



## The flawed reason for U.S. military aid cuts to Pakistan

Sahar Khan

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The United States just announced that it is cancelling a \$300 million disbursement to Pakistan, citing the country's failure to take strong actions against Afghan Taliban militants and their safe havens in Pakistan. With Secretary of State Mike Pompeo making his first visit to Pakistan last week, what message does this aid cut send to Imran Khan, the newly elected prime minister of Pakistan?

The message is that regardless of who is in power in Pakistan, the United States is focused on ending Pakistan's support of militant groups and will no longer provide any kind of financial assistance to Pakistan. The only problem is that it's unclear what the Trump administration's ultimate goal is—not just with regard to Pakistan, but also Afghanistan.

The aid cut is consistent with President Trump's hard-line approach toward Pakistan. The White House has made military and security cuts. These include limiting Pakistan's access to Foreign Military Financing, a loan or grant that allows countries to purchase U.S. arms, equipment, services and training. The United States also lobbied to include Pakistan on the Financial Action Task Force's (an international consortium to counter terrorist financing) "grey-list," which is a list of countries that can be sanctioned due to their involvement in illicit terrorist financing. One of the biggest impacts of being on the grey list will be on Pakistan's flailing economy. And just last month, the Trump administration suspended Pakistan from the U.S. International Military Education and Training program that has been considered a hallmark of the bilateral relationship.

This latest cut to Pakistan's coalition support fund, which is a program that allows the Department of Defense to use funds from its emergency response fund to reimburse coalition partners for logistical and operational support to U.S. military operations, is not a surprise. In fact, the cuts are part of financial aid cuts announced in January 2018. Pakistan's relatively muted reaction, however, also reflects the Khan administration's foreign policy priorities, which include improving the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan. Both Khan and his foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi have moved away from their anti-American campaign rhetoric, and are now emphasizing their desire to listen to U.S. concerns and mend the strategic partnership.

Yet the timing of the most recent aid cut highlights a more important issue plaguing the United States: the Trump administration's lack of consistency in its Afghanistan strategy is sending mixed messages to Pakistan, risking an already tumultuous relationship. On the one hand, the United States wants Pakistan to facilitate direct talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government. On the other hand, the United States is cutting military aid because Pakistan is not combating the Afghan Taliban operating within its borders.

So, what does the United States want in Afghanistan, and what does Pakistan have to do with it? Does the Trump administration want a political settlement with the Taliban? If so, it needs Pakistan's help to do so. After all, Pakistan has had a relationship with the Afghan Taliban since the 1990s, and continues to maintain ties with the group. Or does the United States want Pakistan to end its support of the Taliban and eliminate all Taliban safe havens (which Pakistan maintains it has already done)?

Unfortunately, the United States can't have both a political settlement in Afghanistan and an end to Pakistan's militant sponsorship for one simple reason: the United States has no control over Pakistan's national security interests or the powerful army, which has a strong influence over Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan's military establishment and intelligence agencies have had strong links to militant groups since the end of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1989, and have used these groups to counter India in Indian-administered Kashmir. As long as the Kashmir dispute remains unresolved, Pakistan's use of militant groups will not decrease. Even then, there is no guarantee that the Pakistani state won't continue to use militant groups as proxies.

Reaching a political settlement with the Taliban, however, is still an achievable goal for the United States. The Trump administration has already made some positive moves toward a political agreement: Ambassador Alice Wells, the U.S. Department of State's deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, met with Taliban leaders in Doha in July with the support of the Afghan government in an attempt to further Afghanistan's ongoing peace process.

The Trump administration needs to understand that no amount of military and security aid cuts can change Pakistan's security calculus or behavior, all of which are tied to the Pakistani deep state's relationship with militant groups. While the Trump administration is correct in cutting military and security aid to Pakistan, it needs to think carefully—and strategically—about the implementation and timing of cuts to Pakistan as it tries to exit Afghanistan. In other words, announcing a military aid cut—even if it is part of a broader plan to cut aid—days before Pompeo and Dunford's first visit to Pakistan provides more avenues for contention rather than cooperation. And both the United States and Pakistan need to cooperate with each other if they want U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan.

*Sahar Khan is a visiting research fellow in the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department.*