

Whither Aid? Future of US Assistance to Pakistan

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Post 9/11, accepting the indispensability of Pakistan in solving the Afghan problem, US sanctioned massive flow of aid in Pakistan. Having committed substantial amount of aid henceforth, US feels its security objectives and efforts are frustrated by Pakistan's duplicitous acts in the war against terror. In the wake of the Osama killing, US policy makers are debating how to devise an aid policy which could strike balance between short term objectives of counter terrorism and long term goal of stabilizing Pakistan by making aid more development oriented. This paper discusses the current debates on aid in US and Pakistan, at a time when relations between the two countries have deteriorated, and deliberates on the future course of aid.

The Context

American forces were able to hunt down Osama Bin Laden just a few months before the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Even though this became possible after tireless efforts spanning almost a decade, the accomplishment was indeed remarkable—both in terms of the War on Terror and boosting American morale, which was at an all-time low in face of recession and mounting pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan. Osama was traced and killed in Abbottabad, a military cantonment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, hence raising questions about the very nature and future of US-Pakistan ties. A sense of shock pervaded the period that followed the Osama killing. The incident jolted public perceptions in both countries and thereafter unleashed an intense debate on whether it was feasible and advisable for US to continue its aid to Pakistan in the prevailing circumstances. Various conjectures followed: Would this lead to an estrangement between the two allies; and will US announce an aid withdrawal to penalise Pakistan?

The US administration refrained from making any impulsive announcement regarding aid withdrawal etc. Probably the top brass in US was in the know how of the operation and thus this calculated restraint. Moreover, this was not the first occasion when questions were raised on continuing aid to Pakistan. Earlier this year, the Raymond Davis case had also highlighted the inherent inconsistencies that characterise US-Pakistan relations in general and aid relations in particular. Parallel

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to the post Osama debate in US on how to make Pakistan accountable for aid, the emerging public discourse in Pakistan is that aid cuts would not impact Pakistan's economy and the security forces' capability for counter terror operations.

Six months hence, with US openly accusing the Pakistan spy agency, ISI of being involved in the bombing of the US embassy in Kabul in September 2011, the relations between the two countries have reached - what some believe - the nadir. In this backdrop, this paper seeks to briefly capture the ongoing current debates on US aid to Pakistan- both in the US and Pakistan and subsequently discern the likely course of US assistance to Pakistan. The paper lays special focus on the \$800 million cut in security aid announced by the US in July 2011 which tangentially marks the shift in US aid policy towards a visibly defiant Pakistan.

US Congressional Position on Aid to Pakistan

The H R 1699 Pakistan Foreign Assistance Accountability Act¹ was presented in the House on May 3, 2011, a day after Osama was killed. The legislation introduced by Ted Poe, the Republican senator from Texas, contains certain tough clauses with regard to Pakistan. It requires the US state department to certify that authorities in Pakistan had no information about Osama's whereabouts till May 2, 2011. In case it did have information, it was communicated timely to the US. If Pakistan is found complicit, then the US will hold back its aid to Pakistan. The bill is currently under consideration of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. In addition to the bill, there were several Congressmen who expressed their dissatisfaction over Pakistan's purported duplicity in the war against terror, which peaked with Osama being discovered there.

On July 7, 2011, two amendments to cut \$2 billion aid to Pakistan were moved by Senator Ted Poe in the Defence Appropriations Act for the fiscal year 2012.² The amendments were rejected by the House vote. Nevertheless, on July 11, 2011, the US administration decided to withhold \$ 800 million of military aid promised during the October 2010 round of US-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue as part of the \$2 billion package spread over a period of five years. A fraction of the deferred amount was slated to feed the quarterly reimbursements for the last two quarters of the year 2010 and remaining was meant for purchase of military hardware-equipment, weapons etc. The White House Chief of Staff, Bill Daley, announcing the decision to withhold aid noted "Pakistan has taken some steps that have given us reason to pause on some of the aid which we are giving to the military".³

The H.R. 2583: Foreign Relations Authorization Act⁴, Fiscal Year 2012 introduced on July 19, 2011 and passed by the Foreign Affairs Committee on July 21 outlined a similar set of conditions for continuing aid to Pakistan. It prescribes certification by

the secretary of state as to whether Pakistan is fully cooperating in investigating the domestic support base of Osama while he was alive and giving US unfettered access to his relatives and the material discovered from his compound in Abbottabad.

