

Pakistan boycotts talks with US, rejects role for India in Afghanistan

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Pakistan has postponed indefinitely several high-level bilateral meetings with the United States after President Donald Trump announced a new strategy for Afghanistan. Trump's speech, which placed Pakistan "on notice" for harbouring terrorist "safe havens," while promoting India's regional role, has further exposed the deepening rupture between the two Cold War-era allies.

The first meeting was to be between Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, scheduled for August 25 in Washington. Instead, Asif embarked on a tour to China, Russia and Turkey to rally support for Pakistan.

A scheduled visit to Islamabad by acting US Assistant Secretary of State Alice Wells and US National Security Council official Lisa Curtis to discuss "cooperation in the region" suffered the same fate. Islamabad requested that the visit be postponed "until a mutually convenient time."

Trump's speech last week provoked an angry reaction in Islamabad. He declared that if Pakistan failed to "demonstrate its commitment to civilisation" by "doing more" in the "war on terrorism," the US would cut economic and military aid to Pakistan and revoke its status as a "major non-NATO ally." He indicated there would be US strikes against "terrorists" inside Pakistan and this could include continuation of the drone war.

Another option with which Washington reportedly toyed in preparing its new strategy was to brand Pakistan a "terrorist state." Curtis herself advocated that in a Heritage Foundation report published in February before her appointment in the White House.

Trump also called for the further development of Washington's strategic partnership with India, Pakistan's arch-rival, as a "critical part" of his

administration's strategy and asked for Indian assistance in further interventions in Afghanistan.

Amid escalating war tensions over Kashmir, Trump's promotion of India has infuriated Islamabad. As Trump was speaking, India was engaged in its most serious military stand-off with China since the 1962 border war.

In effect, Trump's strategy more closely intertwines the historic Indo-Pakistan rivalry with the Afghan war and Washington's rivalry with China, adding an extremely explosive element to each conflict.

Washington's geo-strategic favours to Delhi, in order to integrate it into the US military's anti-China preparations, played a significant role in downgrading relations with Islamabad. While India welcomed Trump's speech, both China and Russia promptly criticised the Afghanistan strategy.

Islamabad's ruling elite has been rattled by the geo-political crisis it faces. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa held a lengthy meeting with other top civil and military officials from the National Security Committee (NSC). The NSC eventually issued a statement accusing the US of "scapegoating" Pakistan over Afghanistan.

Speaking with *Bloomberg*, Prime Minister Abbasi declared that the US military strategy in Afghanistan "has not worked and it will not work, there has to be a political settlement." He added: "We do not intend to allow anybody to fight Afghanistan's battle on Pakistan's soil."

The NSC statement insisted that US military action had to "eliminate sanctuaries harbouring terrorists" in Afghanistan, "including those responsible for fomenting terror in Pakistan." Islamabad has repeatedly accused Kabul of supporting the Islamist militia Tehrik-e-Taliban, allowing it to operate from Afghanistan. The

group has frequently carried out terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.

The statement also declared that US claims of “billions of dollars in assistance” were “misleading” because the air attacks were only a fraction of the cost incurred by Pakistan in the US war in Afghanistan.

“India cannot be a net security provider in the South Asia region,” the statement continued. It accused Delhi of “destabilising Pakistan from the east and the west,” interfering in the “internal affairs of neighbouring countries and using terrorism as an instrument of state policy.”

Islamabad’s ruling elite has previously denounced India over its action in Afghanistan and for supporting the Balochi separatist insurgency in Pakistan. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has publicly declared his willingness to support the Balochi insurgency and Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has canvassed using “terrorists” to counter alleged Pakistan-originated attacks in India.

The NSC statement is a clear warning to India, which has boasted repeatedly of its readiness to mount military raids inside Pakistan. Islamabad has previously warned it would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons to turn back alleged Indian aggression.

Last week, Imtiaz Gul from the Islamabad-based Center for Research and Security Studies summed up the explosive tensions, telling Associated Press: “Upgrading the Indian role in Afghanistan basically means perpetuating the hostilities.”

The immediate cause for Washington’s frustration with Pakistan is its connections to Islamic militias, including the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. But the ever-deepening rift with Islamabad is bound up with Pakistan’s strengthening diplomatic, economic and defence ties with Beijing. This is symbolised in the strategic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, which is expected to see Chinese investments of more than \$US50 billion in Pakistan.

As for its “terrorist” links, Pakistan shares these connections with the CIA and Saudi Arabia, which financed the mujahedeen movement against Kabul’s pro-Soviet government during the 1980s. Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency, the ISI, played a crucial role in developing these intimate links with the mujahedeen leadership.

These Islamist forces were used by the CIA decades

later in its interventions in Libya and Syria. Similarly, the ISI and its military controllers regularly employed these elements to extend Islamabad’s interests in post-Soviet Afghanistan and also in India, especially in India-controlled Kashmir. Pakistan’s military, which has fiercely challenged any civilian attempt to control the country’s security and foreign policy, regards these elements as a valuable proxy force.

Michael Kugelman of the US-based Wilson Center told Associated Press that Washington’s “leverage in Pakistan is deeply exaggerated.” He added: “Pakistan has an unshakeable strategic interest in maintaining ties to militant groups like the Taliban because they help keep Pakistan’s Indian enemy at bay in Afghanistan.”

Islamabad, however, has been shaken politically by Trump’s Afghanistan strategy. An August 26 editorial in Pakistan’s *News* declared that although Pakistan needed to speak out “against Trump’s incendiary policy ... it is unclear what Pakistan can do beyond mere protest. The US is still the senior partner in this relationship as it holds the purse strings.”

These concerns point to the deepening economic crisis facing Pakistan. Islamabad depends on financial injections from the International Monetary Fund. Unfavourable evaluations of the Pakistan economy by the US-dominated bank would make it harder to secure funding from other sources.

Beyond these immediate financial concerns, the Pakistani ruling elite has historically relied on political and financial support from Washington to maintain its rule. Sharp factional infighting has erupted in Islamabad over whether China is capable of replacing Washington.

A nervous August 25 editorial in Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper described the NSC statement as “uncharacteristically stern” and warned the government it “must strive to avoid a strategic collision with the world’s only superpower.”



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