

Strategic Analysis Paper

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The United States in South Asia: The Pakistan Factor

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Key Points

- The US-Pakistan relationship has existed since Pakistan came into being in 1947.
- The relationship, despite its ups and downs, remained strong until fairly recently.
- It has deteriorated dramatically in recent times – and even faster under the Trump Administration.
- It appears to be close to the point of no return unless there is a dramatic and radical shift in either the two countries' perceptions of each other or international circumstances.

Summary

Pakistan, the “Land of the Pure”, was carved out of British colonial India and became an independent state on 14 August 1947. The United States established diplomatic relations with Pakistan soon after. It also established a broad, multi-faceted partnership with Pakistan in areas including education, energy, trade and investment. The Cold War saw Pakistan firmly ensconced in the US camp. Indeed, so close was the relationship that, in May 1960, CIA pilot Gary Powers took off in a U2 spy aircraft from a base in Pakistan bound for another in Norway, with his now-famous flight taking him over some 2,900 miles of Soviet airspace. The US and Pakistan, it would appear, also shared a close security relationship almost from the time the latter came into existence.

The two countries maintained their strong security partnership throughout the 1970s. In 1972, for instance, Henry Kissinger, while on a visit to Pakistan, feigned illness to “disappear” for a few days, during which time he visited Mao Zedong in Beijing, a visit that had been pre-arranged for him by President Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan. It was not surprising, therefore, that when India defeated Pakistan in their war of 1971, thus creating independent Bangladesh from what had been East Pakistan, and threatened to prosecute that war in West Pakistan, the US positioned the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, USS *Nimitz*, in the Bay of Bengal to warn India off any such action.

In more recent times, however, the Pakistan-US relationship has deteriorated dramatically. So dramatic has that deterioration been, in fact, that it would appear that nothing short of a radical shift could revive it. Pakistan today is as closely allied with China, the acknowledged longer-term strategic competitor of the US, as it once was with Washington.

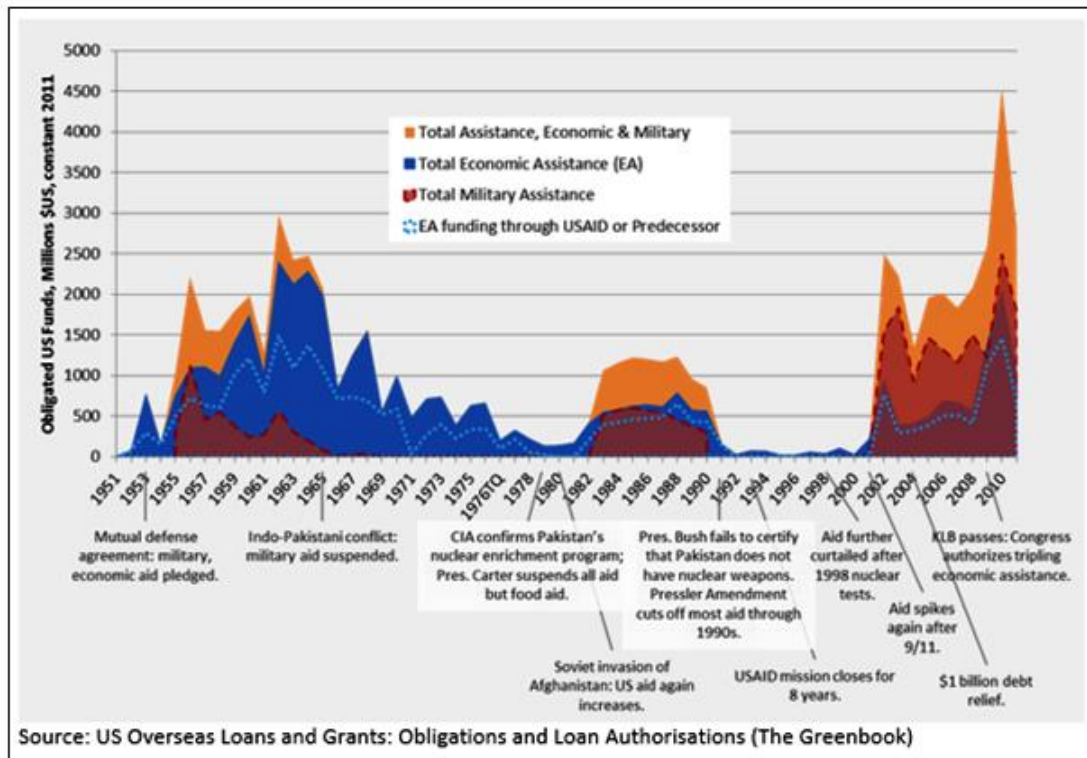
This paper will trace the course of the change in the Pakistan-US relationship to assess the outlook for a relationship that remains critical to US efforts in Afghanistan and beyond.