Both the *H R 1699 Pakistan Foreign Assistance Accountability Act* and *H.R. 2583: Foreign Relations Authorization Act* appear – in spirit - to be an extension of the Kerry Lugar Berman bill passed as the PEACE Act in 2009. The PEACE Act imposed certain restrictions on economic assistance to Pakistan and this was designed primarily to safeguard a massive assistance package of over \$7.5 billion. The continuation of aid was subjected to a certification by the president as to whether Pakistan's efforts in counter terrorism were satisfactory and whether it was fully supporting US operations in the region. In March 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed the first such certification on the President's behalf.⁵ Keeping in view the proposition that Osama was being tracked in Pakistan by the US since August 2010 and that this certification was issued while Operation Geronimo was probably gestating, the veracity and timing of certification stands questioned. Meanwhile, a GAO (Government Accountability Office) report dated July 19, 2011 later revealed that only a fraction of the civilian aid would be covered by such certification.⁶ Certification by the state department could be reviewed by the GAO but the assessment of the review would be classified.⁷

The US had twin objectives in mind while envisaging the Kerry Lugar Berman package: to convince Pakistan that the US wants a long term engagement and simultaneously to crack the whip to ensure that Pakistan accounts for all that is done with the US assistance. Two years down the line, US is nowhere near achieving either of these goals.

A few Congressmen such as Senator Mark Kirk, a member of the US Senate Subcommittee responsible for international aid, have taken an extreme position on Pakistan's perceivable unwillingness to tackle terrorist groups such as the Haqqani network based in North Waziristan. Kirk suggested that all aid to Pakistan should be stopped.⁸ The bombing of the US embassy in Kabul further exacerbated the situation and evoked strong reaction from Senator Lindsay Graham, a member of the Armed Services Committee. Graham sought an immediate end to "the idea of Pakistan's intelligence agencies supporting terrorism as a national strategy".⁹ Senator Graham in his media interaction highlighted the Senate Appropriations Committee approval of a \$1 billion grant for the Pakistan Counter Insurgency Capability Fund (PCCF) and imposing certain restrictions on security aid just as the economic assistance. The committee did not specify appropriations for FY 2012 for Pakistan, leaving it to the discretion of the administration.

In late September 2011, Senator Ted Poe who stridently opposed aid to Pakistan characterised it as "disloyal, deceptive and a danger"¹⁰ to US security interests in

the region, tabled *H. R. 3013 or the Pakistan Accountability Act*.¹¹ The legislation if it comes through will prohibit all aid to Pakistan except for the amount required to secure Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

The latest in the series of resolutions restricting aid to Pakistan was the *HR 3115*¹² for prohibiting non security and other assistance to Pakistan. It was moved on October 6, 2011 by Mike Coffman, who is also a member of the House Armed Services Committee. The legislation proposes to cut all aid-both security and economic to Pakistan unless the President certifies the conduct and sincerity of Pakistan in fighting the Al Qaeda and other terror groups. Coffman explained that the rationale behind the legislation was to make Pakistan understand that it cannot continue to receive aid from US while supporting militant groups and while being intrinsically anti American.¹³

Why an \$ 800 Million Cut in Security Assistance?

The immediate cause for withholding \$ 800 million in aid was Pakistan's insistence that US must call back its trainers and other personnel operating within Pakistan. It was a symbolic gesture to express US displeasure over the Pakistan army's decision to expel at least 90-100 American trainers from inside Pakistan in the wake of Osama operation. The Pentagon statement somewhat confirmed this: "The reduced presence of our trainers and other personnel means we can't deliver the assistance that requires training and supports to be effective".¹⁴ Pakistan had been demanding the withdrawal of US personnel ever since the Raymond Davis case which led to acrimony between the two countries. This was further compounded when Osama was found and killed in a US operation. Sensing its own vulnerabilities and facing international ire, Pakistan felt it could no longer allow US trainers or CIA operatives inside its territory.

