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Shock absorbers for US, Pakistan

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RELATIONS BETWEEN the United States and Pakistan are at historic lows. Pakistani officials are reviewing the bilateral relationship and threatening to halt cooperation on key security fronts. Washington leaders increasingly describe Pakistan as an adversary in the Afghanistan war and propose aid cuts, coercive diplomacy, and sanctions.

Both countries are missing one important opportunity to create new avenues for building a common understanding and sense of purpose: the power of ordinary citizens. One lesson we can learn from the last three years is that governments can only do so much - especially governments that face multiple internal pressures and a complicated bilateral history.

For the past four years, we have been engaged in efforts that have brought Americans and Pakistanis from all walks of society to discuss common challenges. These efforts have produced tangible results - including a joint initiative by Pakistanis and Americans to expand technology and skills transfer in agriculture, and new online educational exchange programs.

The main idea behind these efforts is simple - the United States and Pakistan need strong “shock absorbers” for the tensions that arise in official ties. By focusing on citizen engagement, the United States can invest in areas that could lead to positive transformations in Pakistan and its relationship with America - Pakistan’s vibrant private sector, civil society, and democratic institutions.

Pakistan is a country in which social entrepreneurs and businesses fill urgent public needs. As one Pakistani told us, “We are a culture of problem solvers, and we are a country of entrepreneurs.” Despite violence, corruption, weak governance, and many social challenges, this country of more than 180 million has moved forward in growing its economy. Many Pakistanis are investing in their own and their country’s future - small business owners, industrialists, social entrepreneurs, and investors - under deeply challenging circumstances and not without risk.

In a country where public services are in shambles, private-sector innovations are abundant - in agriculture, education, health, social services delivery, and IT. We met middle-class families running schools, philanthropists building universities and hospitals, investors increasing their investment inside Pakistan, and CEOs whose businesses are thriving. Nestle has one of its largest dairy production facilities in the world based in Pakistan. And as Pepsi notes, the second-largest consumer of Mountain Dew in the world after the United States is Pakistan.

The US Chamber of Commerce and the Pakistan Business Council could promote dialogue, explore business ventures, and identify opportunities for mutually profitable market

development. Our networks of entrepreneurs and businesses can forge relationships with counterpart networks in Pakistan to find opportunities for collaboration and joint investment, information exchange, and mentoring.

Another area that offers great potential is the opportunity to support Pakistanis in deepening their ongoing democratic transition. Parliamentary elections tentatively set for next year offer an opportunity for Pakistan to hold the second legitimate democratic elections in a row for the first time since the country was founded in 1947. The opportunity for citizen engagement and cooperation comes as US and Pakistani civil society organizations work together to address a wide range of challenges in Pakistan, including good governance, religious pluralism, and women's rights.

Pakistan's media - increasingly free and vocal - are interested in exchanging views with American counterparts on how to better educate the public and hold those in power accountable.

For the past two years, the United States has engaged the Pakistani government in several rounds of a strategic dialogue, and tripled the funding for non-military assistance to Pakistan. But because of the Afghanistan war and the threats posed by Al Qaeda and its affiliates, the US government also adopted a more aggressive military strategy in Pakistan, including the controversial drone strikes.

The efforts to move beyond a transactional relationship with Pakistan fell short, however, not just because of what the governments did or did not do. They fell short because governments are constrained in what they can achieve given how they view the threats posed to their citizens.

Without greater citizen involvement to deepen our ties, the United States and Pakistan will remain trapped in mutual mistrust.

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