Analysis

The US began providing economic assistance together with military aid to Pakistan shortly after the country’s creation. In total, Washington pledged nearly US\$67 billion (calculated in 2011 dollars) to Pakistan in the sixty years between 1951 and 2011. That said, the flow of US aid to Pakistan has been anything but constant, ebbing and flowing in accordance with Washington’s perception of Islamabad’s compliance with its demands and requirements. In several periods, including the 1990s, the US halted its aid to Pakistan altogether. That inconsistency rendered the US a far-from-reliable aid donor and partner. In order to rectify that shortcoming, in 2009, the US Congress approved the [Enhanced Partnership for Pakistan Act](#) (commonly known as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Bill). It aimed to insulate security aid from development assistance. The Act authorised, furthermore, the tripling of US economic and development-related assistance to Pakistan, or US\$7.5 billion over five years (from the 2010 to 2014 financial years), to improve Pakistan’s governance, support its economic growth and invest in its people.

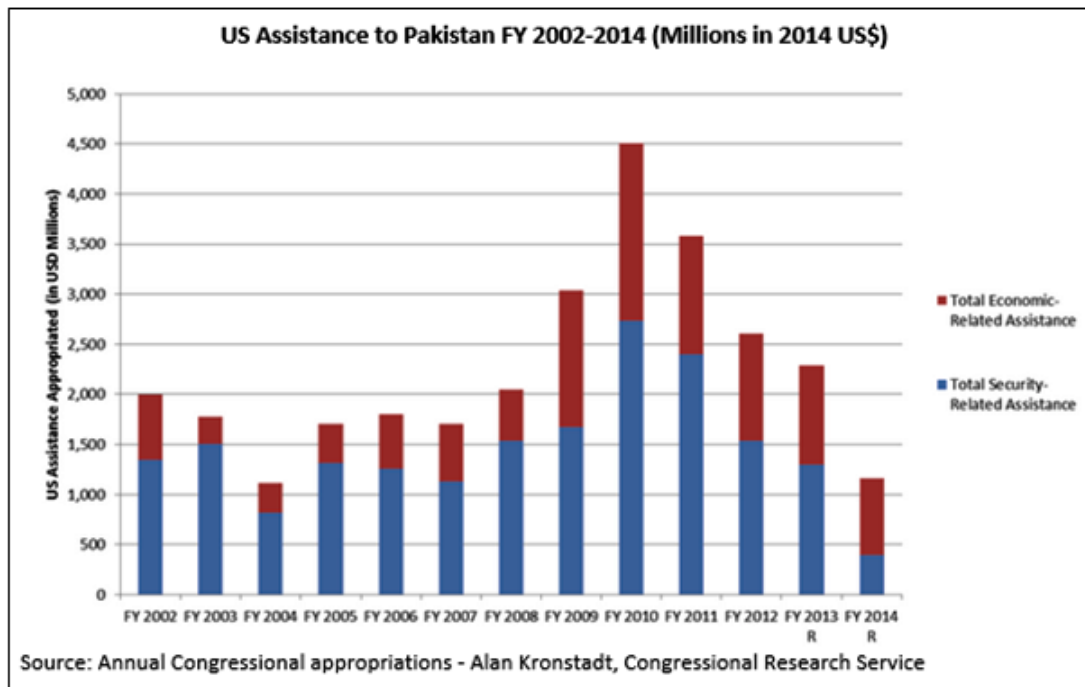
The aid provided in the period between 1951 and 2011 is depicted in Graph 1 (page 3).

The foregoing criticism notwithstanding and building on their generally good relationship, by 2016 the United States was Pakistan’s largest export destination country. Pakistan exported US\$3.7 billion worth of goods and some services to the US between July and December 2015 and imported \$1.837 billion in the same period. The US, until recently moreover, was one of the major foreign investors in Pakistan. In 2015, it invested almost US\$400 million there, mostly in fast-moving consumer goods, construction, chemicals, energy, transportation and communications. Following Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s 2013 visit to Washington, the two countries established a Joint Action Plan to expand bilateral trade and investment over five years in May 2014. In June 2016, they organised the fourth US-Pakistan Business Opportunities Conference in New York to explore other commercial opportunities and expand business-to-business linkages.