It is also believed US has taken serious note of Pakistan's failure to rein in spiralling incidents of violent extremism. Saleem Shehzaad, known for his unbiased reporting against the ISI and the army was kidnapped and later brutally killed in May 2011. Shehzaad's writings in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Mehran naval base at Karachi revealed the extent to which extremist elements had penetrated into the armed forces of Pakistan.

The US administration clarified that the proposed cut would not affect civilian assistance. Non military aid commitments from US to Pakistan would remain "undeterred".¹⁵ The decision was conveyed by Thomas Nides, the US Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources to Pakistan's finance minister, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh in a telephonic communication.

The suspension of a part of the security aid is seen as an attempt to hold Pakistan accountable for the assistance it receives from US.¹⁶ The US is conscious of the fact that aid cuts will accentuate anti American sentiments and that is why the \$ 800 million reduction was termed as a deferment rather than as an actual cut. The announcement also could be a means of gauging the Pakistan reaction to any US cut/withdrawal of aid to determine future US decisions to take tougher measures against Pakistan. On October 5, 2011, the US embassy in Islamabad stated that the military aid is tied with Pakistan's cooperation in the War on Terror and hence this was a suspension and not an actual withdrawal of security aid.¹⁷

The bombing of the US embassy in Kabul forced a rethink on US development assistance as well as is evident in the *HR 3115*. It is believed that the situation has become rather dire and in such circumstances it would be increasingly difficult for United States to channelise augmented development funds to Pakistan. The USAID (United States Agency for International Development) officials already face threats from the militant groups who are overtly hostile to anything American.

Reactions in Pakistan on Aid Cut

Pakistan's implicit involvement in militancy is today at the core of the international security debate. Its role in abetting terrorism became more pronounced when Osama, the lynchpin of global terror, was found to have been living in its territory for over five years. The Pak army had no prior information regarding Operation Geronimo and hence was caught reacting. It was hugely embarrassed and preempting a US withdrawal of aid, the army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, in June 2011 suggested that US aid be diverted from military uses to fulfil non-military development purposes in Pakistan.¹⁸ Speaking on US-Pakistan ties, Kayani acknowledged having received only about \$8.6 billion as against the \$13 billion that was expected and out of this, he noted, at least \$ 6 billion was used by the government for budgetary support.¹⁹ Kayani was making an effort to assuage popular dissent in wake of Osama killing which had got the country a bad name. When US announced the deferment of \$800 million, the Pak army tried to paper over their embarrassment by saying that an aid cut would have no impact on their counter terror operations.²⁰

The former Pakistani foreign minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri upholds the army's viewpoint and says that the army in Pakistan has sufficient resources to counter militancy without American support.²¹ The well known economist and former World Bank official, Shahid Javed Burki deems the US aid cut to be a non-issue since Pakistan's ailing economy is more dependent on other financial institutions like the IMF. Burki suggests that rather than focussing on the fall out of US aid withdrawal, Pakistan should initiate internal economic reforms in the

absence of which the IMF has held back \$ 4 billion from the \$ 11 billion sanctioned in the year 2008.²²

There are however some in Pakistan who believe aid is somewhat pivotal to the military's counter terrorism activities and if withdrawn or withheld, will impact the long term objectives of Pakistan's security and overall US regional security interests. It might be difficult to gauge the repercussions of the aid cut immediately but problems are likely to surface in the next few months.²³

There is a growing belief in Pakistan that US aid is too security centric and focuses disproportionately on counter terrorism operations.²⁴ It is believed US has to divert some funds towards non-military purposes which could help resurrect Pakistan's socio economic structure. If US is able to strengthen democratic structures within Pakistan this could potentially be a panacea for all the ills that beset Pakistan today.

Overall, the withholding of aid was more of a prestige issue for Pakistan as is evident from the debate that followed this announcement.

Was the \$ 800 Million Aid Deferment Meant to Bring Pakistan to the Negotiating Table?

