

The Implications of the Trump Administration's South Asia Policy for US-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

On August 21, 2017, US President Donald Trump unveiled in a televised speech his administration's "South Asia" policy, signaling his intention to place the Afghan war in the broader context of America's relationships with Pakistan and India. The policy announcement has significant implications for Pakistan because it clearly indicated a change in the identity of America's principal ally in the region from Pakistan to its rival India. This shift, however, had been in the works for years, originating in the George W. Bush administration. Both the executive branch and the Congress of the United States for years have blamed Pakistan for the failure of the international coalition to defeat the insurgents attempting to overthrow the Afghan government and praised India for its constructive role in building an Afghan state. It is not in Pakistan's interest, however, to overreact to the harsh statements and punitive actions emanating from the White House and Capitol Hill since the United States remains the world's sole superpower and, moreover, needs positive relations with Pakistan to resolve the Afghan conflict and effect peace, stability and prosperity in the South Asia region, which comprises 25% of the world's population.

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What is New in President Trump's South Asia Policy?

On August 21, 2017, President Donald Trump revealed his administration's long-awaited policy regarding the presence of the American military in Afghanistan.¹ The speech was keenly anticipated because, as a candidate for the presidency, Trump had threatened to withdraw all American troops from the country if elected. His security advisors, including H. R. McMaster, National Security Advisor, and Lisa Curtis, Senior Director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council, strongly urged the president to keep troops in Afghanistan. After months of discussion with his staff, the president finally agreed. The key elements in the policy are:

1. American troops will remain in Afghanistan until victory is achieved.
2. The number and type of troops will be determined by the military commanders.
3. Unless Pakistan stops offering safe haven for terrorists who attack American soldiers in Afghanistan, the United States will reduce military and economic assistance to its erstwhile ally.
4. India, as America's most trusted ally in the region, will be asked to do more to contribute to the development of Afghanistan.

The Trump policy differs in some ways from the Obama administration's Afghanistan strategy, described by its critics as a "surge and exit" approach. Instead of proclaiming the number of troops to be deployed to the Afghan theatre and the date of their withdrawal, President Trump is leaving decisions regarding troop levels to the

¹ "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia", Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, August 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-pressoffice/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia> (accessed September 12, 2017)

generals on the ground and in the Pentagon and is willing to maintain a US military presence until American objectives have been achieved, namely, the defeat of international terrorist groups, including al Qaeda and Daesh (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), and the prevention of a takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban insurgents. Unlike his predecessor in the White House, Trump has pushed reconciliation talks with the Taliban to a low priority, thus making Pakistan's services as a mediator less urgent. Another new feature is the clear indication that the United States regards India as its principal ally in the region and sees Pakistan as an impediment to the achievement of a peace settlement to the Afghan war.

The threat in the president's speech to punish Pakistan for harboring terrorists who kill American and Afghan security personnel and civilians is not new, however. In 2010 the United States discovered that Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in northern Virginia, was hiding in Pakistan—a discovery that led to his killing in May 2011 by United States Navy SEALs. US military assistance to Pakistan dropped considerably after the 2011 raid. Annual economic and security assistance peaked at more than \$3.5 billion in 2011 but had fallen to less than \$1 billion four years later.² In 2015 the U.S. government withheld \$300 million from the Coalition Support Fund (CSF), intended to reimburse Pakistan for the costs of its fight against terrorism. Since 2002, the CSF has reimbursed Pakistan more than \$14 billion. In December 2017, the Trump administration announced that it would withhold another \$255 million in aid from the Foreign Military Financing (FMF)

² Paul McLeary and Dan De Luca, "Trump Administration Threatens to Cut Aid to Pakistan. Does It Matter?"

U.S. aid to Pakistan was falling even before the president's speech." *FP*, August 23, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/23/trump-administration-threatens-to-cut-aid-to-pakistan-does-it-matter/>

program and said that Pakistan's status as a Major Non-NATO alliance partner in the fight against terrorism was in jeopardy.³ At stake is Pakistan's eligibility for such benefits as the transfer of excess defense articles from the US military, expedited delivery of weapons and equipment and access to a loan guarantee program to finance arms purchases. The Trump administration has made clear that it will no longer be "business as usual" in US-Pakistan relations.

In truth, President Trump's speech is not a balanced argument. It reflects the perspectives and interests of the United States and India and ignores Pakistan's point of view. In Pakistan, the National Security Committee (NSC), the Cabinet and later the National Assembly condemned the American administration's new policy on South Asia.⁴ Pakistan pointed out several facts that the policy disregards:

1. Pakistan has made enormous sacrifices in fighting the war on terrorism and has spent more than \$123 billion in the war, more than any other country in the region.
2. Pakistan does not harbor the Afghan Taliban, and there are no Taliban *shura* in Peshawar or Quetta, as alleged by Resolute Force Commander U. S. General John Nicholson.
3. Terrorists, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), operate freely against Pakistan from Afghan soil.
4. India is a known supporter of terrorists, including the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), in an attempt to destabilize Pakistan.
5. Pakistan is not responsible for the failure of the United States to defeat the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and the continued presence of American troops will continue to destabilize the fragile country.

