US Threatens Pakistan as Part of New Afghan War Drive. Islamabad Seeks Beijing's Support

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US government officials have begun to spell out the meaning of Trump's threat to punish Pakistan if it does not suppress Afghan insurgents operating from its border regions. These punishments include not just cuts to aid and payments for services rendered in fighting the Afghan war, but also encouraging India, Pakistan's arch-rival, to play a larger role in Afghanistan, and a more pro-Indian stance on the seven-decade-old Kashmir dispute.

India has repeatedly boasted of its readiness to mount military raids inside Pakistan, even if they risk provoking all-out war between South Asia's rival nuclear powers.

Rattled by Washington's threats, Islamabad has turned to Beijing for support, further heightening tensions in a region where India and China are engaged in their most serious border stand-off since their 1962 border war, and Indian and Pakistani troops routinely exchange fatal artillery barrages across the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

Trump insisted that Pakistan must "immediately" change course and stop "harboring criminals and terrorists" in his Monday evening speech outlining plans for a massive US escalation of the Afghan war. Elaborating on this, **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson** told a Tuesday press conference that Washington's relations with Islamabad will henceforth be determined by whether it heeds US demands on the conduct of the Afghan war. Those who provide "safe haven" for terrorists have been "put on notice," he declared, "warned (and) forewarned."

Failure to comply, Tillerson suggested, would cost Islamabad financially and result in a further downgrading in relations, or worse. Asked what specific actions Washington might take against a recalcitrant Pakistan, he said,

> "We have some leverage that's been discussed in terms of the amount of aid and military assistance we give them; their status as a non-NATO alliance partner. All of that can be put on the table."

Although Tillerson did not mention it, senior Trump administration officials are known to have considered threatening Pakistan with designation as a "state sponsor of terrorism."

Such a designation would automatically entail the loss of all US financial support and scrapping of all US arms sales, and likely lead to the sanctioning of government and military officials.

Lisa Curtis, who last month was named deputy assistant to the president and senior White House director for South and Central Asia, called, in a report issued by the Heritage Foundation last February, for the "terrorist state" designation to be held in reserve for use beyond the Trump administration's "first year."

Tillerson also indicated that the US will resume the drone strikes that have killed thousands of Pakistani civilians and terrorized the impoverished population of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The former Exxon CEO refused to directly answer a question at Tuesday's press conference about the drone strikes, which are a flagrant violation of international law. But in sidestepping the question, he declared,

> "We are going to attack terrorists wherever they live."

The US military-security establishment, along with Democratic and Republican Party leaders, has long blamed the resilience of the Afghan insurgency on Pakistan's reputed failure to crack down on the Taliban and its allies, especially the Haqqani Network.

The reality is that Washington and its NATO allies are waging a brutal neo-colonial war of occupation, propping up a corrupt and reviled puppet government in Kabul with night raids, drone strikes and other acts of terror.

Consequently, the Taliban, notwithstanding its reactionary Islamist ideology, is able to draw on widespread popular support. Pentagon officials themselves concede that, despite the US spending close to a trillion dollars, losing more than 2,400 troops, and raining death on one of the world's most impoverished countries for the past 16 years, the Taliban insurgency is the strongest it has been since American forces invaded the country in October 2001.

Mentioned only in passing by Tillerson on Tuesday was the other element in Washington's double-pronged threat to Pakistan: Trump's call for India to become more involved in Afghanistan, especially in the provision of economic assistance.

India lost no time in welcoming Trump's new Afghan war strategy, which includes among its core elements removing all restraints on US commanders targeting civilian areas and otherwise using the US war machine as they see fit.

> "We welcome **President Trump**'s determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges facing Afghanistan and confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists," said an Indian External Affairs Ministry statement.

