

Trump May Push, but Pakistan Won't Budge



(LorenzoT81/iStock)

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The new year has brought renewed troubles for the already faltering [relationship between the United States and Pakistan](#). On New Year's Day, U.S. President Donald Trump issued a tweet accusing Pakistan of "lies & deceit" despite receiving \$33 billion in U.S. aid for its cooperation in the war in Afghanistan. The next day, the White House announced that it would continue to withhold the \$255 million worth of aid that had been earmarked for Pakistan in 2016, citing insufficient action against anti-NATO militants. And on Jan. 4, the White House said it would suspend \$900 million in security assistance promised in 2017 and place Pakistan on a list of countries violating religious freedom.

These measures are part of a more aggressive strategy that Trump had laid out during a speech in August 2017 detailing the U.S. approach to South Asia designed to force a shift in [Pakistan's behavior in Afghanistan](#). They also demonstrate that, beneath the tumultuous flow of politics, an enduring strategic logic has shaped U.S. foreign policy. Trump may have campaigned against his predecessor, Barack Obama, who in turn campaigned against his predecessor, George W. Bush, but all three U.S. presidents shared a recognition of the importance of Pakistan to the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Courting Pakistani support, whether through blandishment or coercion, will be key to initiating the long and complicated process of extricating the United States from its longest-running conflict.

Because Pakistan hosts the Taliban leadership and the Haqqani network that spearhead the insurgency, its cooperation is crucial to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. The government in Islamabad supports the insurgency in part to fulfill its longtime strategy to project power into Afghanistan in pursuit of two overarching objectives: First, to install a government in Kabul friendly to its interests that would accept the colonial-era Durand Line as their shared border. Second, to shape a government in Kabul that would be hostile to India, thereby preventing an encirclement by its nuclear archrival.

Because Pakistan considers these objectives vital to its continued existence as a state, the coercive U.S. measures will do little to sway it from its course. But another reason for Pakistan's steadfastness in the face of U.S. pressure is the support it receives from the two [strongest military powers in Asia](#): China and Russia. China is a close ally of Pakistan, having invested in the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a critical node in [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#) aimed at integrating Eurasia with China. The day after Trump's tweet, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs came to its ally's defense, lauding Pakistan's contributions to counterterrorism operations.

Russia and Pakistan, on the other hand, have historically been enemies. In the 1980s, Pakistan joined the United States and Saudi Arabia in arming the mujahedeen to bloody the Soviets during their decade-long military occupation of Afghanistan. But a few decades later, the roles are changing. In the growing rift between United States and Pakistan, Russia sees an opportunity to gain advantage. By investing in Pakistan's North-South pipeline, conducting joint military exercises and hosting four conferences aimed at jump-starting negotiations in Afghanistan, Moscow is cozying up to Islamabad to forge a relationship with the Taliban. One of Moscow's goals is to support the militant organization to counter transnational extremist groups, such as the Islamic State, which threaten to spill into the Central Asian states bordering northern Afghanistan. But Moscow's outreach is also aimed at gaining a point of contact in Kabul's post-conflict government, as the Taliban are widely expected to someday [join a power-sharing agreement](#) designed to end the war.

Even without Chinese and Russian support, Pakistan has sticks of its own to wield against the United States. Pakistani army spokesman Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor struck a tone of resistance and restraint in response to Trump's rhetoric, highlighting Pakistan's right to self-defense against unilateral American actions, but also emphasizing the need for Washington and Islamabad to cooperate as allies. Should Trump eventually reach for harsher punitive measures, such as revoking Pakistan's status as a non-NATO major ally or cutting off all aid (including economic), Pakistan will counter by threatening to throttle NATO's supply line reaching from the port of Karachi on the Arabian Sea into landlocked Afghanistan.

To counter such a measure, Washington could preemptively try to breathe life into the dormant Northern Distribution Network, a web of roads and railways crossing through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that from 2009-15 provided the Pentagon with an alternative route to supply troops in Afghanistan. A hint that the United States may be considering this option could include any increased shuffling of U.S. diplomats to those countries. But because Russian support would be required to pursue this option, the ongoing impasse in relations between Russia and the United States makes it unlikely. If it loses Islamabad's help, Washington likely would be forced instead to create a more expensive and challenging air transport corridor.

Ultimately, though, short of turning to extreme measures to try to alter Pakistan's behavior, U.S. options are limited. Although a cooperative partnership has benefited both, the fact remains that Islamabad's strategic imperatives in Afghanistan clash with Washington's. While neither side is willing to walk away, neither is willing to compromise on its key strategic goals, either. These fundamental differences will keep the antagonism between the two countries alive as 2018 unfolds.

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