



PAKISTAN-US RELATIONS: NEED FOR A MEASURED APPROACH

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Pakistan and US relationship currently stands at a very complicated juncture. There's a critical divergence of interests between Washington and Islamabad which has left both the countries trying to walk the diplomatic tight rope. The recent diplomatic tiff between both the countries, to restrict the diplomatic movement has also added to the already tense relations.

This attitude of the Trump administration is not something out of thin air. In fact, a pattern can be drawn of US posture towards Pakistan and how it has led to a degeneration in relations.

This downward trajectory can be divided into the following phases:

Post August 2017, there has been a drastic change in US behavior towards Pakistan. Pakistan witnessed a string of policy statements coming out of Washington through different policy papers such as the Afghan Strategy, the National Security Document, and the National Defence Strategy. All the policy papers had one thing in common: an extreme and offensive posture of US towards Pakistan. In its Afghan Strategy, the US conveniently blamed Pakistan, making it a scapegoat for all its failures in Afghanistan¹ and maligned its role as a stable country globally. Similarly, US President Donald Trump, while unveiling his National Security Strategy, reminded Pakistan that it's obliged to help America because it receives "massive payments" from Washington every year.²

¹ Syed Mohammad Ali, New US strategy for Afghanistan, *The Tribune*, August 18, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1484128/new-us-strategy-afghanistan/>

² Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan 'obliged' to help US, says Trump," *Dawn News*, December 20, 2017 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1377685>

The next phase started with the war of words, courtesy President Trump's tweet on the New Year's eve in which he again spoke negatively of Pakistan. President Trump lashed out at Pakistan stating that 'The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!³ Pakistan in return has said that it is ready to publicly provide every detail of the US aid that it has received. He also tweeted that it would "let the world know the truth."⁴

The third phase came when US announced the cutting off aid in the beginning of 2018 as a follow-up to President Trump's infamous 'new year tweet' on January 1, 2018 in which he stated that "United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit."⁵ which practically was an insignificant move. US aid levels to Pakistan had peaked in 2010, roughly \$4.5 billion⁶ worth of aid was provided to Pakistan in 2010, which has been going down ever since then to its minimum currently. The cut-off of aid directly affects the Coalition Support Funds (CSF), which is the reimbursements to Pakistan by US for its counter terrorism operations. There was significant scaling down of US assistance to Pakistan in the later years of the Barrack Obama administration, from \$2.1 billion in 2014, it came down to \$1.6 billion in 2015 and \$1.1 billion in 2016, and decreasing even further down to \$526 million in 2017.⁷ Up to \$900 million in CSF funding for Pakistan for fiscal year 2017 is still pending,⁸ while the proposed cut for 2018 is \$350 million.⁹

Latest move of major official personnel changes in POTUS cabinet has also spelled a hard approach towards Pakistan as President Trump fired his National Security Adviser, H.R. McMaster, and his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson attributing the next phase of his presidency with an unfettered id

³ https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/947802588174577664?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.forbes.com%2Fsites%2Fleezamangaldas%2F2018%2F01%2F02%2Ftrump-brings-in-the-new-year-with-polarizing-pakistan-tweet%2F

⁴ Leeza Mangaldas, "Trump's Twitter Attack On Pakistan Is Met With Both Anger And Support In South Asia," *Forbes*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leezamangaldas/2018/01/02/trump-brings-in-the-new-year-with-polarizing-pakistan-tweet/#37639f632b35>

⁵ Zeeshan Aleem, "Trump's sudden new fight with Pakistan, explained," *Voice of America*, January 8, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/1/8/16850116/trump-pakistan-suspend-aid>

⁶ Mcheal O'Hanlon, Madiha Afzal, Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, America, and Extremism; The Path Ahead," *The Brookings Institute*, Washington, D.C, January 16, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/fp_20180116_pakistan_transcript.pdf

⁷ Varghese K. George, "U.S. drastically cut aid to Pakistan in the Obama years," *The Hindu*, January 02, 2018 <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/us-has-drastically-cut-aid-to-pakistan/article22348906.ece>

⁸ Arshad Mohammed, Jonathan Landay, "U.S. suspends at least \$900 million in security aid to Pakistan," *Reuters*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-aid/u-s-suspends-at-least-900-million-in-security-aid-to-pakistan-idUSKBN1ET2DX>

⁹ Anwar Iqbal, "Pakistan 'obliged' to help US, says Trump," *Dawn News*, December 20, 2017 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1377685>

"Trump unbound."¹⁰ Much of the sanity prevailing in the White House has been lost, only to be filled in by former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Mike Pompeo as the new Secretary of State and John Bolton as the New National Security Advisor. Amongst the main reason cited for his firing was believed to be due to Tillerson's advocacy for a softer approach on Pakistan after President Trump announced on January 1, 2018 to suspend all aid to Islamabad till the time it eliminates terrorist safe haven from within its territory.¹¹

