US Reengagement with Pakistan: Ideas for Reviving an Important Relationship

REPORT OF THE PAKISTAN STUDY GROUP
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The US-Pakistan relationship has gone through many changes. The relationship had a high point when President Dwight Eisenhower described Pakistan as the “most allied ally of the United States,” and another high point occurred when President Ronald Reagan said that “the American people support close ties with Pakistan and look forward to expanding them.”

The relationship has also had low points, such as when in January 2018 President Donald Trump said, “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than $33 billion in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!”

US administrations going back to President Eisenhower have pinned great hopes on their alliance with Pakistan only to be disappointed and frustrated. For policymakers in both countries, some of the most important recent issues have been Pakistan’s poorly veiled support for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, its backing for jihadi groups targeting Kashmir, its close embrace of China, and its expanding nuclear arsenal.

Successive American administrations have assumed that with the right kind of incentives—economic and military—Pakistan would finally change how its policy diverges from US interests. However, neither the award of military and civilian aid nor the cutoff of aid has been able to change Pakistan’s existing national security paradigm and the policies framed by its security establishment.

Pakistan, for its part, has been upset as it believes it has offered a fair exchange to the US for its aid by abetting US strategic plans: containment of communism in the 1950s and 1960s, military assistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and post-2001 logistical and political support for the American military mission. Pakistan complains that Washington does not respect its contribution or fully appreciate its security threats, regional concerns, and aspirations.

Differing American and Pakistani Perspectives

Right from the start, the US and Pakistan were like two partners that were always confronting different enemies and pinning different expectations onto their association. Neither country has changed its core policies, nor have they given up the hope that the other will change. The two nations have parallel narratives of their shared experience.

According to Pakistan’s story, jihadist terrorism owes its existence to a joint Cold War program gone awry, and the US needs to help Pakistan deal with the issue on Islamabad’s terms and on Pakistan’s timelines. Anti-Americanism in Pakistan is the result of the US being a fair-weather friend, withdrawing from South Asia except when it needed Pakistani cooperation against Soviet communists or al-Qaeda terrorists.

From Pakistan’s standpoint, the US does not show consistent interest in Pakistan’s well-being. Pakistan would be willing to be an American strategic ally only if the US understood and attended to Islamabad’s concerns about India’s influence in the region and to Pakistan’s desire or even its right to emerge as the preeminent power in its neighborhood.

American critics of Pakistan respond by pointing out that Pakistan has always pursued its own agenda, which too often collides with American interests. Yet Islamabad repeatedly seeks US money and arms without keeping its commitments. The list of American grievances is long, not least that Pakistan undertook a nuclear program while promising the US that it would refrain from building a weapon.

The US helped arm and train mujahideen against the Soviets during the 1980s, but Pakistan decided to keep these militants well-armed and sufficiently funded even after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. From the American perspective, Pakistan’s crackdown on terrorist groups even after 9/11 has been half-hearted at best.
Since Pakistan currently seems keen to reengage with the US while Washington sees advantages in reengagement, both sides may need to stop airing grievances and begin to build a relationship that serves the interests of both countries. Yet they do not need to have the same worldview to develop a positive partnership that enhances the security of Pakistan, South Asia, and the US.

Changing Circumstances

Over the last decade, several aspects of the US-Pakistan relationship have changed. Most importantly, a US-India entente has emerged, and a peer rivalry between China and the US is developing. Meanwhile, Pakistan has probably learned a few lessons from Afghanistan as well as from the blowback of its support for militancy in India-controlled Kashmir. A geostrategic competition with Russia and China that involves Pakistan and Afghanistan is also occurring in Asia. So now may be an opportune moment to lay the foundations for a sustainable US-Pakistan relationship.

