

ARGUMENT

Pakistan Has All the Leverage Over Trump

The president can tweet all the threats he wants, but Pakistan's leaders aren't worried.

BY C. CHRISTINE FAIR | JANUARY 3, 2018, 5:34 PM

On Jan. 1, President Donald Trump offered his maiden tweet of 2018:



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

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 & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!

7:12 AM - Jan 1, 2018

54,059

98,590

294,771

Pakistan responded as it has in the past for being called out for its mendacity and perfidy: It rallied its trolls; it summoned the U.S. ambassador in Islamabad for a démarche; and, in all forums possible, it denied the allegations of nefarious deeds with all of the sincerity and credibility of the wholesome human resources manager of the Chicken Ranch.

Even as the tweet continued to titillate Trump enthusiasts in India and at home, however, the responsible members of Trump's government were strategizing how to roll it back. Later that same day, a White House National Security Council spokesperson explained what, specifically, to expect: "The United States does not plan to spend the \$255 million in FY 2016 foreign military financing for Pakistan at this time." This is not the sweeping cutoff that Trump implied in his braggadocios tweet.

In fact, there is little that is, or ever will be, new in Trump's Pakistan policy. That's true for two simple reasons: the logistics of staying the course in Afghanistan and the night terrors

triggered by imagining how terrifying Pakistan could be without American money.

Obama did the same thing, too, and nothing changed

Trump is not the first U.S. president to express distaste for Pakistan's actions. In August 2007, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama **threatened** to undertake unilateral military strikes against the terrorists harbored by Pakistan. Obama, upon being president, took the fight to Pakistan with his **zealous use of airstrikes** by remotely piloted aerial vehicles. Obama did more in the early years of his presidency to wipe out al Qaeda in South Asia than George W. Bush did during his entire eight years in office. Moreover, in March 2009, when Obama announced his so-called Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, he specifically **identified** the latter as a terrorist safe haven. His secretary of state at the time, Hillary Clinton, traveled to Pakistan and said more clearly than any of her predecessors that Pakistan's past policies of supporting terrorism accounts for its own domestic terrorism. Specifically, she impugned Pakistan in October 2011 by **explaining**, "You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors. You know, eventually those snakes are going to turn on whoever has them in the backyard." And it was Obama who ordered U.S. Navy SEALs to unilaterally attack a compound near Pakistan's famed military academy in which Osama bin Laden had been residing in plain sight for numerous years.

The Obama administration also withheld funds from Pakistan **for several years**. It did so because the U.S. Congress passed legislation that authorized \$1 billion in coalition support funds (CSF) but rendered \$300 million hostage to Pakistan taking decisive action against the **Haqqani Network** and in later years **against the Lashkar-e-Taiba**. This money could only be paid *if* the administration certified that Pakistan had complied with the requirements. On several occasions, it demurred to do so.

It is also worth noting that Trump's tweet only reinforced what the *New York Times* **reported** on Dec. 29, that the Trump administration was going to withhold — wait for it — \$255 million in foreign military financing (FMF). **FMF funds** enable partner countries to buy "U.S. defense articles, services, and training" and are provided either as a nonrepayable grant or on a loan basis. This is hardly a sweeping punishment that will persuade Pakistan to begin acting against terrorism. Historically, FMF funds have not been the mainstay of the American dole to Pakistan. Out of the more than \$33 billion given to Pakistan since fiscal year 2002, FMF has accounted for less than \$4 billion. The most lucrative payouts have been through the CSF program, which totals more than \$14.5 billion.

America's preferred roads to Afghanistan go through Pakistan

Why is it that the United States continues to make huge payouts to Pakistan even though it is widely recognized that the country continues to fund the very organizations — such as the Haqqani Network, the Taliban, and groups like the LeT — that are killing U.S. troops and allies in Afghanistan? Why can't the United States simply take its checkbook and **let China take over paying Pakistan's bills** as Pakistan continually threatens will happen should the United States walk away from this abusive relationship for good? There are several important reasons, none of which are easily ignored.

