

US suspends security aid to Pakistan as part of Afghan War push

By Jordan Shilton
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The US State Department announced Thursday that it is suspending virtually all security aid to Pakistan. The move will impact an estimated \$1 billion annually, including hundreds of millions of dollars in Afghan War Coalition payments.

The decision will exacerbate geopolitical tensions throughout the already highly volatile South Asian region, which has become increasingly polarized between the rival India-US and China-Pakistan military-strategic alliances.

The Trump administration has justified the aid cut by citing Islamabad's alleged continued ties to elements of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The latter is a militant Islamist group that is allied with the Taliban, reportedly enjoys a safe haven in parts of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and has carried out some of the most deadly attacks on US-led coalition forces in neighboring Afghanistan.

In a tweet three days prior to the announcement, Trump wrote, "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!"

Thursday's decision is part of the implementation of the strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia that Trump announced in August. In a speech delivered to a military audience, the US president vowed to maintain an indefinite, i.e., permanent, US occupation of Afghanistan and untie the hands of the military to wage an even more brutal neocolonial war against the Taliban and other resistance groups.

Trump also put Pakistan on notice that if it didn't fall into line with the US strategy, Washington would move to curtail ties between the two countries. In background briefings, aides said Pakistan could lose its status as a Major Non-NATO partner of the US and even be labeled a state sponsor of terrorism.

The 16-year-old Afghan war has already claimed the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians and forced millions to flee their homes.

The August strategy shift played a major part in tripling the number of bombs dropped by the US Air Force on the country last year. Trump gave military commanders a free hand to escalate the conflict, with air strikes no longer having to be

approved by the White House.

In 2002, in the immediate aftermath of the launching of the Afghan war, US security aid to Pakistan amounted to \$1.6 billion annually, but this has since dropped. The State Department has said that monies the US pays to fund Pakistan's participation in military operations in Afghanistan will be reinstated if Islamabad takes steps to clamp down on terrorist groups. Reports suggest that the US could continue to transfer some aid on a conditions-based approach for identifiable purposes.

The provocative character of the State Department's announcement was underscored by comments made by Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, on Wednesday. US-Pakistan relations can "no longer bear the weight of contradictions," declared McMaster, adding that Trump was "frustrated with Pakistan's behavior" of supporting terrorist groups.

In a barely disguised threat that Washington is ready to dramatically ratchet up tensions with Islamabad and even confront it militarily, McMaster continued, "Pakistan could be on a path to increased security and prosperity, or it could be on a path to replicating North Korea. I think that's an easy choice for Pakistani leaders."

The accusation of support for terrorist groups is particularly hypocritical coming from Washington. It was the US that enlisted Pakistani intelligence to help organize the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s to overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Kabul, and it did so while providing staunch support to Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul-Haq and his reactionary "Islamization" drive. Moreover, Washington has time and again used Islamist militia as shock troops in its regime-change drives in the Middle East, including in Libya and Syria.

Pakistan's maintenance of covert relations with the Taliban and the Haqqani Network is above all the result of US imperialism's aggressive moves to reorder the entire South Asian region, as it seeks to build new alliances capable of economically and militarily confronting its chief rival, China. To this end, over the course of the past decade and a half, Washington drastically downgraded Pakistan's status as its main ally in the region and instead partnered with India,

Islamabad's arch-nemesis.

First under George W. Bush and then under Barack Obama and his "pivot to Asia," which aimed to strategically, economically and militarily isolate and encircle China, Washington singled out India for special attention.

New Delhi has been the recipient of numerous military and strategic favors from the US. In return, India has thrown open its ports and military bases to US warplanes and battleships; shares intelligence with the Pentagon about Chinese ship and submarine movements in the Indian Ocean; and parrots the provocative US stances on the South China Sea dispute and North Korea.

Under Trump, the US has pledged to take strategic ties with India to a new level. As Secretary of State Rex Tillerson put it in October during a visit to Afghanistan, "Our view of the relationship with India is one that's of strategic importance, not just for this specific region," but for "a free and open Indo-Pacific region stretching all the way from Japan to India."

The Trump administration has now declared it a priority to integrate India into the so-called Quad, a US-led military and strategic partnership aimed at combating rising Chinese influence, which, in addition to New Delhi, includes US imperialism's foremost Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

This has not only inflamed tensions between China and India, who fought an undeclared war in 1962 and faced off over the remote Doklam Plateau for two and a half months in 2017. It is also encouraging India in its belligerence against Pakistan.

The two nuclear rivals, who have engaged in four wars and numerous lower-intensity conflicts since the ethnic partition of the subcontinent in 1947, confront each other with ever greater hostility as their regional rivalry becomes entangled with US imperialism's aggressive war drive against China.

Pakistan has reacted to the cooling of relations with Washington by developing closer ties with its longtime ally China. Beijing has pledged to invest \$57 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major project aimed at building transportation infrastructure between the two countries to establish Chinese access to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar.

From Beijing's standpoint, the CPEC is critical to enabling the Chinese regime to counteract US plans to economically strangle the country in the event of war by seizing chokepoints in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea so as to impose an economic blockade.

The CPEC is part of China's more comprehensive One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategy, which seeks to expand Chinese economic ties with Europe, the Middle East and Africa. This represents a direct challenge to US global hegemony and is viewed as intolerable by the US ruling elite, which has increasingly resorted to military force over the past quarter-century in a desperate bid to offset its protracted economic decline. In recent months, the US has joined India

and Japan in publicly opposing the OBOR.

The Pakistani ruling elite has denounced the Trump administration's move to suspend security aid. "Arbitrary deadlines, unilateral pronouncements and shifting goal posts are counterproductive in addressing common threats," Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif declared in a Thursday interview that the US is no longer a friend or ally, but "a friend who always betrays."

Opposition leader Imran Khan took a harder line, urging Pakistan to cut supply lines used by the US to transport equipment to its 14,000 troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan blocked the supply lines during 2011 and 2012 for several months, following the secret US operation to kill Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani soil and the bombing by the US of a Pakistani army post, killing over 20 soldiers.

China's Foreign Ministry reacted to the stepped-up criticism of Pakistan by the Trump administration in a statement by spokesman Geng Shuang, who said Pakistan had "made great efforts and sacrifices in combating terrorism." The government-aligned *Global Times* described the China-Pakistan relationship as an "all-weather strategic partnership of cooperation."

The deepening of US-Pakistan tensions thus has major regional and global implications. It will further inflame Pakistan-India and India-China antagonisms, and, in so doing, those between China and the US. All are nuclear powers.

The shaky ceasefire between India and Pakistan in the disputed Kashmir region collapsed after the Indian military staged "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan in September 2016. Ever since there have been regular exchanges of cross-border fire, including in the last days of December, when four Indian and three Pakistani soldiers were killed.

India has applauded Washington's denunciations of Pakistani support for "terrorism," which provide grist for its mill in the escalation of border clashes with its neighbor and the whipping up of nationalism to divert mounting social tensions at home.

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