- A modest, pragmatic relationship between the US and Pakistan, one not based on exaggerated expectations on both sides, would involve understanding the following:
  - Pakistan and the US will continue to see Afghanistan through different lenses but can cooperate to maintain peace in that country and alleviate its people’s suffering.
  - Attitudes toward India at both the elite and popular levels in Pakistan will, at best, change slowly.
  - Public opinion in both the US and Pakistan acts as a constraint on bilateral relations.
  - There is little the US can do to induce Pakistan to change its overall strategic calculus, which is based on Pakistan’s understanding of its security environment.
  - The US and Pakistan have divergent views on China.

Need for New Policy Ideas

The US has tried both years of sustained engagement with large-scale aid and years of using sticks while withholding carrots, but Pakistan has not altered its policies. At the same time, Pakistan’s close economic and political relationship with China is unlikely to diminish, and Islamabad will probably retain expanded ties with Russia.

With these caveats in mind, policymakers should consider what is attainable and whether the two countries can achieve a relationship based on mutual interest. Relying on either inducements or threats to encourage greater cooperation has apparent limits. Moving forward, the two sides would benefit by developing a framework for pragmatic engagement.

However, policymakers should avoid overestimating the possibilities of, or demanding, a complete convergence of interests between Pakistan and the US. Instead of allowing existing differences to define the partnership, both countries should recognize that they need to understand the other’s interests so that they can find a way to collaborate on areas of mutual concern.

American policymakers also need to think of more options beyond either giving or denying vast amounts of aid to coerce Pakistan into changing its policies. Pakistan’s leaders, too, need to move beyond the fantasy that Pakistan is “critical” to America so that US policymakers will always focus on it.

There is also a need for acceptance within the Pakistani leadership that all of Pakistan’s problems, especially terrorism and militancy, cannot be laid at the door of the US.

Areas of Shared Interest

US-Pakistan policy has had a circular quality over the decades. While some in the US do not view relations with Pakistan as important, circumstances may change so that Pakistan may once again figure prominently in American security interests. Therefore, policymakers should consider under what circumstances this might occur. What upcoming crisis could cause such a shift, and how can Washington constructively prepare for it by improving relations with Pakistan?
Historically, US departures from the region have not worked out well for American interests. In its absence, developments took place that led the US to regret its inability to exert influence. Over the 1990s, al-Qaeda emerged with Pakistan’s assistance as a global terrorist threat, the subcontinent developed nuclear weapons, and India and Pakistan engaged in armed conflict that could be resolved only through US reengagement as a mediator.

The form and level of engagement may be at issue, but history has repeatedly shown that benign neglect of South Asia does not serve American security interests.

Experts often describe US-Pakistan relations as transactional in nature. However, a transactional relationship can also be sustainable and durable if both sides focus on areas where their core interests align. Pakistan, given its location and size, is never going to be irrelevant, and the United States will continue to be a relevant actor in the region. Acknowledging these truths, policymakers need to develop a normal relationship that is not petulant or dismissive in anticipation of the day when they may need it.

Pakistan is significant in terms of both the problems and the opportunities it can provide. Disengagement is not a realistic option, and public expression of indifference may also be a bad idea. There is a difference between (a) knowing what is going on by keeping a finger on the pulse and (b) engaging with understanding but taking a more hands-off approach than the countries have often done in the past.

Maybe the time has come to recognize that Pakistan cannot be the close ally of yesteryear but is still an important country that is willing to cooperate with the US in select areas. While Pakistan and the US often fail to see eye to eye regarding Afghanistan, China, or India, they do share an interest in maintaining regional stability, combating the problem of extremism, and averting armed conflict in nuclear South Asia. Relations do not need to be close or broadly based to achieve the goals of each side.

A Pakistan that is politically and economically stable, is democratic and protects the human rights of its citizens, fulfills its human development goals, and has good relations with its neighbors is in the interest of the United States. Historically, the US has been one of Pakistan’s largest aid donors, not just on the security front but also in meeting economic and humanitarian needs. In the past, American financial and security assistance helped bolster Pakistan’s defense capabilities and laid the foundation for economic development, which unfortunately never happened.

