

# The Pakistan Policy Symposium

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## Bringing More Stability to a Misunderstood Relationship

Michael Kugelman, Shezad Habib, and Nasir Naveed

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.

Pakistan's relationship with the U.S. also enjoys, and has long enjoyed, a period 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.

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

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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**Michael Kugelman** is deputy director of the Asia Program and senior associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

**Shezad Habib** is special advisor to INDUS.

**Nasir Naveed** is director of policy for INDUS.

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