

US suspends security assistance to Pakistan for purchase of military equipment

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On Monday, Trump said the U.S. had “foolishly” given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid in the last 15 years and had gotten nothing in return but “lies & deceit.”

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert

Washington: The United States announced Thursday it was suspending security assistance to Pakistan for failing to take “decisive action” against Taliban militants targeting U.S. personnel in neighboring Afghanistan.

The State Department’s declaration signaled growing frustration over Pakistan’s cooperation in fighting terrorist networks. Initially vague information on how much money and materiel was being withheld suggested the primary goal was to substantiate President Donald Trump’s surprising New Year’s Day tweet that accused Pakistan of playing U.S. leaders for “fools.”

Spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the restrictions covered security assistance above and beyond the \$255 million for Pakistani purchases of American military equipment that the administration held up in August.

Nauert made clear the \$255 million was still blocked, and the Pentagon said the new action targets payments of so-called Coalition Support Funds that the U.S. pays to Pakistan to reimburse it for its counterterrorism operations.

Defense spending legislation for 2017 provides for up to \$900 million in Coalition Support Funds, of which \$400 million can only be released to Pakistan if Defense Secretary Jim Mattis certifies Pakistan has taken specific actions against the Haqqani network. None of the \$900 million as so far been disbursed, the Pentagon said. The last Coalition Support Funds were paid to Pakistan in March last year, provided under defense spending legislation for 2016.

On Monday, Trump said the U.S. had “foolishly” given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid in the last 15 years and had gotten nothing in return but “lies & deceit.” He reiterated longstanding allegations that Pakistan gives “safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan.”

Trump unveiled in August a South Asia strategy aimed at ending the stalemate in the U.S. war in Afghanistan, now entering its 17th year. Nauert said that despite sustained high-level engagement with Pakistan’s government, “the Taliban and Haqqani network continue to find sanctuary inside Pakistan as they plot to destabilize Afghanistan and attack U.S. and allied personnel.” She told reporters that until Pakistan takes “decisive action” against those groups, security assistance was suspended.

Civilian development and economic assistance to Pakistan is not affected.

Also Thursday, the State Department accused Pakistan of severe violations of religious freedom. It announced that it was placing Pakistan on a special watch list, pursuant to 2016 legislation. The step does not carry any serious consequences.

Pakistan’s embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

But on Tuesday, Pakistan called Trump’s tweet “completely incomprehensible” and at odds with recent “trust-building” visits by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Mattis. It accused the U.S. of scapegoating Pakistan

for its own failure to bring peace to Afghanistan.

A senior Pakistani senator expressed disappointment at the U.S. decision to suspend military aid to Islamabad, saying it will be detrimental to Pakistani-U.S. relations.

Nuzhat Sadiq, chairwoman of the Senate Foreign Affairs committee in the upper house of parliament, says Islamabad can manage without the United States as it did in the 1990s, but would prefer to move the troubled relationship forward. Sadiq said on Friday that "what the U.S. is doing now is not good for its policy against terrorism and for a lasting peace in this region."

She said that Pakistan has always "played a vital role in the war on terror."

The haphazard nature of Thursday's announcement suggested it had been hastily arranged rather than developed through a traditional policy process. Even after members of Congress had been notified of an impending aid suspension, White House and State Department officials were still hammering out details for who would announce it and when. Earlier Thursday, Mattis said the policy on military aid to Pakistan was "still being formulated."

As recently as October, Trump credited U.S.-Pakistani cooperation for winning the release of an American woman, her Canadian husband and their children who had been held by Haqqani militants for five years.

U.S. assistance to Pakistan, which rose sharply after the 9/11 attacks, has been declining since 2011 when American commandos killed Osama bin Laden inside Pakistan, straining relations. Pakistan has increasingly turned for economic support to northern neighbor China, which is investing tens of billions in transportation links and power generation as it extends its strategic footprint across Asia.

Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Wilson Center's South Asia program, said suspension of U.S. security assistance to Pakistan would not torpedo relations but it was a significant step backward. He said Pakistan could fall back on Saudi Arabia and China for military supplies, but it still depends on the U.S. for certain types of high-end equipment.

"There are considerable risks for the U.S. because Pakistan could retaliate in ways that would be very problematic for U.S. regional interests," he said, such as curtailing intelligence cooperation and U.S. supply lines into Afghanistan.

"No matter what, the relationship is in a bad spot right now."

- AP