



Pakistan's Reaction to Trump's South Asia Policy

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The relations between United States and Pakistan further worsened with the issuance of US President Donald Trump's announcement of his strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia on August 21, 2017 in Fort Myer, Virginia.

Trump on Pakistan

While elaborating US policy on Afghanistan and the ongoing peace process, President Trump made an assessment of the ongoing role played by Pakistan, which brought forth significant reactions from Pakistan.

In clear terms he stated that “20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan -- the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world”.¹ He stated that while Pakistan already maintains relations of enmity with India, both being nuclear-weaponed states, it still gives “safe haven to agents of chaos, violence and terror”, which makes the threat worse. He echoed the concern of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and materials from falling into the wrong hands or going to terrorists to be used against US or any other nation or region, which Trump vowed to prevent.²

He categorically stated that the US administration will not “be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond”.³ While mentioning about the sacrifices that Pakistan has made, he rebuked Pakistan for still harbouring those terrorist groups, which was targeting US and its allies, while getting billions from US for eliminating such groups. President Trump asked Pakistan to immediately mend its policies. He stated that such terrorist and criminal networks will face retribution where ever they are.⁴

Pakistan's Reaction to the Statement

The following can be stated to be a day to day development that happened that was adapted by the Pakistani leadership after the President Trump's speech.

- **August 22nd** - Immediate support for Pakistan was provided by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, who lauded Pakistan's contributions and sacrifices made in fighting terrorism.⁵
- **August 23rd** - Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, accompanied by Finance and Foreign Ministers, paid a one day visit to Saudi Arabia, his first foreign visit after assuming Office.⁶ Crown Prince acknowledged Pakistan's efforts and sacrifices in fighting terrorism.⁷ In Pakistan, senators of the National Assembly strongly denounced Trump's speech. Senate Chairman Mian Raza Rabbani suggested the cancellation of Defence Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan's forthcoming US visit.

Pakistan People's Party Senator Farhatullah Babar said President Trump was wrong to point fingers at Pakistan, but urged the Pakistani government to look inwards, asking whether the time had come to abandon the failed policy of selective treatment of militant groups. "We must revisit the policy of nurturing some militants to advance our security and foreign policy agendas in the region", he said. He said point seven of the National Action Plan was that "defunct outfits will not be allowed to operate under other names", which had not been acted upon. Worse still, instead of taking action, recently-banned militant outfits were allowed to reassemble and launch themselves as a political party, he said.

Blocking the UN move to impose sanctions against the head of a banned militant outfit does raise questions, he said. Senator Usman Kakar claimed that the 'good Taliban-bad Taliban' policy continued to prevail, adding that foreign policy should be framed by parliament, but everything was in the hands of the establishment. Jehanzeb Jamaldini agreed that foreign policy should be under democratic forces.⁸

- **August 24th** - The National Security Committee (NSC) held an emergency meeting to discuss the Trump Administration's South Asia Strategy headed by the Prime Minister along with the Chief of Army Staff, General Bajwa. NSC out rightly rejected allegations against Pakistan stating that Pakistan is being made a scapegoat for the mistakes and failures of US in stabilizing Afghanistan. Pakistan has taken indiscriminate action against all terrorist networks and sacrificed thousands of troops and civilians in this fight. The NSC stated that there should be more understanding and recognition of Pakistan's efforts and sacrifices fighting against terror. NSC underscored that as a responsible Nuclear weapon state, Pakistan has in place a robust and credible command and control system.⁹ NSC also set conditions for future counterterrorism cooperation with Washington and Kabul, specifically the removal of hideouts in eastern Afghanistan. Counterterrorism cooperation with the US and Afghanistan, the NSC said, was contingent upon: "focusing on core issues of eliminating safe havens inside Afghanistan, border management, return of refugees and reinvigorating the peace process for a political settlement in Afghanistan."¹⁰

Russian Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov was critical of President Trump's Pakistan strategy and insisted that Islamabad is "a key regional player to

negotiate with.” “Putting pressure [on Pakistan] may seriously destabilise the region-wide security situation and result in negative consequences for Afghanistan,” Kabulov stated.¹¹

Iranian foreign ministry denounced the new strategy adopted by the US towards Pakistan, urging Washington to stop interfering in the internal affairs of regional countries.¹²

- **August 27th** - Alice G Wells, the acting US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia visit to Pakistan was delayed until a mutually convenient time, at the request of Pakistan.¹³
- **August 28th** - US commander in Afghanistan, Gen John W. Nicholson claimed that the United States “knows the Afghan Taliban leadership is in Quetta and Peshawar”. According to Gen Nicholson, the matter of alleged terrorist sanctuaries was being addressed “in private” by the Pakistan and US governments.¹⁴ Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif stated that Pakistan has temporarily suspended talks with the US as well as official bilateral visits in protest.¹⁵
- **August 30th** - Both houses of parliament unanimously rejected the targeting of Pakistan by US President Donald Trump and denounced his complete disregard for Pakistan’s vast sacrifices in countering the scourge of terrorism. Both the National Assembly and Senate also expressed their commitment to seriously engage with the US on the full spectrum of bilateral issues, based on the principles of reciprocity and mutual respect. The lower house rejected the US claim of giving billions of dollars to Pakistan in aid, pointing out that Pakistan’s economy had, in fact, suffered a loss of over \$123 billion. The resolution called on the government to consider suspending cooperation with the US, particularly the provision of air and ground lines of communication. However Foreign Minister Asif showed his reservation in revealing the amount of money America claimed to have paid Pakistan to fight terrorism. The resolution called on the government to share with the US a fact-sheet of Pakistan’s contributions and sacrifices in the war against terror, which needed to be appreciated.¹⁶
- **August 31** - US Ambassador to Pakistan David Hale and National Security Advisor Lt Gen (retd) Nasser Khan Janjua meets in Islamabad where the US Ambassador stated that President Trump did not blame Pakistan for the failure in Afghanistan. Ambassador Hale said the press had generally taken the policy piece-by-piece instead of interpreting it as a whole. It was also wrong to assume that the policy recommended a purely military solution or that engagement with Pakistan had been ruled out, he said, adding that the military strategy was just one piece of the policy which espoused a political solution. The policy, he added, supported the role of regional countries in a peaceful settlement where Pakistan had an important role to play. Ambassador Hale said that there was a probability of reviving and accelerating the four-nation initiative and the six-plus-one process on Afghanistan where Pakistan might have to play a leading role. The Pakistani Foreign Office spokesperson also tried to play down the hype over the strains in ties between Pakistan and the US. “In inter-state relations, there can be differences over issues between two countries, for which there would be established channels of communication through which misperceptions could be allayed and differences resolved,” Nafees Zakria told reporters in a weekly press briefing.¹⁷