India's corporate media has lauded Trump's endorsement of India in his Afghan speech as a "key security and economic partner" of US imperialism. In an op-ed column titled, "Donald Trump's Afghanistan policy presents India a chance to increase sphere of influence in South Asia," *Firstpost* senior editor **Sreemoy Talukdar** termed Trump's Afghan policy a "loud" endorsement—one that has huge implications for India in South Asia, where it jostles for influence with a mercantile China."

To the dismay of Pakistan's ruling elite, New Delhi has supplanted Islamabad over the past dozen years as American imperialism's principal regional ally. With the aim of building up India as a counter-weight to China, Washington has showered India with strategic favours,

Under **Narendra Modi** and his three year-old Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, the Indo-US strategic alliance has undergone a qualitative transformation. India has parroted Washington's provocative stances on the South China Sea and North Korea disputes, dramatically increased its military-strategic cooperation with America's principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia, and thrown open its ports and bases to routine use by US warships and fighter jets.

The US establishment, be it **National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster** and the rest of Trump's cabal of generals, or the liberals of the *New York Times*, accuse Islamabad of playing a "double game"—that is, of fighting the Pakistan Taliban and providing logistical support to the US war in Afghanistan, while surreptitiously protecting the Haqqani Network and other elements of the Taliban with close ties to Pakistan's intelligence agencies.

This is truly a case of the pot calling the kettle black. It was the CIA that instructed the Pakistani ISI in the use of Islamist militia as proxy forces. At America's behest, Islamabad helped organize and train the Mujihadeen who were used to draw the Soviet Union into the Afghan civil war, then to bleed it militarily for the next decade.

Moreover, the US has repeatedly employed Islamist militia and terror groups, including in regime-change operations in Libya and Syria. And it has done so while cynically claiming they are the target of the "war on terror" that successive US administrations have invoked as the pretext for military interventions in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia and for sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home.

Pakistan's maintenance of ties with sections of the Taliban is bound up with its strategic aim of securing a major say in any political settlement of the Afghan war and its mounting anxiety over the "global Indo-US strategic alliance."

For years, Islamabad has been warning Washington that its strategic embrace of India is fueling an arms and nuclear arms race in South Asia and encouraging Indian belligerence. But these warnings have been curtly dismissed. At most, Washington would agree to somewhat curb India's ambitions in Afghanistan. Now even that is being set aside.

As the US has downgraded its relations with Pakistan, Islamabad has increasingly turned to its "all-weather friend," China, to offset Indian pressure. Beijing, for its part, long sought to woo New Delhi with offers of investment, including a leading role in its One Belt-One Road Eurasian infrastructure-building scheme. But with India under Modi emerging as a frontline state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China, Beijing's stance has changed markedly.

Over the past two months, Chinese government officials and the state-owned media have repeatedly threatened India with a border war unless it withdraws its troops from a remote Himalayan ridge, long under Beijing's control but also claimed by Bhutan.

Underscoring the extent to which the US drive to harness India to its war drive against China has drawn South Asia into the maelstrom of great power conflict and is polarizing the region along India-US versus China-Pakistan lines, Beijing has given Islamabad a strong show of

support in the wake of Trump's Afghan war speech.

First, a Chinese Foreign Ministry representative came to Pakistan's defence, saying the country had made "great sacrifices" and "important contributions" to the fight against terrorism. Then, the Chinese foreign minister, who was already in Pakistan on a previously scheduled visit, agreed in meetings with the Pakistani leadership to "maintain the momentum" of high level military-security and economic cooperation. This is to include Beijing and Islamabad enhancing policy coordination in the "emerging global and regional situation" and pressing forward with the development of the $50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Russia has also made clear its opposition to Washington's plans to intensify the Afghan War and bully Pakistan. Russia's presidential envoy to Afghanistan, **Zamir Kabulov**, said Tuesday,

> "Putting pressure [on Pakistan] may seriously destabilize the region-wide security situation and result in negative consequences for Afghanistan."

Traditionally, Russia has enjoyed very close relations with India. But New Delhi's alignment with Washington is placing the Indo-Russian strategic partnership under severe strain.

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