³ Anwar Iqbal, "US to Withhold \$255m From Another Fund after CSF Cuts." *Dawn*, December 31, 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1379904>

⁴ Muhammad Khan, "Pakistani response to US S Asia policy." *Pakistan Observer*, September 8, 2017. <https://pakobserver.net/pakistani-response-us-s-asia-policy/>

6. There is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.
7. The Trump administration's reason for the policy of putting more US military forces in Afghanistan is to maintain America's hegemony in the world.

The shift in US preference from Pakistan to India as America's principal ally in South Asia has also been underway for years. The rise of India in US foreign policy, however, does mark a significant change from the past. The United States was among the first countries to establish relations with Pakistan after its independence from Great Britain in 1947 and immediately enlisted the new country as a chief partner in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Pakistan played a critical role as intermediary between the Nixon administration and Communist China and helped bring about the normalization of relations between the two giants in 1979. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan assisted the United States in enabling the mujahideen to drive out the Soviet forces. Pakistan became one of America's key partners in the War on Terror following the September 11, 2001, attacks and was named by the United States as a major non-NATO ally in the war in 2001. As a result, Pakistan was allocated more than \$30 billion in aid from the United States to fight terrorists (but in fact did not receive the full amount). India, by contrast, had been a close ally of the USSR during the Cold War. During the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, the United States supported the latter, and, in 1974, America denounced India for conducting its first nuclear weapons test. The administration of George W. Bush (2001-2009), however, witnessed a dramatic warming of relations between the United States and India, driven largely by the rise of an increasingly wealthy and powerful China and the American need for a strong ally in the region. Economic ties between the former adversaries also grew dramatically. The United States is now India's second largest trading partner and largest investment partner, including commerce in the rapidly growing information technology sector.

India, moreover, has long been a major contributor to the rebuilding of Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban regime by US forces in 2001. India has given more than \$3 billion in assistance to the war-torn country since then. India is the fifth-largest international donor to Afghanistan and its largest donor in the South and Central Asia region. India has built thousands of miles of roads, dams, hydroelectric power plants, drinking water projects, hospitals, housing complexes for refugees, schools and even the country's new parliament building. In 2011 India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in which India made a long-term commitment to the security and development of Afghanistan. India's assistance to Afghan security forces has been limited, however, and includes training Afghan soldiers in its military academy and supply of attack helicopters to the nascent Afghan air force. India was pleased, however, by the praise it received from President Trump. In the first high-level meeting between the two governments following Trump's August 21st speech, on September 11, 2017, Afghanistan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani and Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj signed an agreement increasing Indian assistance.⁵ India, however, has no interest in sending troops to Afghanistan, even though the Trump administration has drawn no red line against it doing so.

Pakistan Seeks Allies in Wake of Closer US-India Ties

The cooling of relations with the United States generates incentives to Pakistan to seek new and strengthen existing partnerships with regional powers to counter the close US-India ties and protect its economic and security interests. Pakistan's natural ally in building a new balance of power in the region is China. Immediately following Trump's August 21 speech, China came to Pakistan's defense, with the Chinese Foreign

⁵AnjanaPasricha, "India to Provide More Assistance to Afghan Defense Forces," VOA, September 11, 2017. <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-assistance-afghanistan-defense-forces/4023686.html>

Ministry stating that Pakistan is on the front lines of fighting terrorism. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a large investment and is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. China shares what it calls an "all weather friendship" with Pakistan.⁶ Pakistan has shifted its reliance for high-tech weapons from the United States to China. China is now the biggest weapons exporter to Pakistan.⁷

There are limits, however, to Chinese support for Pakistan. For years, China shared Indian and US concerns that terrorist groups were taking shelter in Pakistan, including Uighur separatist groups from China's Xinjiang province that have taken refuge in North Waziristan.⁸ These fears have abated, however, as a result of Pakistani military operations against terrorists in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), including the North Waziristan Offensive (2013), Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* (2014) and Operation *Radd-ul-Fassad* (2017). China, however, has eyes on Afghanistan's rich mineral resources, and has economic investments in the country, including the Aynak Copper Mine and electrical generation and freight railroad projects. Afghanistan has large iron ore deposits and gold reserves that China covets. China stands to benefit, therefore, from any efforts made by the United States and India to bring stability and security to Afghanistan.