The US would benefit by appreciating that Pakistani society has changed over the last few decades. Much of the American understanding of Pakistan is based on outmoded conceptions. There is a need for greater understanding of how the society, military, and political system have evolved if both countries are to achieve successful engagement. All the while, the US needs to avoid becoming too involved in Pakistan’s domestic affairs.

As one of the world’s most populous, majority Muslim countries, sitting at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia and armed with nuclear weapons, Pakistan cannot and should not be ignored, isolated, or marginalized. US security interests in the region and the likely negative impact of US disengagement from Pakistan are compelling reasons for American policymakers to consider new options in maintaining ties with this strategically important country.

Policymakers should also bear in mind that, political differences notwithstanding, Pakistan’s elite admire the United States and that hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis have emigrated to the US and are well integrated into American society. Members of the large Pakistani diaspora, spread across the United States with large concentrations in Texas, New York, Illinois, and California, normally play a positive role in bringing their adopted homeland and the country of their origin closer.

Security Cooperation

The strong security partnership that Pakistan shared with the US during the Cold War may have helped Pakistan build its mil-
itary and stand up to India, but it also ended up creating a very narrow aperture for relations with the US. Further, as the two countries’ divergences increased in later years, the lack of progress on a narrowly defined, security-driven, and transactional relationship created increasing acrimony between them.

For a long time, Afghanistan has dominated US-Pakistan relations. After the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan can play a key role in ensuring a stable Afghanistan. It can help the US curb extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP, also called ISIS) and blunt their ability to use the country as a launchpad for future attacks. Even with the killings of Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the US still has an interest in eliminating al-Qaeda and other affiliated terrorist organizations that seek to hurt the US and its allies and partners. But just as Pakistan can help to curb these organizations, it can also hinder what the US wants to achieve.

The US has long doubted Pakistan’s commitment to act against militant extremist groups that operate from its soil, especially those that focus on India and Afghanistan. Regardless, the US and Pakistan have often cooperated in sharing intelligence on al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi. The need for counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan has, if anything, increased with the loss of intelligence assets following the US military withdrawal from the region.

While Pakistan has historically been reluctant to act against militant groups that operate on its soil, the fear of international isolation and its economic consequences has resulted in an improvement, even if limited, in its internal security and some progress toward action against some militant groups that have threatened the Pakistani state. Pakistan has suffered from terrorism on its soil, leading to millions of internally displaced people and over 80,000 casualties, civilian and military, between 2005 and 2013. There was also likely a domestic political component in which civilians and the military both sought ways to deal with these groups. Public sentiment played a role. In 2008 the military was keen on an accord with TTP—and the government signed several agreements that fell apart—but after the 2014 attack against an army school, there was leeway to conduct strikes. This resulted in the major army offensive Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan.

Since 2018, Pakistan has been on the gray list of the UN Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for its failure to adequately enforce measures to curb terrorist financing. While it is likely that the FATF will finally take Pakistan off that list, the US and the international community will continue to monitor the country to ensure its compliance with FATF demands.

The US has long had an interest in the security and safety of nuclear weapons and material in Pakistan, specifically in preventing the proliferation of nuclear technology and weaponry and nuclear escalation between Pakistan and India. With Pakistan’s growing arsenal of nuclear devices, the possible danger of an extremist group penetrating nuclear facilities is of deep American interest. As the caretaker of Pakistan’s nuclear stockpile, the military is a particular focus, namely that it retains its ability to protect the country’s nuclear assets and maintain a reliable command and control system.

**The China Factor**

US foreign policy appears to be in a realist moment when policymakers view everything through “the China construct.” In such a context, especially post-Afghanistan withdrawal, Islamabad’s relationship with China has become a principal lens through which Washington views Pakistan. Both the US and Pakistan want to ensure that Pakistan maintains a degree of sovereign autonomy over its actions. The US prefers to see a Pakistan that is capable of independent decision-making and avoids becoming a Chinese proxy.