The US has also provided civilian assistance to Pakistan. The assistance is focused on five priority areas that were agreed upon together with the Government of Pakistan: energy, economic growth, agriculture, the stabilisation of underdeveloped areas that remain vulnerable to violent extremism, education and health. Between 2009 and 2011, the US committed over US\$6 billion in civilian assistance to Pakistan, including over US\$1 billion in emergency humanitarian assistance in response to conflict and disasters like the 2010 floods. US contributions have benefitted over 28 million Pakistanis by adding over 2,400 megawatts of electricity generation to Pakistan’s electricity grid with infrastructure upgrades; led to the launch of the Pakistan Private Investment Initiative (PPII), which provided seed funding to small- and medium-sized enterprises in Pakistan; built or reconstructed nearly 1,000 schools; and funded nearly 1,100 kilometres of roads in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (before that province was amalgamated with neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa this year) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The US also provided security assistance to Pakistan until relatively recently. That assistance was centred on strengthening the counter-terrorism (for the most part in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and counter-insurgency capabilities of the Pakistani security forces and promoting closer security ties and interoperability with their US counterparts. US Foreign Military Financing to the Pakistani military, which amounted to around US\$255 million in the 2016-17 financial year, sought to promote the development of Islamabad’s long-term counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency capabilities and improve Pakistan’s ability to participate in maritime security operations and to counter-maritime piracy. A further US\$5 million was provided, under the US International Military Education and Training programme, to enhance the professionalism of Pakistan’s military and strengthen long-term military relationships between the two countries.



The Pakistan-US relationship has deteriorated since its heyday, however. US perceptions that Pakistan was playing a double game – using at least part of the funds that had been provided by Washington to give support to terrorist groups that operated from its territory – and the revelation that Osama bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan soured the relationship. Unsurprisingly, in 2011, the Obama Administration froze the allocation of US\$800 million in economic aid to Pakistan and, in 2016, froze another US\$350 million in military aid. According to some estimates, the US provided Pakistan with a total of approximately US\$70 billion over seven decades.

Pakistan’s relationship with the US deteriorated dramatically due to US perceptions of Pakistan being a hotbed and direct sponsor, in some instances, of terrorism. The assassination of Osama bin Laden on Pakistani territory by American Special Forces did nothing to alleviate the situation, nor did Pakistan’s decision to transfer to China the remnants of the crashed helicopter that was used in that operation in order to give China access to US technology.

In mid-2016, the US Congressional House Foreign Affairs Committee convened two of its sub-committees, the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, to determine if Pakistan had friendly or antagonistic motivations towards the US in the latter’s global war against terrorism. The joint hearing, titled “Pakistan: Friend or Foe in the Fight Against Terrorism?” was convened to ‘give members the opportunity to learn more about Pakistan’s long-standing ties to terrorist groups and allow for a more informed reassessment of US foreign policy priorities vis-à-vis Islamabad’, according to Congressman Ted Poe, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade. His counterpart, Congressman Matt Salmon, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, added:

The US has spent tens of billions of taxpayer dollars in aid to Pakistan since 9/11. Now, fifteen years later, Pakistan's military and [intelligence] services are still linked to terrorist organisations and little success has been made to stabilise the region. ... We must take a closer look at US goals, expectations and our aid spending in the region. In this hearing, we will discuss the Administration's failed policy towards Pakistan and debate the best way forward.

It was clear that the two Congressmen wanted to take a close look at Pakistan's efforts in the Global War on Terror and to re-evaluate those efforts.

There is a large degree of justification in those perceptions. It is now generally recognised that Pakistan has not been averse to using unconventional means to carry out attacks on neighbouring states. That goes back to 1947 when, after becoming independent, the Pakistani Army used armed tribesmen from the North-West Frontier Province (the present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) to invade Kashmir in October 1947 in an effort to coerce the Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir into acceding to Pakistan. The stratagem was more or less employed again in August 1965 when the Pakistan Army used over twenty-five thousand soldiers, [dressed as Kashmiri locals](#), to cross into Indian-administered Kashmir. The Pakistani Army was, to its surprise, fought to a standstill on both occasions. The leaders of the Army then turned the Kashmiri issue into one of "national security" to legitimise themselves and their forces.