Pakistan also reached out to Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia for support. Russia lifted its embargo on arms sales to Pakistan and helped Pakistan secure full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia, moreover, is interested in buying agricultural

⁶Sriparna Pathak, "Trump's South Asia Policy: Implications for China." In Tourangbam, Monish ;Maini, Tridivesh S. ; Pathak, Sriparna: Perspectives on Trump's South Asia Policy. URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53480-3>. pp. 13-17.

⁷ Omer Farooq Khan, "Report: Pak shuns US for Chinese weapons." *TNN*. April 20, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/report-pak-shuns-us-for-chinese-weapons/articleshow/63838695.cms>.

⁸ Sriparna Pathak, "Trump's South Asia Policy: Implications for China," *IndraStra Global* 2017, 1(1), 1-4. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53948-6>

products from Pakistan since it has banned such imports from the European Union.

The prospects of Russia as a close ally of Pakistan, however, are limited. Russia and India have long military ties, and India is a major purchaser of Russian military equipment and weapons. India exerted its clout in the past as a major customer to pressure Russia into not selling military hardware to Pakistan.⁹ Because of the large volume of Russian-made hardware in its inventory, India will continue to purchase equipment, ammunition and service contracts from Russia that will exceed the value of its military imports from the United States. India, with great power aspirations of its own, however, is actively working to diminish its reliance on Russian arms and equipment and is seeking self-reliance in military hardware. Russia, for its part, has reacted to India's decline as an arms customer by opening and expanding new markets in the Middle East. Russia wants to sell energy to Pakistan, which it sorely needs. Because of Pakistan's indebtedness, however, its ability to buy weapons or oil and natural gas from Russia is constrained. Russia, moreover, regards China, Pakistan's closest ally, as a rival in its quest for global influence and economic clout.¹⁰ Due to geopolitical realities, a Pakistan-China-Russia alliance against US-India-European Union collaboration is not likely.

The Dangers of Overreaction

It is not in Pakistan's interest to overreact to the Trump administration's harsh criticisms of its support for terrorists, perhaps most crudely

⁹ Usman Ansari, "Pakistan cosies up to Russia, but Moscow doesn't seem to want to take sides." *Defense News*. May 2, 2018. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2018/05/02/pakistan-cosies-up-to-russia-but-moscow-doesnt-seem-to-want-to-take-sides/>

¹⁰ Ume Farwa, "Pakistan's Evolving Regional Policy: Impact Of Trump's South Asia Strategy," *South Asian Voices*, October 27, 2017. <https://southasianvoices.org/pakistans-evolving-regional-policy-impact-of-trumps-south-asia-strategy/>

expressed in a presidential tweet on New Year's Day in 2018.¹¹ In spite of China's rapid economic growth and rising military capability and presence in Central, South and Southeast Asia and Russia's ambitions to regain its status as a world power, the United States remains the world's sole superpower.¹² As a debtor nation, moreover, Pakistan is dependent on US support for continued lending from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Pakistan will continue to need IMF bailouts due to its growing current account deficit and falling foreign currency reserves. As the largest depositor, the United States can veto Pakistan's requests.¹³

Why the United States Needs Pakistan

Despite the harsh rhetoric coming from the White House and certain members of Congress, a positive relationship with Pakistan is critical to U.S. interests in the region. Firstly, there can be no lasting settlement to the armed conflict in Afghanistan without Pakistan's full involvement. U.S. and Afghan forces cannot, by themselves, defeat the insurgents and regain control over the vast swathes of territory currently controlled by the Taliban militants. The number of US troops in the Afghan theatre, for example, has fallen from more than 100,000 under President Obama to fewer than 15,000 under President Trump. Pakistan historically has had substantial influence over the Afghan Taliban and must be present at any negotiating table whose purpose is to end the conflict between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Pakistan's cooperation, moreover, is

¹¹ "Pakistan Will Continue To Have Engagement With US: Foreign Secretary." *NDTV*, January 7, 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/pakistan-will-continue-to-have-engagement-with-us-foreign-secretary-1796897>

¹² Kenneth Holland, "How Unipolarity Impacts Canada's Engagement with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," in Christopher Kirkey and Michael Hawes, eds., *Canadian Foreign Policy in a Unipolar World*, pp. 241-267 (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ "Pakistan Could Face US Aid Cuts Over Human Trafficking: An aid cutback would deal a fresh blow to US-Pakistan relations following President Donald Trump's suspension in January of some \$2 billion in US security assistance." *NDTV*, April 12, 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/pakistan-could-face-us-aid-cuts-over-human-trafficking-report-1836719>

essential in the control of the 2,430-kilometer-long border separating Afghanistan and Pakistan, a border that Pakistan has attempted to fence to prevent terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan, in the face of hostility and lack of cooperation from the Afghan government.

