

The Atlantic

Pakistan Will Try to Make Trump Pay

The country has banked on being treated as too dangerous to fail. But this time could be different.



Trucks carrying NATO supplies wait to enter Afghanistan through a border crossing in Pakistan.

Reuters

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Before the news cycle—and the president himself—got consumed with the [new White House tell-all last week](#), Donald Trump made a good foreign policy decision, albeit seemingly in haste. The administration announced it was suspending security assistance to Pakistan, on the grounds that the country is continuing to arm, assist, fund, and provide sanctuary to a wide array of Islamist militant groups that are murdering U.S. troops and their allies in Afghanistan. Well-placed sources involved with calculating the relevant funds have told me that this was not a planned policy and took the other agencies, not to mention the Pakistanis, by complete surprise. Rather it was an ex post facto response to Trump's [January 1, 2018 tweet vituperatively repining that](#):

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!

With this move, though, the president may well stumble into a foreign policy success. Alternatively, he may break the U.S.-Pakistan relationship beyond repair while reaping few actual benefits. Which way it goes depends on the ability of his team to counter or even pre-empt likely Pakistani reprisals. So what might those be?

We've been here before.

In February 2011, Pakistan closed off ground routes America was using to resupply troops in Afghanistan, first because of the episode of [Raymond Davis](#), a CIA contractor, who shot and killed two men [linked to](#) Pakistan's intelligence agency after they menaced him at gun point. When the CIA rescue vehicle came, it killed a bystander who was uninvolved in the event. Just as the relationship was recovering, in May the Obama administration staged a unilateral raid on Osama bin Laden's compound, [which was in Pakistan less than a mile from the premier military academy](#). Then in November, NATO troops in Afghanistan killed 24 Pakistani troops, when they attacked a position near the Pakistani border from which they claimed to have been receiving fire. [Pakistan disputed the characterization](#). In my view, [the evidence suggests that the most acute mistakes were made by U.S.-NATO forces rather than Pakistan](#). The ground routes thus remained closed for much of the year; Pakistan did not fully reopen them [until July 2012](#).

The United States was well into the surge at this point; between NATO forces and Afghan forces, there were hundreds of thousands of troops to resupply, all of whom had relied on the routes through Pakistan. The need to find alternative routes by land and air—including through Central Asia—[ended up costing the Americans about \\$100 million per month more than the previous arrangement](#). Many feared that while this worked to get supplies into Afghanistan, it would not be sufficient to get massive amounts of war materiel out of Afghanistan when the United States and NATO withdrew. Consequently, the U.S. government hoped that Pakistan would reopen the ground routes. But it turns out that weaning itself off them was not such a bad option after all.

I [argued](#) at the time that Americans should not fall for the cheap ground transport solution Pakistan seemed to offer, in part because what America later spent on air supply was cheaper than the so-called Coalition Support Fund payments they paid Pakistan to help guarantee the use of those routes. Moreover, having kicked the cheap ground supply habit, the United States could be in a better position to do what it needed to do if it wanted to win: Put real and costly pressure on Pakistan for continuing to support the Taliban, which was one of the principle reasons for the U.S. inability to prevail in Afghanistan.

Arguably, America is in an even better position now than in 2011, because it only has about 14,000 troops in Afghanistan compared to 90,000 or so in 2011 (of a total of 132,000 NATO troops). America can certainly sustain this through air shipments, especially if it's pocketing savings by not paying Pakistan the nearly \$1 billion a year in Coalition Support Funds, among other funding streams.

But Pakistan has aces in sleeve.

Pakistan now says the alliance is over—and good riddance. Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif complained that “[This is not how allies behave.](#)” He is absolutely correct: U.S. allies do not take its lower and middle-class taxpayers' hard-earned money and hand it over to enemies such as the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Asif went on to offer the usual protestations that Pakistan's military operations have cleared Pakistan of sanctuaries for these groups to hide in. But *if* there were such scoundrels on Pakistan's territory, he said that if Pakistan went after them, “[then the war will again be fought on our soil, which will suit the Americans.](#)”

What is not clear in Asif's statement is what Pakistan will cease doing. (We know for certain that it will not cease supporting the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, or Lashkar-e-Taiba.) Will Pakistan do as it has done in the past: Close the ground resupply routes? Will it escalate and close down its air space to American resupply flights? If that happens, what will the Trump administration do? Will it consider this action to be an act of war?

There is still space for further escalation short of conflict. Washington has been silent about U.S. economic assistance to Islamabad, which has totaled [more than \\$11 billion since 9/11 and is thus about one third of the total \\$34 billion given to Pakistan thus far](#). And there are several kinds of sanctions that could be applied against persons as well as the country. It is not likely that the administration has pondered the next steps that both capitals can or will take.

In the meantime, Pakistan has repeatedly said that its relationship with the United States is redundant because it now has China. In fact, after Trump's contumelious tweet, [China's Foreign Ministry declared that it is “ready to promote and deepen” its cooperation with Pakistan](#). But as with all things that sounds too good to be true, so is the Chinese embrace.

Unlike Washington, which has given Pakistan mostly grant aid, the Chinese only disburse loan aid, largely designed to enable Chinese businesses to build infrastructure in Pakistan on terms favorable to the Chinese. Sri Lanka provides a case study of the risks: Unable to pay back a Chinese loan to finance a port, Sri Lanka was forced to relinquish sovereignty over it and now the Chinese [hold the lease](#) to the port for 99 years. China is not truly a substitute for the United States, and it will take time for China to assemble a suite of programs to replace U.S. aid.

Still, Pakistan likely suspects it has the upper hand, and for good reason: It has cultivated a global fear that it is too dangerous to fail. This is why many Americans have been afraid to break ties with Pakistan and have never encouraged the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral organizations to cut off the country and let Pakistan wallow in its own mess. Pakistan believes it has effectively bribed the international community with the specter that any instability could result in terrorists getting their hands on Pakistani nuclear technology, fissile materials, or a weapon. In fact, Pakistan has stoked these fears by having the world's [fastest-growing nuclear program, including of battlefield nuclear weapons](#). It is conceivable that Pakistan could use funds from a future IMF bailout to service its burgeoning Chinese debt.

Still, one positive side effect of having an erratic head of state is that the United States now has a genuine and credible threat to act against Pakistan. America has not been in such a position since 9/11, when it used its position of leverage to coerce Pakistan to facilitate the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Whereas Pakistan had long comforted itself that neither Presidents Bush nor Obama would seriously alter course, due to the petting zoo of Islamist militants that Pakistan cultivated as crucial tools of foreign policy, and to its nuclear weapons, Pakistan will have to seriously consider that Trump means what he says. Since the early months of the war on terror that began in October 2001, the United States has ultimately swerved when confronted with Pakistani brinkmanship. Pakistan can't count on that this time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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