While Senator Carl Levin, the chair of the Armed Services Committee was leading a Congressional delegation to Islamabad in late August 2011, there were reports that the US had offered to release the aid if Pakistan agreed to sort out visa issues for the US military trainers. The delegation held meetings with president and the prime minister of Pakistan in the course of which Zardari apparently noted that the aid cut may accentuate anti Americanism amongst people already under economic hardships.²⁵ General Kayani reportedly refused to review the decision of sending US trainers back.²⁶ The army fears that allowing the American trainers to operate in Pakistan could further reveal the nexus between the Pak army and the militants. Osama's presence in Pakistan raised pertinent but uncomfortable questions for Pakistan, more specifically for the army which was neither informed about the operation nor involved in it.

The expulsion of American trainers from Pakistan was a setback for the US which was hoping to acquire some leverage over Pakistani security forces in the wake of the Osama killing. The decision to defer military aid while continuing civilian assistance appears to be a negotiating mechanism used by US to urge Pakistan to allow US personnel within its territory for achieving US objectives in the region. US thinking stems from the belief that its presence inside Pakistan is essential to

keep track of the ground realities there. Otherwise, Pakistan may mislead US while receiving aid worth billions.

Deepening Discord in US -Pakistan Ties and US Aid: An Assessment

Aid is worthwhile when there is trust between the donor and the recipient which appears to be missing between the US and Pakistan. Prospects for aid in a relationship beset with inherent problems and in an environment infused with visceral hatred towards US become as it is, very bleak.

This is a time, when the US Pak ties have hit a new low (worse than in the aftermath of Operation Geronimo in May 2011). The recent rhetorical phase of US Pakistan ties witnessed certain high points. Citing the telephonic interceptions between the Kabul bombers and the ISI, Admiral Mike Mullen was rather blatant in calling the Haqqani network a “veritable arm” of the ISI.²⁷ He also noted that Pakistan’s policy of “exporting violence” had “eroded their internal security and undermined their international credibility”.²⁸

Discord was getting intense as Pakistani foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar, instead of Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani addressed the UN General Assembly. Responding to Admiral Mullen’s comments, she stated in an interview that the Haqqani network, the Frankenstein monster was created by US and other powers during the Cold War and hence the responsibility cannot be put solely on Pakistan.²⁹ Enraged by Admiral Mullen’s accusations, Khar, as reports suggested, was asked to cut short her visit and return to Pakistan. This was, however, later denied by official sources.³⁰ Subsequently, she did address the UNGA before returning home.

The strictures from the US administration culminated in President Obama issuing a fresh set of warning to Pakistan denouncing its ties with “unsavoury” elements.³¹ The US president also questioned whether it was worthwhile to continue to give Pakistan billions of dollars in military and development assistance while the ISI continues to forge ties with militant groups to wield influence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s ties with the groups such as the Haqqani network are being perceived as part of its long term objective to gain a firm hold on the state of affairs in Afghanistan when the US led coalition forces withdraw in the next few years. The US is desperately trying to persuade Pakistan to give up its affinity to militant groups in the region, and feels it is futile to commit billions in aid to Pakistan.

The recent deterioration in US - Pakistan relations has deterred even those constituencies in US who strongly backed aid to Pakistan. The idea of making all

aid to Pakistan conditional is emerging as the consensus in the US. This is based on considerations that harsh domestic economic realities and eluding resolution to its Afghanistan commitment may make it imprudent for US to turn a blind eye to Pakistan's duality towards US objectives.

Pakistan still lives in denial and hence whenever it finds itself on a tight spot, it reverts to making charges that these militants are offshoots of the mujahedeen whom US nurtured to defeat the Soviet Union. It fails to understand that US at least is trying to learn from past mistakes and has adopted a clear cut approach to dealing with militants in this part of the world. The onus lies on Pakistan to make some hard but clear choices. In the present situation, Pakistan has no option but to change course. Rather than Pakistan deceiving US on counter terror efforts and US issuing warnings to cut aid time and again, it would be better for both to cooperate to eliminate the extremist groups that they had jointly supported a few decades ago.