The US does not need to have a zero-sum view of China’s relations with Pakistan. For decades, the US has viewed Pakistan
through the prism of its policy toward Afghanistan. It should now avoid viewing bilateral ties with Pakistan through a China lens. Instead, the US could try to calibrate its relationship with Pakistan in a way that improves Pakistan’s bargaining power vis-à-vis China. Unlike in previous decades, the US is the hedge for Pakistan rather than the basket in which Pakistan is reluctant to put all its eggs—a role that China now assumes.

This situation presents an opportunity, but the US needs to be realistic about the possibilities. For Pakistan to achieve the strategic autonomy that it claims to seek, it needs to strengthen its engagement with the US. For the time being, unfortunately, Washington shows reluctance to broaden the relationship and may be unwittingly driving Pakistan to heavier reliance on China.

As the US has stepped back from the region, China has been investing even more in building relationships, not just in the economic and military realms but also in education and culture. So Washington should act to strengthen constituencies within Pakistan that champion ties with the US.

One way to accomplish this goal could be to help build Pakistan’s capacity for transparency and compliance when it comes to loans like those under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This step would be akin to what the US has done in the Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

India-Pakistan Relations

The more US equities in India increase, the more Pakistan becomes apprehensive. That Islamabad continues to see relations with India as a zero-sum game carries implications for its relations with the US. The US mistakenly saw Pakistan through the Afghanistan lens for the last two decades, and it should not repeat this mistake and see Pakistan purely through the lens of US-India relations or US competition with China.

Pakistan has a vested interest in ensuring that the US remains engaged with the region and plays a robust role in preventing an escalation of military hostilities. Even while it should be clear that the US sees no role for itself as a mediator in Kashmir, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis and the 2022 accidental missile strike have shown that managing an India-Pakistan crisis and preventing escalation remain key American interests. A major terrorist attack in India blamed on Pakistan-based militants—or some other type of precipitating event—could cause a wider conflict that has the potential to escalate to the use of nuclear weapons.

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After decades of trying to balance policies toward India and Pakistan, US officials have now de-hyphenated relations. While that change is the need of the hour, the US should maintain robust engagement with each country based on their respective merits yet be modest about its ability to bridge what divides them.

Economy and Aid

Pakistan is facing a massive economic crisis. Helping the country get through it will be an enormous task and will take years, if not decades. Powerful interests in Pakistan resist any reforms they see as coming at their expense. Yet there are signs that the Pakistani government under Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif is trying to move the country in the right direction by taking steps toward necessary structural reforms. The US and the international community should recognize and encourage these developments.

While the private sector will need to lead and sustain the expansion in commercial relations, any encouragement the US government provides will go a long way. Over the last few years, Pakistan has pushed the policy of geoeconomics, and the US has reciprocated by emphasizing business opportunities for large US-based firms within Pakistan.
Interlocutors in the US may believe that making further efforts to bolster the economic relationship has a limited upside for Washington. This perspective is misplaced, especially in an increasingly multipolar world and amid a growing rivalry between the US and China.

The US is a vital economic partner for Pakistan, providing market access for Pakistani exports, capital in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI), and technical expertise critical to modernizing Pakistan’s economy. In fiscal year 2022, Pakistan earned almost $7 billion in export receipts from the US, with textiles as the largest sectoral contributor, according to the State Bank of Pakistan. The trade relationship focuses on more than exports: Pakistan imported over $3 billion in goods from the US in 2022, making the US one of the most important sources of imports for the country. FDI from the US also contributes immensely to modernizing Pakistan’s economy: in fiscal year 2022, FDI inflows from the US amounted to $257 million, behind only China ($706 million) and the Netherlands ($305.8 million).

Over the decades, the US has offered a lot of developmental and security assistance and investment to Pakistan. While the US has viewed the aid as support to Pakistan, the Pakistani side often viewed it as having strings attached. There is presently little appetite in Washington for any generous aid programs to Pakistan, but the US should continue providing Economic Support Funds and other relevant funding mechanisms.

