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The Trump Administration's Pakistan Strategy: History Repeating Itself?

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In his first tweet of 2018, President Donald Trump rebuked Pakistan for its "[lies and deceit](#)" in its partnership with the United States over the last decade and a half, accusing the country of harboring militants within its borders that undermine U.S. operations in Afghanistan. The tweet highlighted issues within the administration's 2017 [Afghanistan and South Asia Strategy](#) as well as longstanding concerns within the U.S. government over Pakistan's reliability as a security partner. Through both private and public channels and across U.S. administrations, Washington has noted its concerns of Islamabad playing a "[double game](#)" of partnering with the United States while simultaneously supporting anti-U.S. militants. Pakistan, on the other hand, holds up the loss of over [60,000 lives](#) and [\\$126 billion](#) in damages due to terrorist attacks as the price it has paid for allying with the United States since it first launched its post-9/11 War on Terror.

Within days of the provocative New Year's Day tweet, the Trump administration [suspended](#) nearly \$900 million worth of security assistance to Pakistan. In the months that followed, U.S.-Pakistani relations have deteriorated further, with additional U.S. measures quietly being taken against Pakistan: the termination of [Coalition Support Funds](#) (CSF), the suspension of [International Military Education and Training](#) (IMET) programming, and an increasingly "[hard line](#)" taken by senior U.S. officials in their comments on Pakistan.

This sequence of events has not come as much of a shock to those closely following the historically fraught U.S.-Pakistan alliance. It is, however, charting a trajectory where the United States is in danger of further damaging its trust and credibility in the eyes of Pakistan. The United States risks repeating past mistakes that marred the bilateral relationship and undoing the work of U.S. military and civilian officials seeking to rectify those mistakes and build a lasting and productive partnership with Pakistan over the past decade and a half.

Withholding Coalition Support Funds

CSF funds are a vital tool in the U.S. security partnerships, serving as a reimbursement for partner support to U.S. military operations. CSF funds both enable U.S. operations to be adequately supported and supplied and create an avenue for building credibility, trust, and partnerships with key countries by compensating them for important services rendered in the line of U.S. operations.

From 2002 to 2017, Pakistan received over [\\$14.5 billion](#) in CSF funds in return for permitting the United States vital basing access and the use of ground and air lines of communication for transporting material and supplies to U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. This funding was and continues to be perceived in Pakistan as [a right and not a privilege](#)—as compensation and not as aid money. The Pakistani government has claimed that it has incurred costs worth greater than [\\$126 billion](#) since 2002, and the CSF funding it has received so far barely scratches the surface of those costs.

It thus comes as little surprise that the Pakistani public perceives the cessation of CSF funding by the United States as a bullying tactic to withhold money rightfully owed to Pakistan. When the Trump administration first announced its suspension of aid to Pakistan at the beginning of the year, there was still hope that CSF funding could be revived if the Department of Defense determined that Pakistan was making ample efforts to curb militant activity within its borders. In August, however, the suspension was [converted](#) to an outright cancellation, with the Pentagon reallocating \$300 million in CSF funds away from Pakistan.

The cessation of CSF funding is reminiscent of a similar situation in the early 1990s: the invocation of the [Pressler Amendment](#) led to the curbing of all security assistance to Pakistan, including U.S. sales of the coveted [F-16 fighter jets](#). Pakistan had paid [\\$658 million](#) for 28 F-16 jets in the late 1980s and early 1990s yet did not receive the planes due to the restrictions placed by the Pressler Amendment. Consequently, Pakistan perceived that the United States was withholding its rightful purchase, and the U.S.-Pakistan relationship suffered significantly. Although the Clinton administration eventually [partially refunded Pakistan in 1999](#), Pakistani mistrust of U.S. intentions persisted and colored much of the subsequent relationship between the two countries in the Global War on Terror. That decades-old mistrust will most likely be intensified by the Trump administration's decision to cut CSF funding to Pakistan, playing into the Pakistani perception of being cheated of its due by the United States, tarnishing U.S. credibility even further.

Cutting Pakistan off from IMET

IMET programming is a staple of U.S. security assistance to its international partners. It instills capabilities, technical expertise, and values of professionalism and respect for human rights in military operations. It also can serve as an avenue for forging relations between U.S. and international military officers rising up the ranks that could prove important channels of military-to-military communication in the future.

Participation in IMET programming is a prestigious rite of passage for senior Pakistani officers and has in the past helped cement good working relations between U.S. military leadership and their Pakistani counterparts. IMET exchanges are so crucial to the bilateral relationship that Pakistani participation in the educational and training programs survived even through some of the toughest chapters of the alliance—for instance, Pakistani officers continued to partake in IMET despite the souring of relations after the 2011 Bin Laden raid in Abbottabad. As of August 2018, however, the Trump administration has [quietly cut IMET programming](#) for Pakistani officers to the [reported chagrin](#) of both Pakistani and U.S. government officials.