Secondly, Pakistan is pivotal for the U.S. counter-terrorism strategy. There are twenty terrorist organizations officially recognized by the United States operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan—the largest concentration in the world. The cooperation of Pakistan intelligence and security agencies is needed to counter these groups through drone strikes and other counter-terrorism measures.¹⁴

Thirdly, there will be no resolution of the Kashmir conflict unless Pakistan allows the United States to play a mediating role in negotiations with India. US credibility as a mediator, however, has been sharply diminished in Pakistan's eyes by America's tilt toward India and the relocation of its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Fourthly, the United States has no real alternative to the Pakistani route for supplying its forces in Afghanistan. The US needs Pakistan's cooperation to keep this supply route open.¹⁵

Fifthly, Pakistan is essential to the economic integration of the region, a principal goal of American foreign policy. The conflict between the Russian and British empires in the 19th century followed by the emergence of the Soviet Union and the Cold War with the United States in the 20th century erected barriers to the normal north-south trade between Europe and South Asia. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the possibility of re-opening these trade routes emerged. In October

¹⁴ Tridivesh Singh Maini, "Trump's Straight Talk: India's Reaction." In Tourangbam, Monish ; Maini, Tridivesh S. ; Pathak, Sriparna: Perspectives on Trump's South Asia Policy. In: The Dossier by IndraStra 1 (2017), 1. URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53480-3>, pp. 9-12.

¹⁵ Monish Tourangbam, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: Old Wine in Trump's Bottle." In Tourangbam, Monish ; Maini, Tridivesh S. ; Pathak, Sriparna: Perspectives on Trump's South Asia Policy. In: The Dossier by IndraStra 1 (2017), 1. URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53480-3>, pp. 5-8.

2011, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton called for a New Silk Road. She said: "Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan's and India's growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into Indian linens. Furniture and fruit from Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond."¹⁶ The project would give the large populations of Pakistan and India access to the minerals, energy and agricultural products of sparsely populated Central Asia. The concept includes such initiatives as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) power project. The benefits to the United States of this economic integration of Central and South Asia are the growth of the Afghan economy to the point where the Afghan government is no longer dependent on US financial support for its basic functions and the lessening of economic dependence of the Central Asian republics on Russia. The United States and India, however, oppose Chinese efforts to integrate these economies through the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Sixthly, the United States has a strong interest in nuclear weapons not falling into the hands of Islamic extremists, and Pakistan's prosperity and stability and the strength of its major institutions, including the military and the state, are bulwarks against such an outcome.

Seventhly, Pakistan has a population of more than 200 million, making it the sixth most populous country in the world. Pakistan's stability, therefore, is a pillar of peace in the region. Thus, even as the level of military assistance declines, US development assistance to Pakistan remains high. Pakistan is the second largest recipient of development assistance from the United States in the region, after Afghanistan. The primary focus of the US civilian-assistance program is to

¹⁶ Joshua Kucera, "The New Silk Road? The United States hopes that a combination of trade and infrastructure can help steer Afghanistan away from unrest – and Russia." *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2011. <https://thediplomat.com/2011/11/the-new-silk-road/>

develop a stable, secure and tolerant Pakistan with a vibrant economy. The United States Agency for International Development has identified five areas essential to Pakistan's stability and long-term development: energy, economic growth, stabilization, education and health. The Trump administration budgeted \$211 million in economic assistance to Pakistan in 2018, compared to \$134 million in security-related aid.¹⁷

Conclusion

In geo-political terms, President Donald Trump's "South Asia" policy acknowledges the pivot of the United States from Pakistan to India as its principal ally in the region, the result of the rising power of China in Asia. The policy continues a trend, visible since 2011, of declining US military assistance to Pakistan due to frustration by Washington with Pakistan's unwillingness to deny safe haven to insurgents attempting to overthrow the Afghan government. Given the critical rhetoric directed at Pakistan by President Trump and several members of Congress and the US tilt toward India, it is understandable that Pakistan would reach out to regional powers, especially China and Russia, to form a countervailing coalition to the US-India-Afghanistan alliance. Given the economic and military strength of the United States in comparison with that of any potential ally, and the ongoing presence of US forces in neighboring Afghanistan, it is not in Pakistan's interest, however, to distance itself too far from the world's only superpower. The United States, for its part, has equally compelling interests in maintaining close relations with Pakistan, a country essential to a settlement of the Afghan War and to the economic integration of Central and South Asia, the key to the region's peace and prosperity.

¹⁷ "Rezaul H. Laskar, "US aid to Pakistan plummets to \$526m in 2017, set to fall further: The Trump administration has warned it could cut aid and revoke Pakistan's 'major non-NATO ally' status if it does not crack down on terror groups operating from its soil." *Hindustan Times*, November 29, 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-aid-to-pakistan-plummets-to-526m-in-2017-set-to-fall-further/story-l8jlouhIG3OoklGv28YXNL.html>