US aid cuts won’t hit Pakistan where it hurts

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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Washington’s decision last week to suspend $800 million in military aid to Pakistan should not have come as a surprise to anyone who has been following recent developments in the US-Pakistan relationship. But it is difficult to see what the US will gain from such a move.

The Pakistani leadership has expressed concern over US actions and the head of Pakistan’s intelligence services is now heading to Washington for high-level talks, but the prognosis remains poor for the relationship between the two countries.

Points of conflict

Since early this year, the Obama administration has shown publicly that it is unhappy with Islamabad. This is for a number of reasons but two have been pivotal in the significant deterioration of bilateral relations. One was the arrest in January of a CIA contractor, Raymond Davis, following the fatal shooting of two Pakistanis in Lahore. And the second was the discovery that Al Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, had been holed up for the last five years in an expensive, large villa only some 50 kilometres from Islamabad.

Both these issues were eventually resolved to Washington’s satisfaction: Davis was released for about $2 million of “blood money” and bin Laden was eliminated in an operation conducted by a US Navy SEAL team in May. Although both matters have been settled, the events soured the relationship.
Pakistan’s issues

In addition to these two issues, there have been other irritants in the relationship. As a sign of displeasure with the Americans’ failure to forewarn them of the imminent assassination operation against bin Laden, the Pakistani authorities had over 100 military trainers leave the country. Since then, Islamabad has also made it more difficult for US intelligence and military personnel to obtain entry visas.

Along with these problems, there has been another important source of conflict – Pakistani political leaders want the US strikes by the unmanned drones against al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives hiding in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan to stop immediately.

The American administration has made clear this will not happen. These strikes have been highly successful in eliminating hundreds of terrorists, including Pakistani Taliban militants but they have also caused many civilian casualties. These civilian deaths have been the single, most important factor in fuelling the rampant anti-Americanism on the streets of Pakistan.

Finally, another irritant has been the Obama administration’s insistence that the Pakistani military launch operations against the Haqqani Network – a particularly nasty and efficient Afghan Taliban group, hiding in North Waziristan.

Having already lost more men fighting Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists in the tribal areas than the Coalition forces have in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military has no appetite for such an operation. And critically, the army does not want to hunt down the Haqqani network because that group has helped them fight other anti-government Pakistani Taliban forces.

Aid cuts won’t make Pakistan change

It’s important to note that of the $800 million in aid cuts, which represents about a third of the annual $2 billion in US military aid to Pakistan, about $300 million of it comes from the Coalition Support Fund (CSF).

This fund is designed to reimburse Pakistan for deploying more than 100,000 troops in the tribal areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The rest of the funds are for equipment and training. So whilst withholding CSF money will hurt the Pakistani budget, this will not be enough to have Pakistan cave in to American demands.

Pakistan’s tangled web of alliances

There are two fundamental reasons why the Pakistani authorities will not cut their ties with some of the militants groups nor go into North Waziristan.

First, whilst it would undoubtedly be in the long-term interests of Pakistan to cut loose these militant groups, it would be political suicide to do so now. The military and the Pakistan government are already facing a lot of criticism for appearing too pro-American.
After a decade of publicly siding with the US in the War on Terror and losing some 3,000 soldiers in the tribal areas, there is a real sense of American betrayal in Pakistan, particularly after the unilateral raid on bin Laden. Although there does seem to be a little sympathy from the Pakistani public for Americans when they discovered that bin Laden had been hiding so close to Islamabad for all those years.

Secondly, there is actually no incentive for the Pakistani military to go hunting down the Haqqani network in North Waziristan. By admitting that they are involved in behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Taliban and that the security of Afghanistan will be turned over to Kabul by the end of 2014, the Americans have effectively admitted strategic defeat in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the lack of incentive has been re-enforced after Lt.Gen David Rodriguez, the deputy commander of US forces in Afghanistan, who stated on 1 February that if the Pakistani army did not go into North Waziristan this would not mean “mission failure” in Afghanistan.

Accordingly, given that it would appear that the Haqqani Network – or at least elements of it – will probably eventually be part of a peace deal in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military is unlikely to want to make enemies with them at this stage in the game.

What was Washington hoping for?

So at the end of the day, it is not quite clear what Washington is hoping to achieve by withholding this military aid, except send a message of displeasure with Pakistan’s behaviour. But surely, Washington would know that the Pakistani military will not move on the two issues that matter most to Islamabad.

The Obama administration is, of course, in a position to put much more pressure on Pakistan where it hurts, including making it difficult for Islamabad to get additional vital loans from the IMF needed to prop up the decrepit state of the economy. But given the crucial role Pakistan will play in a post-Coalition Afghanistan, does Washington really want to weaken even further this geo-strategically important nuclear-armed state?

Two and half years ago, the Obama administration stressed that its priority was to fix the “trust deficit” between the US and Pakistan. It appeared genuine to want to do so. Unfortunately the score card today is not good.

Washington will need to change diplomatic tack because the bottom line is this: it would be in no one’s interest for this bilateral relationship to get worse, especially at this crucial moment in the lead up to the Coalition’s departure from Afghanistan in 2014.

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