The potential fallout from this decision could mirror the fallout from a similar decision undertaken in the era of the Pressler Amendment when the United States halted IMET programming for Pakistan from 1991 to 2002. A decade of terminated IMET programming resulted in what has been dubbed as a “[lost generation](#)” of senior Pakistani military officers who did not have the opportunity to train in the United States and thus had no ties to and limited sympathy towards the country. This lack of trust and ties between the United States and Pressler-era Pakistani military brass became a root cause of the problems within the fraught alliance. The Trump administration’s decision to cut Pakistan off from IMET undercuts significant efforts over the last fifteen years to rectify the bilateral rift, and competitors are already stepping in to fill the vacuum left behind by the United States. [Russia will begin training Pakistani officers](#) after Moscow and Islamabad reached an agreement almost immediately after the decision was made.

The advent of a Russia-Pakistan relationship in addition to the existing close alliance between [Pakistan and China](#)—another key U.S. adversary—runs counter not only to U.S. regional interests and its [South Asia strategy](#) but also to its global strategic goals highlighted in the [National Defense Strategy](#).

Prospects of a Reset?

Pakistan's strategic calculus has largely remained unchanged since its inception in 1947—what has ebbed and flowed over the years is U.S. willingness to overlook contentious Pakistani activity when the South Asian nation has been of strategic importance to the United States. Over the course of the turbulent relationship, the United States has at several times awarded Pakistan exceptions to strict U.S. laws and standards when convenient but reneged on those exceptions as many times when Pakistan was no longer of strategic importance. This has created a trust deficit between the two nations and a lack of U.S. credibility in Pakistani eyes, the latter of which does from time to time conflict with Pakistani desire to benefit from the perks—particularly in the military realm—of allying with the United States.

Pakistan's prospects would be quite slim if it were truly at a stage of being unimportant to the United States. However, with renewed U.S. efforts underway to strike a [peace deal with the Taliban](#) in Afghanistan, Pakistan is still poised as a key player with its (albeit limited) influence over the Taliban, and therefore the United States will likely still want to maintain [some level of engagement](#) with Islamabad. There are reports of a [potential U-turn](#) being considered by the Trump administration to restore security aid to Pakistan, which, coupled with the [measured tone](#) taken by Prime Minister Imran Khan's new administration with regards to the United States indicates that there is potential yet for U.S.-Pakistan relations to thaw.

Recommendations

The United States has historically been unsuccessful in changing Pakistani behavior through punitive measures. Despite the harsh sanctions imposed by the Pressler Amendment in the 1990s, Pakistan went on to develop a nuclear weapons program. Pakistan will find ways to survive without CSF funds and IMET programming but perhaps at a heavy cost to the U.S.-Pakistan partnership. The Trump administration may consider an approach that incentivizes greater cooperation from Pakistan without harming U.S. credibility.

Although CSF funding to Pakistan has been canceled for 2018, the Trump administration may consider granting those funds next year with some inbuilt conditionality. The United States should provide clear milestones that it wants Pakistan to achieve vis-à-vis eliminating militant safe havens, sequencing each milestone with a correlating awarding of CSF funds. Any punitive measures that the United States may

consider should be accompanied by remedial opportunities and flexibility for Pakistani course-correction, showing a U.S. commitment to working together and solving its issues with Pakistan as a partner.

Similarly, the United States should consider initially reopening limited “dual intent” IMET opportunities for Pakistani officers, particularly as they relate to human rights training and professionalism, humanitarian operations, security of military facilities, etc. In this manner, the Trump administration can continue to promote issue areas generally helpful to U.S. interests, while simultaneously mollifying Pakistani concerns and allowing for an opportunity to rebuild trust between the two countries. If relations continue to improve, the United States may consider restoring IMET programming in Pakistan to its full capacity and maintaining conditional caveats over the continuation of the program to ensure cooperation from its partner.

Lastly, the United States might consider leveraging other partners in influencing Pakistani behavior in certain areas, allowing for a country with slightly better credibility with Islamabad to intercede on the Trump administration’s behalf. The United Kingdom, for instance, has already offered its support to Pakistan on [tackling terror financing](#), an issue that has landed Pakistan on the multilateral Financial Action Task Force’s “grey list” of countries. Since the United States is still quite unpopular within Pakistan at the moment, it may consider working with mutual allies such as the United Kingdom and other European and Middle Eastern partners to influence Pakistan in a more positive direction.

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