what-trumps-foreign-aid-budget-means-to-the-rest-of-the-world/521553/>

⁸ Peter Bergen and David Sterman, "Will President Trump restart the drone war in Pakistan?" *CNN*, January 21, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/21/opinions/trump-drone-war-in-pakistan-bergen-sterman/index.html>

⁹ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Trump administration eyes hardening line toward Pakistan," *Reuters*, June 20, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-exclusive-idUSKBN19B0C8>

¹⁰ "US tells Pakistan it won't tolerate selective approach in fight against terror groups," *First Post*, August 6, 2017, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/us-tells-pakistan-it-wont-tolerate-selective-approach-in-fight-against-terror-groups-3900013.html>

sceptical of the prospects of success, and that strengthening US ties to India, Pakistan's arch-enemy, undermine chances of a breakthrough with Islamabad.¹¹

The current mindset in the Trump Administration regarding Pakistan has been slowly built to chaperon the mindset of a select few. Washington needs to stop its romance with the select few countries in the region and come up with an empirical policy towards Pakistan, and the region. The recent statements point to the fact that the Trump Administration refuses to recognise the efforts made by Pakistan over the past few years against all the terrorist elements without any discrimination. Pakistan has never allowed anybody to use its soil against any other country¹² and it does not play the politics of good or bad Taliban as it has been most effected by their existence.

Pakistan today is a growing and thriving economy, and was upgraded from a frontier economy to an emerging market in the MSCI index.¹³ The economic growth of Pakistan and the success of CPEC projects despite all the internal challenges and external pressures, promises to make Pakistan an economically diverse country challenging the economic status quo in the region. Keeping this reality in mind, the US needs to change its 'selective' stance towards South Asia, specially with regards to its relations with the two nuclear power states in the region.

¹¹ "Trump seen hardening line toward Pakistan," June 20, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1340669>

¹² Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Dismisses US Assertions Fighting Terrorism 'Selectively'," Voice of America, August 06, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-us-assertion-fighting-terrorism/3974351.html>

¹³ Christine Lagarde, "Pakistan and Emerging Markets in the World Economy," International Monetary fund, October 24, 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/10/24/SP102416-Pakistan-Emerging-Markets-in-the-World-Economy>