American developmental assistance to Pakistan needs to be viewed through the lens of investment, not for building influence but for enabling Pakistan to deal with its multiple challenges.

The recent disastrous floods have made it especially clear that in several sectors—humanitarian aid, disaster management, water management, mitigation of air pollution, and climate change resilience—USAID and similar agencies of the US government should step up their allocation of funds to Pakistan.

Another sector in which collaboration would serve both American and Pakistani goals is clean energy. Pakistan is an ideal candidate for the State Department’s Energy Resource Governance Initiative (ERGI), whose aims are to promote sound mining sector governance and to secure resilient supply chains for critical energy minerals.

Technology

In recent years, the US, led by the Pakistani-American diaspora in Silicon Valley, has played an integral role in providing Pakistan’s technology sector with access to capital and expertise. Venture capitalists who have cut their teeth in the US have emerged as a major catalyst in the country’s burgeoning startup ecosystem, which cumulatively raised over $365 million in 2021, more than in all the past years combined.

The inflow of this capital is birthing the next generation of businesses in Pakistan, deepening US-Pakistani ties in the technology sector. As this ecosystem grows, collaboration between Pakistani and American technologists is only bound to grow, creating research, investment, and entrepreneurial linkages between the two countries in emerging and cutting-edge technologies.

The growth of the technology sector in Pakistan has also catalyzed growth in the country’s technology exports, which stand at almost $2 billion a year. While country-specific data is not available for these exports, the US is reportedly the largest market for Pakistan’s technology exports; this is evidenced by the large and growing presence of companies like Afiniti in the US.

According to the World Bank, only one-quarter of Pakistan’s population uses the internet. Broadband connectivity thus remains a challenge. In 2020, Google announced that it would invest $10 billion to accelerate India’s digital economy, provide free Wi-Fi in various locations, and provide access to the internet in local languages, not just English. If Silicon Valley can be convinced to participate in something similar for Pakistan, that
would greatly help. The strategic element is to ensure Pakistan’s broadband infrastructure is American, not Chinese. However, this would involve an investment of $6 billion, which might require specific actions on Pakistan’s part.

**Democracy and Human Rights**

A politically stable, democratic Pakistan that upholds the rights of all its citizens has long been an American goal, one that most Pakistanis share.

Pakistan has a long history of curbing dissent, impeding the work of civil society organizations, and suppressing media freedoms. Unfortunately, in recent years such tendencies have only worsened. US policymakers, the White House, and civil society have taken a deep interest in these issues, especially when it comes to human rights and the protection of ethnic and religious minorities.

The US Commission of International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has for years sought to place Pakistan on the list of countries of particular concern. Islamabad needs to take more remedial action on this front and to guarantee the rights of its own citizens as well as protect the rights of its minorities, religious and ethnic.

The US should continue its support for Pakistan’s civil society, media, press, academia, and policy world. Increased legislative interactions, a deepening of relations with political parties, state-to-state collaborations, local government-to-local government conversations, and broader links between civic groups in each country would provide additional venues for promoting the same goals.

The large and vibrant Pakistani American diaspora is a huge asset to the US-Pakistan relationship. In addition, there are several US-educated Pakistanis in media, academia, think tanks, civil service, and even the uniformed military. Building on these networks to champion relations between the two countries would be beneficial.

**Recommendations for a More Nuanced US Policy on Pakistan**

This report seeks to carefully select from within a broader set of policy objectives which issues have the potential to improve bilateral relations. It is true that the US and Pakistan have worked together to combat the threat of terrorism. Yet their perceptions of the nature of this threat have diverged historically and often led to disappointment. To move forward, the two countries need to work together to find commonalities even if at the strategic level their interests diverge.

US engagement with Pakistan would benefit if it were based on a realistic appraisal of Pakistan’s policies, aspirations, and worldview. The US should acknowledge that inducements or threats will not secure a change in Pakistan’s strategic direction.

