

The Pakistan Policy Symposium

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The Way Forward for Pakistan-U.S. Relations: A Pakistani Perspective

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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.



Pakistan and the United States have been on the same side of history for over half a century, as friends and allies. Both have partnered together in shaping our world.

The national interests and strategic calculus of the two converged during the Cold War era. Subsequently, Pakistan contributed significantly toward the international campaign against terror. However, Pakistan-U.S. relations have drifted during the past few years.

Fundamental to this has been a communication breakdown and a certain inability to accurately read each other's strategic intent. Of course, the global and regional situation has also changed, as has the domestic political situation of both countries.

Pakistan is a gateway to Central Asia and an Indian Ocean state. Its geostrategic importance cannot be ignored. But for now it carries a negative connotation in the United States. This is due to a perceptual inclination. The challenge is to convert the perception of negative relevance to positive relevance.

The differences between Pakistan and the United States arise primarily from a lack of a shared assessment of the situation in Afghanistan.

Pakistan considers the fighting in Afghanistan as a civil war between various ethnicities and tribes. The United States has persisted in viewing it only from the prism of antiterrorism and counterinsurgency.

The United States ascribes the resilience of the Afghan Taliban to the so-called sanctuaries in Pakistan and to Pakistan's forward agenda in Afghanistan. These perceptions are misplaced.

To cooperate meaningfully, Pakistan and the United States need to arrive at a common assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. Both should then move toward identifying end-state goals and array political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence tools to achieve shared objectives.

Unfortunately, the U.S. "Afghanistan and South Asia strategy" is premised on a coercive approach towards Pakistan. It is counterproductive and inhibits in-depth engagement. Only relatively recently have the U.S. secretary of state and Pakistani foreign minister had occasions to meet.

It is imperative to find a *modus vivendi* to align Pakistani and U.S. views based on their respective national interests.

On Afghanistan, the United States needs to premise its understanding of Pakistan on the following:

Pakistan would like America to succeed in bringing a durable peace to Afghanistan.

The U.S. presence in Afghanistan is therefore a factor of stability.

Afghanistan should not again become a hotbed for terrorism.

ISIS needs to be eliminated from Afghan soil and the broader region (the Afghan Taliban is of the same view).

All Afghan parties need to be incentivized to reach a settlement.

The rights of women and minorities need to be fully respected in a future political/constitutional dispensation.

The Afghan people are weary of strife and conflict.

The war economy needs to be transformed into a normal economy.

The binary of victory or defeat is false. The focus should be on victory for peace for the Afghan people.

Pakistan has no favorites in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban ought to find political accommodation within the Afghan state through broad-based consultations both within Afghanistan and with America.

The unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan needs to be ensured and respected.

There is a four-way convergence of interests between Washington, Kabul, Islamabad and the Taliban on several key facets of the way forward in Afghanistan. These include a realization that there is no military solution; the prioritization of a political settlement; and support for eliminating ISIS so that Afghanistan may never again be used for international terrorism. However, producing a generally acceptable settlement will require creativity, imagination, and substantial political and economic inputs.

This needs to be concretized into a political settlement/grand Afghan reconciliation.

The international community—notably the United States, European Union, and neighbors and regional states—should assist in building a solid economic foundation for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

China and the United States should reach an understanding to assist in Afghanistan's socioeconomic development along with other regional states. This implies that Afghanistan and Pakistan should not be viewed by the United States in the context of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Pakistan can assist Afghanistan by offering connectivity and participation in

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

The U.S. corporate sector should be incentivized for participating for profit in connectivity projects.

The above would constitute a broad framework of understanding for U.S.-Pakistan relations that could be operationalized by a range of pragmatic steps. Essential to this would be:

Refraining from negative public narratives about each other.

Reviving multi-tiered consultations to restore trust.

Setting up a standing military-intelligence-diplomatic coordination mechanism for policy/ operational coherence.

Excluding the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation from the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

Crafting a statement of principles on U.S.-Pakistan relations that underscores mutual respect and mutual interest.

Reviving strategic dialogue.

Restoring or pursuing Track II processes that cover broader questions and issues (including trilateral consultations between Pakistan, the United States, and China).

Pakistan needs to pursue its own developmental priorities, and it cannot afford to play proxy in great power struggles. In this context, the United States is currently focused on enhancing India's role in the region and beyond.

Pakistan has no difficulty with a U.S.-India defense alliance, if sophisticated weapons transfers by the United States to India are not used or threatened to be used by India against Pakistan.

A certain sensitivity by the United States to

South Asian dynamics would be conducive to stability and peace in South Asia.

At a minimum, U.S.-India tracks and U.S.-Pakistan tracks should remain distinct and not intersect.

The United States should stand to benefit from the opening up of trans-regional economic and trade cooperation between Central and South Asia. Pakistan needs to open up connectivity and transit facilities overland for all concerned.

If geography is destiny, then geoeconomics is the playbook. In an interdependent world, geopolitics has limited validity.

U.S. President Donald Trump's embrace of patriotism vis-a-vis globalism and the defense of national sovereignty and freedoms is compatible with the core principles of the UN Charter, which emphasize sovereignty, the equal rights of peoples, and the principle of self-determination.

As far as Pakistan-U.S. bilateral relations are concerned, steps should be taken to facilitate people-to-people contacts, access for Pakistani students to U.S. educational institutions, and business interactions.

America can help Pakistan secure assistance from the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions.

On nuclear issues, Pakistan needs to be able to play its role in promoting strategic stability and nonproliferation. Pakistan is not interested in an arms race in South Asia.

America could assist both Pakistan and India in promoting confidence-building measures in the realm of strategic weapons and conventional forces.

The normalization of Pakistan-India relations, coupled with the revival of South Asia regional economic cooperation, would be in the interest of world peace and would contribute to progress and prosperity for a billion-plus people in this region.

Enlightened reasoning demands that Pakistan and the United States renew their efforts to cooperate by promoting their shared interests and by working together to help foster regional peace, stability, and development.

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