



Insulting Pakistan Solves Nothing

Sahar Khan

January 5, 2018

President Donald Trump began 2018 by tweeting about Pakistan and withholding \$255 million in aid until Pakistan took decisive action against the Haqqani Network. Pakistan reacted swiftly and angrily. On Friday, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif stated that the United States is turning Pakistan into a "whipping boy" and no longer sees the U.S. as an ally.

Insulting Pakistan is unproductive, especially given that the U.S. troops in landlocked Afghanistan depend on Pakistan for supplies. More importantly, Pakistan will not simply change its policy of using jihadi groups just because Trump is tweeting at them to do so or because the U.S. has decided to withhold assistance. With the latest U.S. troop surge to Afghanistan now complete, harsh words and short-sighted plans are counterproductive to U.S. interests in the region.

This is not the first time Trump has called Pakistan out for harboring militant groups. In August 2017, as the president outlined his new strategy for Afghanistan, he reprimanded Pakistan for continuously harboring terrorists. The U.S. National Security Strategy, released in December, stated, "We will insist that Pakistan take decisive action against militant and terrorist groups operating from its soil."

So what was the point of Trump's latest tweet, and will depriving Pakistan of aid actually change its behavior?

Perhaps the tweet was simply impulsive: just another day with another tweet in the life of the president. But singling out Pakistan for harboring terrorists has two broad implications.

First, the Trump administration is in the process of expanding U.S.-run counterterrorism operations within Pakistan — and without Pakistan's consent. Trump's rhetoric mirrors that of President George W. Bush, who famously stated "you are either with us or against us" after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Trump's message to Pakistan seems to be, "stop harboring terrorists or we'll come in and get them ourselves."

Not only would this show careless disregard for Pakistan's sovereignty, but more significantly, it would simultaneously jeopardize the United States' involvement in Afghanistan and U.S.–Pakistan relations overall. Whether the United States want to admit it or not, stability in

Afghanistan is tied to Pakistan, and hence, the United States needs Pakistan, especially if it ever hopes to withdraw its troops.

Second, singling out Pakistan for harboring terrorist groups while remaining silent on Saudi Arabia's sponsorship of terrorism ignores the role Saudi Arabia has had in Pakistan's ability to sponsor terrorist groups. Without criticizing Saudi Arabia, any U.S. action to deter Pakistan from militant sponsorship will be useless.

Trump is not the first U.S. official to reprimand Pakistan or to suspend aid. The Obama administration was constantly frustrated with Pakistan, and in 2016, withheld \$300 million in military assistance and reimbursements till Pakistan took strong actions against the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba, actions that Pakistan has deflected over time. The current aid cut is to foreign military financing, a grant that allows countries to purchase U.S. defense equipment, services, and training. That, however, has not been the most lucrative assistance program, so cutting it may have little effect on Pakistan's counterterrorism policies.

Like past administrations, Trump continues to view Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan, and to some extent, is using Pakistan as a scapegoat for its failures in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan has not always been a reliable partner: Pakistan's continued support of the Haqqani Network and Afghani Taliban continues to be constant source of tension in the U.S.–Pakistan relationship.

The core problem of the U.S.–Pakistan relationship, therefore, is that each views the other as unreliable and a source of instability, an issue that that president's tweets and policies blatantly dismiss. With respect to Afghanistan, U.S.–Pakistan tensions are rooted in their differing views on what a stable Afghanistan would look like, and what role each of them will have in the post-conflict (and potentially post–U.S. withdrawal) environment.

The first step in building trust and encouraging transparency between the two countries is to focus on practical actions and logistics rather than attempting to persuade the other of the "correctness" of their point of view. In the past, quiet diplomacy, involving discretion and behind-the-scenes interactions between officials has been the most successful approach to finding common ground on counterterrorism issues. Trump's disdain for diplomacy and preference for a military-centric approach, however, makes quiet diplomacy improbable.

While belligerent tweets and cutting off aid may be popular with Trump's base, they are detrimental to diplomacy, which is essential if the administration hopes to find a solution to America's longest war.

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