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Attempts to Isolate



Touqir Hussain

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Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military leadership have been expressing a [desire for improved relations](#) with India. But India is unlikely to respond anytime soon. And the reasons go beyond its upcoming elections.

I recall here a private briefing some of us South Asia hands in Washington got from a close adviser of Narendra Modi soon after he took office as prime minister. Unaware of my identity, he spoke of Pakistan with contempt. "We are going to treat Pakistan as if it were on the other side of a high wall," he said. Four years on, the adviser is there as is India's Pakistan policy.

How has the policy endured for so long? The search for the answer opens up a vast landscape of policy, politics and ideology in India. Beginning in 1991, India has been on a steady march to foster external relations conducive to its economic growth and technological development. This would define how it engaged with great powers, especially the United States, thus raising its economic weight, military potential, and diplomatic stature.

Modi has enhanced this policy, making it and national security the centrepiece of India's priorities. Balancing China and containing Pakistan, knitted together by the opposition to CPEC, reflect and affect these policies as do India's relations with Afghanistan.

How has India's Pakistan policy endured for so long?

India, Modi reckoned, could not rise under the threat of destabilisation by alleged non-state

actors from across the border. He would use India's relations with Washington to strengthen his hands vis-à-vis Pakistan, particularly to change its 'behaviour'. And, with his tough approach towards the latter country, help advance US interests in South Asia.

There were, no doubt, important domestic stimuli also at work; the Pakistan policy represents the historical Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh view of Muslims, Pakistan and Kashmir. Then, of course, it reflects the position of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP that Modi leads has a much broader appeal. Marketing-savvy and skilled in the use of digital tools, Modi has tapped into the traditional nationalist ideology of his party, and by bundling it with a shiny economic agenda and populism reached out to wider demographics. And the Pakistan issue, traditionally popular with the BJP's voter base, has helped.

Tensions with Pakistan have always served to move general populace away from dissatisfaction on other issues. But the accent on militancy, and the way Modi played the attacks in Pathankot in January 2016 and Uri in September 2016 that triggered an enormous emotional response from the Indian citizenry, has given the party a broader constituency.

The issue also helps Modi gain his military's support. India has risen and so has its military's ambitions. Militancy broadens the scope of conflict and enlarges the concept of national security elevating the military's national profile. All it needs is a credible enemy to raise the stature of the issue. From its perspective, Pakistan fits the bill.

Modi knows the power of the visual for modern media. The invitation to Nawaz Sharif to his (Modi's) swearing-in ceremony and the air dash to Lahore on Sharif's birthday in December 2015 had a dramatic impact internationally, especially in Washington. It showed Modi as keen for good relations, and Pakistan as a spoiler. Modi managed to conjure up this image by avoiding a military response to attacks he perceived to be coming from across the border. Instead, cancelling talks and sabotaging the Saarc summit kept the focus on Pakistan's 'behaviour', while earning India praise for its 'restraint'.

The issue thus serves, among other purposes, India's attempts at isolating Pakistan and keeping it off balance, limiting its diplomacy on Kashmir. Modi's brutal repression of Kashmiris has no room for compromise; hence no compulsion for dialogue.

Indians like the Pakistan policy to be in the hands of a strong leadership. They would go along with peace if possible, as with Vajpayee, or war if necessary, as long as the leadership was resolute and decisive. Would a re-elected Modi have a rethink on Pakistan? It would all depend on the trade-off at the time between the unknowns of normalisation with Pakistan, and the familiar gains of tensions for domestic politics, Kashmir, and India's regional and geopolitical interests.

Any economic incentive will not feature yet given Pakistan's position on MFN and transit trade, and the Afghanistan situation, that inhibits pipeline prospects and trade with Central Asia. But concern of being left behind in the scramble for peace in Afghanistan may count.

Pakistan may have responded well, as far as Pakistan-India relations go. But the real question to ask? Modi's Pakistan policy enhances India's national objectives; is Pakistan's India policy doing the same for Pakistan?

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Oct. 17-18, 2018 | Pathways to Change: Pakistan Policy Symposium

Introducing the Pakistan Policy Symposium Policy Brief Series

By Michael Kugelman, Athar Javaid, David Silverman

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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 has reached a pivotal moment in its 70-plus-year history.

On the one hand, the country has recently achieved some major milestones. It has dealt a devastating blow to the once-ferocious threat of anti-state terrorism. It has graduated to the status of emerging market. It has elected a new and non-dynastic political party that promises to usher in a refreshing new era of clean and efficient governance. And its

foreign policy—spearheaded by a China financed transport corridor that affords Pakistan new opportunities to become integrated into the global economy, and by a deepening of relations with key regional players such as Turkey and Russia—shows signs of entering a new and positive phase.

