

The Pakistan Policy Symposium



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Bringing More Stability to a Misunderstood Relationship

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Last year, **Pathways to Change – Pakistan Policy Symposium**, a two-day event jointly organized by the Wilson Center and INDUS, convened expert scholars, academics, and practitioners from the United States and Pakistan to explore Pakistan's recent achievements in economic, political, and foreign affairs as well as its opportunities to address current and future challenges. Speakers and panelists focused on identifying practical, innovative, and above all actionable policy solutions. The following series of policy briefs, which draw on discussions from the symposium, will be of interest to the academic and scholarly communities; diaspora audiences; business and policy circles; and any general audiences interested in Pakistan, U.S.-Pakistan relations, or international relations on the whole.



The U.S.-Pakistan relationship is many things.

Complicated. Fragile. Frustrating. Volatile. The list goes on and on.

But most of all, it is misunderstood.

Indeed, U.S.-Pakistan relations are frequently mischaracterized as interminably bad: A dysfunctional partnership that survives only because it can't bring itself to get a divorce.

In reality, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship runs hot and cold. It has its share of torturous moments, but it also enjoys periods of warmth. It's easy to forget that during the Cold War, when Pakistan was an American ally, the two often got along quite well. There was even a time, back in the 1950s, when American film stars visited Pakistan to shoot movies.

More recently, in 2009, after the Obama administration took office, the two sides set out to broaden their relationship beyond security cooperation. Admittedly, it was a short-lived period of *détente*, and by 2011 the relationship had plunged into crisis.

That brief two-year period—punctuated by the establishment of a new strategic dialogue—was another reminder that U.S.-Pakistan relations have their ups as well as their downs.

Recent months underscore this yo-yo-like pattern of U.S.-Pakistan relations. Over the first year of the Trump administration, the yo-yo took a plunge: The White House repeatedly threatened to take a harder line on Pakistan. Its rhetoric—including the president's tweets—was harsh. Security assistance was cut, and the two sides scaled down their engagement.

And then, suddenly, the yo-yo climbed back up. By 2018, President Trump was increasingly impatient to leave Afghanistan and wanted a deal with the Taliban to give him cover for a withdrawal. Consequently, Washington staged a full-court press to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan was enlisted to help, and by all indications it did: In late 2018 and early 2019, the Taliban was sending senior representatives to meet U.S. negotiators in Abu Dhabi and Doha.

How ironic that the very administration that threatened a harder line on Pakistan came to regard Islamabad as a critical partner in a fledgling peace process with the Taliban.

Washington has long viewed its relationship with Islamabad through the lens of Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, the immediate-term trajectory of U.S.-Pakistan relations will depend on the fate of peace talks in Afghanistan. If they succeed, and Washington believes Islamabad was helpful, the relationship could enjoy a renaissance. If talks fail, and Washington believes Islamabad was in some way to blame, then bilateral ties could take another big tumble.

If U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan, Washington may decide to wash its hands of Pakistan altogether and move on to other matters.

Or, it may decide to roll up its sleeves and take a harder line. With no more troops in Afghanistan, Washington would no longer have to worry about the risk of problematic Pakistani retaliations—such as the closure of NATO supply lines—if the United States were to implement coercive policies. If America believed Pakistan was still nurturing ties to terrorists that threaten U.S. interests, it may feel emboldened

to take the punitive steps that the Trump administration has threatened but not implemented.

And then there's the third and most likely option: Washington continues to engage with Islamabad in order to help achieve its core interest of stability. Consider what Laurel Miller, a former acting U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, said during the Pakistan Policy Symposium's U.S.-Pakistan relations panel: "Any enduring U.S. interests in the region... will require U.S. engagement with Pakistan beyond the term of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan."

In other words, disengaging from Afghanistan won't prompt Washington to disengage from Pakistan in its continued effort to ensure that terrorism—or insecurity more broadly in the region—doesn't threaten American interests or the U.S. homeland.

David Sedney, the other American on the U.S.-Pakistan relations panel and a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, was even more sanguine. He asserted that there are ample opportunities for U.S.-Pakistan relations beyond the Afghanistan issue.

Sedney spoke of the potential for more nuclear cooperation—including the "stretch goal" of a civil nuclear deal, much like the one Washington concluded with New Delhi more than a decade ago. He also called on the United States to work with Pakistan to strengthen the rule of law, freedom of the press, and the ease of doing business. Adding more layers to the relationship, Sedney said, can make the partnership

more resilient. If you have strength in more areas, he contended, the relationship can "withstand pressure" in others.

In reality, until the fate of peace talks and other matters in Afghanistan become more clear, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship will remain tethered to that country and likely won't have the bandwidth to tackle such sensitive, albeit significant, topics.

For now, it's worth highlighting several modest steps that can keep the U.S.-Pakistan relationship relatively stable and capable of withstanding any shocks that result from Afghanistan-related disagreements or problems.

First, be pragmatic. Don't oversell or undersell the relationship. Acknowledge it'll always have its ups and downs.

Second, target low-hanging fruit—non-security and non-controversial issues—to build more trust and goodwill in a relationship that badly needs both. This can entail forming new working groups to discuss potential cooperation on clean energy development, water resource management, and public health education, among other areas.

Third, be more flexible about the geopolitical realities of South Asia. In her remarks on the U.S.-Pakistan relations panel, Miller wisely suggested that the relationship might fare better if Islamabad doesn't treat the fast-growing U.S.-India relationship as a zero sum, and if Washington accepts the deepening role of China in South Asia.

Indeed, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship stands to strengthen if the two sides focus a bit less on their rivals and a bit more on themselves.

Ultimately, Washington and Islamabad will never be soul mates. But that doesn't mean they can't find ways to have fewer downs and more ups in their relationship—no matter how complicated, fragile, frustrating, or volatile it might be.

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