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## Trump administration eyes restoring Pakistan's security funds as part of reset with new leader

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The election of outsider Imran Khan as prime minister of Pakistan last month presents the U.S. with a rare window to reset relations with a critical but troublesome ally, but the two sides face a slew of difficult issues and a lack of trust in any effort to improve relations.

A battle is brewing inside the Trump administration over whether to reconsider the president's aggressive policy of withholding millions of dollars in sensitive security assistance to Pakistan on grounds that the South Asian nation is ready to reconsider its willingness to provide safe haven to terrorists nearly two decades after 9/11.

Washington has long made clear its frustration with Islamabad's tolerance of Taliban and other Islamist factions within its borders, saying it enables an insurgency in neighboring Afghanistan that Kabul and Washington have been unable to defeat.

With Pakistan last month holding a democratic transition of power for only the second time in its 71-year history, some of Mr. Trump's top advisers argue that the time is ripe for Washington to begin restoring the military aid that the president cut from Islamabad at the start of the year.

"The Pakistanis needed to be put in their place," one former White House adviser on Pakistan told The Washington Times, but a former U.S. ambassador to the country countered that "the recent cutting of security funds was an absolutely terrible decision."

Former and current U.S. officials privately say trust is always an issue — al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Special Forces in Pakistan. But they add that the country has sacrificed thousands of lives as one of the closest U.S. allies in the war on terror and that pushing the nuclear weapons state too far from Washington's orbit of influence could have dire consequences.

Mr. Khan, a charismatic cricket legend who broke through to dominate national elections, could prove key.

A onetime playboy who successfully challenged Pakistan's long-ruling political dynasties, Mr. Khan has morphed from being an anti-American populist who was tolerant of radical Islamist groups to a leader of a financially struggling country that is seeking better relations with wealthier Washington.

Since his swearing-in ceremony last month, American officials have been engaging in something of a diplomatic "good cop, bad cop" routine, analysts say.

The bad part came Sept. 2 when the Pentagon announced plans to suspend \$300 million of the Coalition Support Fund, cash paid to Islamabad for allowing U.S. and other NATO supplies to transit through the country on their way to Afghanistan. The U.S. government said Pakistan was not doing enough to tackle militant groups.

But just three days later, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered some good news. He traveled to Pakistan to tell Mr. Khan that Washington was eager to “reset the relationship.”

Speaking at the Pakistan Air Force Base Nur Khan after their talks, Mr. Pompeo said, “We’ve still got a long way to go, lots more discussion to be had, but the relationship military-to-military is one that has remained in a place where some of the other relationships haven’t, frankly.”

Mr. Khan also emphasized the positive. “A sportsman always is an optimist,” he said. “He steps on the field and he thinks he’s going to win.”

Dealing with Mr. Khan, regional observers say, means dealing with the economic crisis he inherited when entering office.

After years of mismanagement, the world’s fifth most populous nation has almost no foreign cash reserves. The central bank was forced to devalue the rupee four times since December, depleting foreign cash reserves to \$9.1 billion. Much of the cash drain is the result of a surge of imports and debt triggered by loans provided by Beijing to build critical infrastructure under China’s ambitious “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

The showpiece of the China-Pakistan collaboration is the Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea near the Iranian border. China is building up the port, sparking fears in the U.S. and its allies that Beijing hopes eventually to take control of the facility and use it as a naval base in the Indian Ocean.

To pay off this spiraling debt, Pakistani officials this summer considered requesting up to \$15 billion from the International Monetary Fund.

The Trump administration and China hawks on Capitol Hill have deep skepticism about the request. Sixteen senators from both parties sent a letter to the Trump administration warning against an IMF “bailout” to repay what they called “predatory Chinese infrastructure financing” projects. The letter, addressed to Mr. Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin, called the Belt and Road Initiative “debt-trap diplomacy” designed to make borrowers economically and politically dependent, and specifically mentioned the Gwadar port.

“It is imperative that the United States counters China’s attempts to hold other countries financially hostage and force ransoms that further its geostrategic goals,” they wrote.

Mr. Khan, who campaigned on improving the lives of the poor and fighting corruption, discussed the IMF bailout about two weeks after the senators weighed in and addressed the issue in his first speech as prime minister.

“We have formed a bad habit of living on loans and aid from other countries,” he said. “No country can prosper like this. A country must stand on its own feet.”

Mr. Khan this week made the first overseas trip of his tenure not to China, India or the U.S., but to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which both have security and economic ties

to Islamabad. Both also employ large numbers of expatriate Pakistani workers who are crucial to the economy back home.

Uncertain course

With Mr. Khan still consolidating his government, the road ahead for U.S.-Pakistani relations is cloudy, analysts said.

Pakistan's ability and willingness to help the Trump administration in Afghanistan could depend crucially on Islamabad's relations with India, Pakistan's archrival, which has cultivated its own close ties with Kabul. Pakistan could also become a prime battleground for influence between China and the U.S. in South Asia in the years ahead.

Much of Mr. Khan's past anti-American rhetoric was for domestic public consumption and shouldn't be taken as a guide to the policy his government will adopt, Joshua White, a former South Asian specialist on the National Security Council who now teaches at Johns Hopkins University, told a recent United States Institute of Peace forum on Pakistan's future.

"The issue of the West is not as salient as it was years ago, given the changing relationship with the U.S.," Mr. White said.

Sahar Khan, a Cato Institute visiting research fellow, told the gathering that Mr. Khan has since struck a distinctly more conciliatory tone toward his neighbors — and to the various power centers inside Pakistan.

"So far, he has also been very careful not saying anything anti-military," she said.

As a civilian leader in a country with a powerful military prone to deposing elected leaders in times of political instability, that relationship is seen as paramount.

Pakistan, as its officials are quick to note, has been a prime victim of the global war on terror. The military has battled radical Islamist movements in the country's remote and hard-to-police border areas.

Although figures vary, roughly 80,000 Pakistani citizens and soldiers have been killed in the region's war against terrorism since 2002.

"We know how seriously Pakistan has sacrificed, and we take that sacrifice seriously," said Randall G. Schriver, assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, who spoke at a Pakistani Embassy Military Day event this month.

Mr. Pompeo said this month that Mr. Khan told him peace in Afghanistan was a "shared goal." He also said U.S. military aid to Pakistan could be restored under the right circumstances.

"This relationship between us is both strained and strong," a Pakistani official said on the condition of anonymity during the Military Day celebration. "It should be. It is one of the world's most complex relationships."