First, Pakistan has the **fastest growing nuclear program in the world**, which includes efforts to develop so-called tactical nuclear weapons (I prefer to call them “battlefield nuclear weapons,” as even the smallest nuclear bomb will have strategic effects if used). Given Pakistan's well-known reputation for black market nuclear trafficking, well-publicized reports of moving its warheads around in **unescorted soft-skin vehicles** (such as ordinary vans), and a petting zoo of every kind of domestic, regional, and transnational Islamist terrorist organization thriving under its protection, America and its allies are rightly concerned that any instability in Pakistan may result in terrorists getting their hands on Pakistan's nuclear technology, fissile material, or a nuclear device. This is Washington's worst nightmare. Ironically, Pakistan has invested in both its nuclear and terrorist arsenals on Washington's time and dime. Yet, even as the continued payments to Pakistan intensify the country's nuclear coercion, American officials in virtually all branches of government fear that a complete breakoff in aid will hasten the worst-case outcome.

Second and related to the first, the United States worries about Pakistan's solvency. If it really wanted to bring Pakistan's to its terrorism-loving knees, it would let the International Monetary Fund (IMF) cut the country off when it reneges on its own commitment to financial reform. Soon, international contributors to the IMF will essentially be subsidizing Pakistan's exorbitant loan repayments to the Chinese. This alone should be adequate reasoning to let the IMF cut Pakistan off. However, this is unlikely to happen. Pakistan has essentially developed its bargaining power by threatening its own demise. With any economic collapse of Pakistan, Washington again fears that the specter of a nuclear-armed terrorist group rising up from Pakistan will materialize.

Finally, the United States has placed itself in an unwinnable position in the Afghan war. One can argue that the United States lost the war in Afghanistan when it went to war with Pakistan, one of the states most committed to undermining U.S. efforts there. Whereas the United States wants a stable Afghan government that can resist its predatory neighbors and keep Islamist militants out of the government and prevent these militants from using

Afghanistan as a sanctuary to train, recruit, and plan terrorist attacks in the region and beyond, this is *precisely* the Afghanistan that Pakistan wants. The only way Washington could have had any hope of avoiding the situation in which it finds itself is if then-President Bush had capitalized on the opening with Iran that President Mohammad Khatami offered.

In 2001, Iran was incredibly supportive of the American effort in Afghanistan. U.S. Ambassador James Dobbins, who was present at the talks in Germany that led to the Bonn Agreement, has **attested** to Iran's productive role in trying to secure a democratic future for Afghanistan. The United States instead spurned Iran and even labeled it a founding member of the Axis of Evil. The Bush administration was clueless about Pakistan's interests and had believed that then-President Pervez Musharraf was sincere in offering his country's help in defeating its own proxies in Afghanistan. We know now that this was a preposterous assumption. Yet the die had been cast. The United States became singularly reliant on using Pakistan's air and land corridors to **move supplies** for the war effort. Its efforts to cultivate a so-called **northern distribution route** failed to materialize.

Over the years, I have offered **reminders** that Americans could work with Indian contractors to move goods from Chabahar to Afghanistan, thus providing an opportunity to further consolidate the two countries' fast-growing ties with India. This would require using Iran's port in Chabahar, which the Indians have helped to develop along with the road and rail lines connecting it to Afghanistan.

But most Americans recoil at the suggestion of cooperating with Iran, arguing that Tehran is a potential nuclear-proliferating sponsor of terrorism. Needless to say, Pakistan is an actual nuclear-proliferating sponsor of terrorism. Moreover, Pakistan is actually *more* dangerous than Iran: Tehran's terrorist proxies are regional menaces rather than the international, hydra-headed scourges cultivated by Islamabad.

Under the Obama administration, the United States made unprecedented progress in thawing relations with Iran with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, which opened up at least the possibility of exploring the idea of moving supplies from the port in Chabahar. In fact, India just completed its first shipment of 1.1 million tons of wheat to Afghanistan that traveled through Chabahar. However, Trump has made it clear that he prefers to scrap the JCPOA entirely.

Without an alternative port, the United States will have no choice but to continue working with Pakistan if it wants to remain engaged in Afghanistan, as Trump intends to do. (The proposed troop surge is now complete with about **14,000 U.S. troops** in the country.) While

Trump can tweet whatever he wants about Pakistan or Iran, the professionals on his staff know the truth: U.S. policy in Afghanistan requires a port with road or rail access to Afghanistan. This administration — like each one before — has cast its lot with Pakistan. And this administration will confront the same failures as its predecessors. Logistics will beat strategy every time.

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