Another significant move came as McMaster was replaced by John Bolton. This again shows the changing attitude of the US administration and President Trump's need to have like-minded people around who maintain a hawkish policy approach in lieu of problem solving and give little or no criticism to Trump's own policy approach. John Bolton maintains an extreme hard line towards North Korea and Iran. Many speculate that he is ready to take on Pakistan with the same hard line whilst adopting a more punitive approach towards Pakistan. He has openly advocated against Pakistan's nuclear safety controls and has spoken against the military, stating that radicals inside Pakistan "already controlled the military's intelligence wing and are [an] increasing threat across the officer corps," and that if Pakistan's nuclear arsenal were to fall into the hands of the radicals, "you would have Iran on steroids right now."¹²

Making policy towards Pakistan more muscular and bringing in more players in the already complicated situation in Afghanistan will bear no desired fruits. The role of India in Afghanistan also remains a major bone of contention between Pakistan and US. Besides administrative changes, US is also looking to share the burden - primarily with regard to the war in Afghanistan, and curbing China's rise - regionally with other like-minded allies like India so that it does not have to be the main party responsible.

Pakistan has no problem with India helping the Afghan government in building infrastructure projects but that's about it. However, if that does not remain the case, an increased Indian presence in Afghanistan will certainly escalate the security quagmire for Pakistan. India does not have a direct border with Afghanistan and does not share the same stakes as Pakistan does.

¹⁰ "Personnel changes leave fewer checks on Donald Trump's impulses," *The Economist*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/03/31/personnel-changes-leave-fewer-checks-on-donald-trumps-impulses>

¹¹ Mike Pompeo an Advocate of Tough Policy on Pakistan, *Times of India*, March 13, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/mike-pompeo-an-advocate-of-tough-policy-on-pakistan/articleshow/63290061.cms>

¹² Aman Azhar , "Incoming National Security Adviser Bolton: Pakistan Could Be 'Iran on Steroids,'" *Voice of America*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/incoming-national-security-advisor-bolton-says-pakistan-could-be-iran-on-steroids/4313820.html>

Another major point of divergence remains the peace and negotiations with the Taliban and more rhetorically the end of war in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan and US, both want a negotiated peace in Afghanistan, the way for both the countries to achieve this remains different or testy at the moment. For many regional actors, the pressure on Pakistan is a good thing especially now that Pakistan is deepening its relations and alliance with China in all spheres, which for many is seen as a threat.

Nonetheless, besides all bullying by US, Pakistan has maintained a mature stance towards its offensive behavior that it is projecting. Pakistan is also moving forward in developing relations with countries such as Russia, which Pakistan had ignored previously.

This stark change in faces and foreign policy approach in the Trump administration has left President Trump himself with fewer impulse checks.

Washington restricting the movement of Pakistani diplomats in US and Pakistan responding with its own restrictions on the movement of US diplomats in Islamabad does not add anything positive to the already tense relations. Following the diplomatic tiff, US in another move has called for further cuts to US military aid provided to Pakistan until the country demonstrates a commitment to tackle insurgency in Afghanistan by taking demonstrable steps against the Haqqani Network.¹³

All these moves by US reflect their impatience in dealing with Pakistan. Nonetheless, this attitude of US to push Pakistan to a wall will actually not produce the desired behavioral change that Washington apparently wants. US needs a basic reality check at the moment. It is imperative for US to grasp ground realities and understand that it needs Pakistan for its success in Afghanistan. Moreover, US also needs to recognize that its military approach in Afghanistan will serve no one. Similarly, doubting Pakistan's resolve is only going to strain the relationship further to a breaking point which US, more than Pakistan, cannot afford.

The future of Pakistan and US relationship can be what both the countries choose to make of it. The current overtures of US policy towards Pakistan remains hostile filled with unwarranted accusations. Both Pakistan and US have to move beyond the transactional relationship of alignment and work towards a relationship of partners while overcoming the trust deficit. Sanity still prevails in many policy quarters of US, and Pakistan has repeatedly reiterated that it is not looking for any material or

¹³ Jon Grevatt, US looks to make further cuts to Pakistan military aid, *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, May 10, 2018, <http://www.janes.com/article/79987/us-looks-to-make-further-cuts-to-pakistan-military-aid>

financial assistance ... but trust, understanding and acknowledgement of its contributions.¹⁴ At the moment, President Trump's cabinet projects an outlook of likeminded people with a discriminatory hard line towards Pakistan. Such an atmosphere will only contribute to weaken the already fragile relations between both the countries. The need of the hour is to sit and talk, and resolve all the issues and misunderstandings through negotiations and sustainable means and channel. The platform of Pakistan US strategic dialogue can serve as an opening for officials and diplomats both in Washington and Islamabad to kick-off to a soft start to mend the relations.

For Pakistan, the test of the pudding came the hard way. The sacrifices Pakistan has made and is still making is beyond comprehension. The differences can only be sorted out if both the countries see beyond a typical customary security relationship and move forward from alliances to partners.

¹⁴ Asad Hashim, "Pakistan in the crosshairs of Trump's Afghan strategy," *Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/pakistan-crosshairs-trump-afghan-strategy-170824052758366.html>