Recognizing the following facts would be helpful in formulating a pragmatic US policy toward Pakistan:

- It is not in American national security interests to isolate Pakistan or to irreparably breach the relationship. A normalization of Pakistan’s cooperation with the US remains in the US national interest.

- Decades of American efforts to strengthen Pakistan militarily have not led Pakistan to change its views on India. Cutting off military ties, even educational and training endeavors, has had an adverse effect by preventing the US from developing relationships with the rising officer ranks of the military. Maybe it is time to understand that engagement should continue, even in the absence of large-scale military aid and equipment transfer.

- Differing views on Afghanistan and the presence of American and allied troops there led to the placement of counterterrorism conditions on any military aid given to Pakistan. For years, various US agencies were divided over the nature and extent of Pakistan’s support to the Afghan Taliban, but no one disputes that perspective anymore.
With the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the value of intelligence sharing to combat terrorism has grown, so the two sides need to find a way to overcome suspicions and other obstacles that have impeded cooperation. The US will need to keep an eye on terrorist groups in the region, both domestic and global, and Pakistan also needs to deal less selectively in addressing the threats that its militant extremist groups pose. The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri shows that the US has the capability to monitor, track, and kill a terrorist, but doing so is more expedient and less costly with the support of countries in the region.

Sustaining US-Pakistan cooperation on the security of weapons of mass destruction is important. Going forward, the two countries should engage on security-related issues, including nuclear weapons, with greater transparency. On principle, in light of the “imported government” narrative, US policy and any ensuing cooperation need to be as open and transparent as possible. Where there is shared interest, the US and Pakistan should clarify and codify in public ways that make the civilian government and army own the relationship, which will help disarm conspiracy theories and normalize this type of security engagement.

The US and Pakistan need to ensure open lines of communication between them and to build relations between their military officers. An important way to achieve this is through training programs like International Military Education and Training (IMET), a low-cost program that has over time provided a large dividend in helping build relations between officers of both countries.

The US should continue its efforts, including in multilateral forums, to remind Pakistan about the need to act against terrorist groups and individuals on its soil. Pakistan has long insisted that terrorist groups such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba are too powerful and pervasive for the military establishment to challenge easily and that it needs time to act against them. The US should work behind the scenes and subtly pressure Pakistan to continue cracking down on these groups within its territory. Gulf Arab countries, too, can pressure Pakistan into changing its direction.

It is in US and allied interests to help Pakistan reduce its economic dependence on China. They can accomplish this in multiple ways, most desirably through direct American investment along with investment from friendly countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Japan. The International Development Finance Cooperation (IDFC) is one US government entity that can help identify projects in key industries where American firms with technological and economic advantages would benefit by collaborating with Pakistani counterparts. As previously noted, Pakistan should be invited to join the US State Department’s ERGI.

In 2008, the US and Pakistan spoke of creating Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs), which would help Pakistan and Afghanistan rebuild their economies. In 2021, some senators once again proposed the idea under the Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Development Act to allow textile and apparel goods from these areas to enter the US duty-free. The aim each time has been to stabilize the region through economic assistance.

US funding in areas like gender and economic empowerment that address environmental challenges, help small businesses, and encourage entrepreneurship should continue.

Climate change is another area of mutual interest. In the case of Pakistan, work to counter climate change could present an economic opportunity by allowing the country to modernize its agricultural sector and build up a surplus of exports, especially as there will always be a need for food security. This issue may also offer an opportunity for the US to help Pakistan relieve its energy problems.

The US has an interest in supporting those in Pakistan striving to strengthen the country’s democratic institutions and the rule of law. American foreign policy choices can be instrumental in influencing the outcome. US strategic interests may be bound up with whether Pakistanis value democratic values over those of illiberal and autocratic regimes.
• Without appearing to intrude in domestic politics, the US should clarify where it stands in its respect for media freedom, the right to dissent, the protection of religious freedom, and the rights of civil society in Pakistan.

• Fellowships, training and mentoring programs, professional training, and teaching opportunities should be available to Pakistani journalists, think tank members, academics, and civil society personnel.