But at the same time, Pakistan is witnessing the emergence of a new generation of extremist organizations. It is suffering through a serious balance of payments crisis. Longstanding democratic challenges—from weak civilian institutions to a military that enjoys an outsize role in statecraft and policy—remain entrenched. And its foreign policy, which still struggles to develop deep partnerships beyond its Saudi and Chinese allies, remains framed by an India-centric lens and hampered by a global image problem.

In effect, Pakistan faces new and in some cases unprecedented opportunities, but it also confronts a series of major challenges both old and new.

How can Pakistan capitalize on its recent progress while conquering or at least managing the challenges that threaten to squander its recent achievements and new opportunities?

This was the overarching question that inspired and informed a two-day conference at the Wilson Center in October 2018. The event, co-hosted by the Wilson Center's Asia Program and INDUS - Mobilizing People's Power (American Institute of Pakistan Affairs) organization, and entitled Pathways to Change: Pakistan Policy Symposium, brought together thought leaders—analysts, journalists, academics, diplomats, and business people, among others—from both countries to discuss Pakistan's future and to offer policy recommendations on how the country can best move forward.

To prevent the symposium from getting consigned to the category of one-off, quickly forgotten event, the Wilson Center and INDUS have decided to put together a follow-up policy brief series. The objective is to convey the perspectives and recommendations shared by some of the conference speakers in a set of concise essays.

The essays featured here highlight the salient issues featured in the conference—issues that continue to play out in real time.

The first two essays assess U.S.- Pakistan relations. This up-and-down relationship struggled during the first year of the Trump administration's term, but it is now enjoying new life as the two countries work together to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table in an effort to end the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. **Salman Bashir**, a

former Pakistani foreign secretary, writes that “Pakistan and the United States need to arrive at a common assessment of the situation in Afghanistan.” In his view, this means, among other things, that the U.S. government should exclude Afghanistan from Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which regards Beijing as a strategic competitor, so that it can recognize and accommodate China’s useful role in Afghanistan. He also lists a series of steps that, if taken, could help operationalize what he describes as a new “broad framework of understanding” for U.S.-Pakistan relations.

Michael Kugelman, the Wilson Center’s senior associate, **Shezad Habib**, the INDUS special adviser, and **Nasir Naveed**, the INDUS director of policy, offer a U.S. perspective on the bilateral relationship. They lay out a series of steps—from maintaining realistic expectations to making low-risk moves that enable the two sides to increase much-needed goodwill—that can keep the relationship cordial as it navigates the Afghanistan challenge. “Washington and Islamabad will never be soul mates,” they write, “But that doesn’t mean they can’t find ways to have fewer downs and more ups in their relationship.”

Afghanistan itself is the focus of an essay by **Siniša Vuković**, an assistant professor for the Conflict Management Program and Global Policy Program at SAIS. **Dr. Vuković**, who moderated a panel on U.S.-Pakistan-Afghanistan relations at the conference, was asked to write this essay in order to get an outside expert’s perspective of the conflict. He argues that all parties, “in their own way aware that outright military victory is unattainable, appear to be looking for a face-saving way out of this predicament through a negotiated solution.” He concludes that a “Pakistan-backed endgame in Afghanistan would offer a unique opportunity for a normalization of U.S.-Pakistan relations.”

The next two essays examine enduring challenges for Pakistan: extremism and the economy. **Niloufer Siddiqui**, an assistant professor of political science at the University at Albany-State University of New York, discusses the recent emergence of several new hardline religious parties, one of which is tied to the terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba. Joining the political process, Dr. Siddiqui argues, is unlikely to make these groups more moderate. And yet, there are indications that “relevant stakeholders in Pakistani politics” have provided support to these groups. “If the Pakistani state wants to control the problem of radicalization in society,” she warns, “it must confront its own role in supporting these actors for short-term political gain.”

James Schwemlein, a nonresident Carnegie Endowment fellow and former U.S. diplomat, argues that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) alone is not a silver bullet for Pakistan’s economic troubles. “More attention needs to be placed on

improving Pakistan’s competitiveness, including its economic governance,” he writes. He calls for a “real focus on market-enabling reforms, including a more predictable regulatory and legal framework.” Such improvements, he argues, would strengthen CPEC’s prospects; enhance Pakistan’s role in international trade; and benefit U.S.-Pakistan relations. Ultimately, he concludes, “a Pakistan that is once again competitive for international business would be a more stable country.”

The final essay highlights how to seize the opportunities offered by Pakistani-American financiers. **Amra Tareen**, the head of innovation at Bed Bath & Beyond, and **Amber Jamil**, the communication and outreach director for INDUS, explain that these diaspora members are “uniquely positioned partners in the promotion of investment and social entrepreneurship in Pakistan.” They have the potential to strengthen Pakistan’s economy, enhance its prospects to become a regional economic leader, and more broadly to bring more breadth to the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, according to Tareen and Jamil. We hope these essays and their policy recommendations, much like the conference that preceded them, spark some useful debate about how Pakistan can best tackle a future rife with opportunities—but also fraught with obstacles.

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