Ten years down the line since US started pouring aid into Pakistan, its larger security concerns remain unresolved. Stabilising Afghanistan has been a US priority but with Pakistan's degeneration, the challenges and complications for US have compounded. On the other side, Pakistani suspicions of US intentions are justifiable to the extent that the US did not much pay much attention to developments inside Pakistan before 9/11 even though it was aware of the growing nexus between the establishment in Pakistan and militant groups. This was a time when aid from US almost ceased and the USAID office in Islamabad was closed down.

Americans see aid as a favour to Pakistan and Pakistan perceives the fight against militancy as a favour to the US. These delusions have to be addressed by both sides. Eradicating terror from its soil will benefit Pakistan more than the US which is geographically distant from the terror inflicted Af-Pak zone. On the other hand, it is as much in US interest as in Pakistan's to continue to support Pakistan with aid till the time it is stable and peaceful.

Aid as a means to drive the US's carrot and stick policy seems dated and irrelevant in today's context. What is therefore required is a more pro-active and visible US aid policy which reflects positively on US engagement with Pakistan towards long term sustained efforts on nation building. There is need to bring in more transparency in aid transactions. Unless there is a degree of transparency, US efforts will be discredited by those in Pakistan who benefit from aid and at the same time fail to acknowledge it publically.

Future Course

Aid to Pakistan in deteriorating security circumstances has become a necessity for the US. It cannot wish away the billions promised to Pakistan simply because it is unhappy about certain developments. US could probably afford to withdraw aid before 9/11 and it did so when Pakistan defied US advice and proceeded with its secret nuclear programme. Today, even though Osama was found living in Pakistan and as the economic meltdown limit US financial strength, it has few options but to continue aid to Pakistan. Terror has crossed the US threshold and it cannot afford another 9/11. If the US deserts Pakistan at this juncture, it may revert to fundamentalist policies and politics.

However, aid to Pakistan without having it breaking its ties with militant groups will be self-defeating for US objectives in the region. The US needs to have tangible evidence that Pakistan is dissociating from terror groups before it expects to meet specific objectives in Afghanistan. Bruce Riedel argues that Pakistan lies at the “crossroads of many US nightmares”³² and hence it is essential that the US coerces Pakistan to sever its ties with militants before it expects aid to incur stability in Pakistan at the political and socio-economic level.

US aid may be used to gain leverages with the Pak army but not with the common Pakistani. US aid needs to evolve innovative methods to reach out to the common people in Pakistan. The trust deficit needs to be bridged by somehow convincing them that the aid is well intentioned and lead to well-being and prosperity. There is need to highlight the objectives of an US aid programme rather than the amount appropriated. Policy calculations should be based on actual disbursements and not appropriations. The gap between the amount promised and the funds actually given to Pakistan tends to downplay concerns regarding misappropriation by Pakistan. The Pak army always hits back at US aid impositions by arguing that they receive only a very small portion of the total amount sanctioned. The army complains there is delay in reimbursement via CSF while US reports indicate that the claims put forth by Pakistan are rather inflated and not documented satisfactorily. Discrepancy in figures and statements can be misleading for both sides and baffling for those in the region (read India and Afghanistan) whose security is contingent to what eventuates from the war on terror once US exits the region. In this regard, US may adopt an overseeing mechanism within its aid programme to ensure development funds are utilised judiciously for deserving sections of Pakistani society and security aid is used only for counterterrorism purposes.

The problem with Pakistan is more complex than ever. The US has to weigh its strategic choices on Pakistan well. For the US to think that it can use aid to ensure its security interests may not bear fruit in prevailing circumstances. More aid may

still not appease Pakistan and cuts will hardly make it compliant. The questions that the US needs to consider while formulating its aid policy are: whether aid cut will make Pakistan behave? Even as the US is able to rein in Pakistan and align it towards its security objectives in the region would that address the larger threat of global terrorism which targets American interests? Nonetheless, if Pakistan stops indulging the militant networks and their activities, and if aid can be a harbinger of this change, then the US might succeed in its regional mission. 

Notes:

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