Keeping up the pressure on Pakistan, in August 2016, the US State Department deputy spokesperson, Mark Toner, implied during a daily briefing on 5 August, that Pakistan was selective in its attacks on terrorists operating from its territory. Toner reportedly said, 'We have been very clear with the highest levels of the Government of Pakistan that they must target all militant groups and that includes those that target Pakistan's neighbours. They must also close all safe havens.' He added that the US needed 'to see them go after all groups and, as I just said, even those groups that might not threaten Pakistan itself but threaten its neighbours.'

It was, similarly, the Pakistani Army's decision to train and offer safe havens in Pakistan to Taliban fighters to which Mr Toner referred. A [study](#) published by the London School of Economics in 2010 found that Taliban leaders were in no doubt that they were managed by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence organisation, which is a part of the Pakistani military. That belief is substantiated to a large degree by more recent events. Towards the end of July 2015, Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security [announced](#) that Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader had died in a hospital in Karachi in April 2013. After Afghan President Ghani came to power in 2014, he attempted to mend the fractious relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and, to that end, sought a meeting with the Taliban leadership in Pakistan. It was [reported](#) that the Taliban delegates travelled to the meeting at Murree from within Pakistan. The same report indicated that the Pakistani Prime Minister's adviser, Mr Sartaj Aziz, had admitted previously that Pakistan wielded a degree of influence over the Taliban. As Mr Aziz remarked, 'We have some influence on them because their leadership is in Pakistan, and they get some medical facilities, their families are here. So we can use those levers to pressurise them to say, "come to the table".'

In May of this year, Mullah Mansour, the leader of the Afghan Taliban was killed in a drone strike while he was travelling through Baluchistan, allegedly with a Pakistani passport. That led then Pakistani Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, to [complain](#) that the US had 'put Pakistan in a difficult position'. It is quite possible that he was not referring solely to the diminished influence that Pakistan now wielded over the Taliban. It was incidents such as the above that led President Ghani to change his mind about seeking to mend relations with Pakistan and to [state](#) that, 'We need two kinds of peace. One is with Pakistan because this country is in an undeclared state of war with us.'

The implication was plain to see: Pakistan, tacitly or otherwise, permitted terrorist groups based in the country to attack Afghanistan and India. Pakistan's reaction was expectedly swift and strongly-worded. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Nafees Zakaraiya, stated in no uncertain terms that:

We have taken a serious note of the remarks made by the US State Department deputy spokesperson, which are self-contradictory and oblivious of the fact that Pakistan has taken concrete measures to counter terrorism in a phase-wise manner keeping in view Pakistan's national security concerns.

Worse was to come. Donald Trump decided to stand for the office of President of the United States at the last general election and, despite all predictions, won it. As is his tendency, he had little, if any, hesitation in publicly castigating Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. He did so during his election campaign and continued to do so after taking office. In his first tweet of 2018, Trump said:

The United States has given Pakistan more than \$33 billion completely in vain over the past 15 years. They did not give [the] US anything but lies and deceit. They provide a safe and safe haven for the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, and almost do not help us.

Soon after, on 4 January, the US State Department announced that aid to Pakistan would be frozen. According to Heather Nauert, the Acting Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the money would be frozen until the Government of Pakistan actually fought against terrorist organisations such as the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Although she did not mention concrete figures, it was generally agreed by observers and analysts that the US would freeze around US\$900 million from the "Coalition Support Fund", which is used to pay for foreign troops who fight against terrorists on their country's territory. What was certain was that Pakistan would not receive the military aid component worth US\$255 million.

All that being said, Pakistan remains critical to US counter-terrorism efforts, nuclear non-proliferation, regional stability, the peace process in Afghanistan and regional economic integration and development. The US also requires the land routes that Pakistan provides in order to keep its troops in landlocked Afghanistan supplied. It can transport non-lethal commodities – fuel, equipment, products and construction materials – through Central Asia, mainly Uzbekistan, but that is an arduous and expensive option. Pakistan offers a cheaper and more direct route to Afghanistan. The US, nevertheless, transports its ammunition and military personnel by air from military bases such as Al Udaid and Al Sayliya in Qatar, Camp

Arifdzhan in Kuwait and its naval base in Bahrain. Pakistan, however, still offers certain bases from which the US can operate its drones, for instance. It remains, in short, a vital – and, thus, necessary – partner in its efforts in Afghanistan.

Perceptions and bad blood notwithstanding, the US-Pakistan relationship, it appears, is far from over.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.