- **September 1st & 3rd** - Afghanistan leadership showed its readiness to initiate dialogue with Pakistan.¹⁸ NSA Janjua and FO Spokesperson showed their interest to continue engaging with US for attaining peace in Afghanistan.¹⁹ However, Pakistan responded cautiously to the Afghanistan offer “reminding” President Ghani “of the need for an extensive multilayered engagement and revitalising the existing processes for dialogue”.²⁰
- **September 5th & 6th** – Reacting to the declaration of the BRICS, where the names of Pakistan-based terrorist groups has been mentioned to be a threat to regional security, Pakistan FO reiterated its concern about the threat posed by terrorism and extremism in the South Asian region, as Pakistan was not named to be the reason to be concerned in the declaration.²¹
- **September 7th and 8th** – Before Foreign Minister Asif reached China, on the 7th, senior Chinese official stated that said Beijing called for “a holistic counterterrorism strategy” and opposed “double standards on counterterrorism”. He further stated that ““There is no change in China’s stand on counterterrorism. Moreover, there is no change in China’s stand on support for Pakistan’s stance on counterterrorism”.²² Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif started his multi-country tour, by first arriving in Beijing on a bilateral visit on 8th.²³ On September 8th, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi while meeting Minister Asif lauded Pakistan's efforts against terrorism. He stated that Pakistan is a victim of terrorism for decades. Pakistani people, government and the armed forces have rendered unprecedented sacrifices in combating terrorism. He further mentioned that the international community should recognise Pakistan's sacrifices in the war against terrorism.²⁴
- **September 9th** – Turkish President Erdogan met with Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain on the sidelines of the OIC Summit on Sci&Tech in Astana. The two Presidents discussed Pak-Turkey relations and regional issues including Afghanistan and the situation of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.²⁵
- **September 11** – The core objective of Foreign Minister Asif’s day long visit to Iran was “to evolve some consensus amongst the neighbours of Afghanistan” and held detailed talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Javad Zarif. The two Foreign Ministers also exchanged views about efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan, particularly in the context of latest developments in Afghanistan. They agreed that there was no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and a politically negotiated settlement was imperative for lasting peace in Afghanistan. They underscored that the regional countries have vital stakes in stability in Afghanistan and should play a more proactive role in the peace efforts.²⁶ Foreign Minister Khwaja Asif described this entire stretch of visit as constructive diplomacy.²⁷ Khawaja Asif also called on Iranian President Dr. Hassan Rouhani and discussed strengthening of brotherly relations between the two countries rooted in common history, culture and people to people ties and reaffirmed the mutual desire to strengthen bilateral cooperation.²⁸
Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi warned U.S. sanctions would be counter-productive,²⁹ while Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal emphasized the need for a strong counter-narrative against extremists and terrorists.³⁰

- **September 12th** - Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif during his one-day official visit to Turkey, held meetings with Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu. Bilateral ties, current regional and international developments were on the agenda.³¹ He also met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Benali Yildirim. It was mentioned that all the discussions were on relations between the two nations and “mutual coordination on regional peace, security and connectivity”. Both countries’ foreign ministers agreed that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, and stressed the need for regional powers to work for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process.³²
- **September 13th** - Defence Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan said that the onus of satisfying the United States about its concerns is not on Pakistan. “We are here to give our point of view logically and with evidence. We will explain our position. But it’s not for us to satisfy them,” Mr Dastgir told reporters at the defence ministry.³³
Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, after returning back to Pakistan, in a TV interview stated that China, Iran and Turkey have acknowledged Pakistan's sacrifices in the war against terrorism and assured their full support to Pakistan for its stance of politically-negotiated settlement of Afghan conflict instead of increasing troops deployment in the war-torn country.³⁴

Assessment

There was significant apprehension amongst the Pakistani leadership with regard to the harsh tone that President Trump had adapted while laying down his Afghanistan and South Asia policy, but with significant diplomatic maneuvering (calling it *constructive diplomacy*) Pakistan has attempted to strengthen its diplomatic posture with nations in the immediate and extended neighbourhood, especially during the period in between August 23rd – September 15th. It further made attempt to divert global attention by unleashing a diatribe on allegations of atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir during the 72nd United Nations General Assembly debate, trying to absolve itself from the tag of ‘a haven of terrorists and terrorism’.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

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