

# One Year In: A Conversation with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan

United States Institute of Peace

Tuesday, July 23, 2019

Transcript

## Nancy Lindborg:

Good morning, everybody. My name is Nancy Lindborg. I'm the president and CEO here at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and I'm delighted to welcome you here today. A special welcome to our esteemed guest of honor, Prime Minister Imran Khan, and to the delegation who's traveled far to be here with him. A warm welcome to every who's joining us online, and you can join the conversation @USIP on Twitter with #ImranKhanUSIP. And I'm delighted everyone could be here for the conversation today.

This is the kind of conversation that is the hallmark of U.S. Institute of Peace, which was founded 35 years ago by Congress as an independent, nonpartisan national institution dedicated to reducing international violent conflict. And, we very strongly believe that peace is possible, that peace is practical, and it is absolutely essential for U.S. and international security. So, we pursue our mission by linking research with policy, with training and with action, working on the ground with partners.

Our Pakistan program is one of our largest here at the Institute, and we've been active in the country since 2011. We partner with a network of civil society organizations, innovators, scholars and policymakers to support local programs, conduct research and analysis and convene local peacebuilders. We've supported programs in cities and villages throughout Pakistan. We focus on increasing tolerance of diversity using arts, media and culture to promote dialogue and peace education. USIP partners in Pakistan have reached more than 130,000 youth and helped support their peace building activities.

I've been fortunate to have a chance to visit and to see the extraordinary impact that these young leaders are having. We also work with other institutions, including the police to promote police-community relations and enable the police to be more effective at nonviolent means of addressing conflict. We use our trusted networks in the U.S. government and in Pakistan to facilitate 1.5 and 2.0 dialogues to offer opportunities for policy specialists and those close to decision making on both sides to think of other solution sets and offer innovative approaches to break through policy obstacles.

So, we have a long history, also, of hosting Pakistan top political officials. Last year, we were honored to host Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who's here with us today, welcome. And, we're also delighted to have with us Pakistan's ambassador to the U.S. Asad Khan, who's a good friend, pleased to have you back with us.

Today, of course, we are honored to have with us Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan. This is his first visit to Washington since becoming prime minister last August. We have had the honor of hosting him in the past. The last time you were here was in 2009. The prime minister comes to Washington at a particularly critical moment in U.S.-Pakistani relations. And, yesterday, hopefully we'll hear more about it, he met with President Trump for the first time to discuss cooperation between U.S. and Pakistan.

So today, we thank Prime Minister Khan for the opportunity to hear his insights into developments in Pakistan and what we can expect from Pakistan on the international stage. After the prime minister's

opening remarks, I'll host a moderated discussion with him and then take questions from the audience. We have people circulating with note cards, please write down your question and pass them in to a U.S. volunteer, and we'll also be taking questions from online. And, with that, please join me in giving a warm welcome to Prime Minister Imran Khan.

### **Imran Khan:**

Thank you very much, Nancy. The United States the Institute of Peace, I want to thank you for inviting me here listening to my views about Pakistan, Pakistan's policy. And, I'll start with how someone like me, a sportsman for 20 years, international sportsman, ended up in politics.

I'm the first-generation Pakistani, my parents were born in colonial India. I was the first generation who grew up in an independent Pakistan. We grew up with a lot of pride. My parents reminded me always how awful it was to live in a colonial, in a country where you were not, you didn't have your freedom. So, I valued the freedom of being in an independent country. And, we took great pride when Pakistan started growing rapidly.

In the 60s -- it's not used to my voice, I think -- In the 60s, Pakistan was the fastest growing country in the whole region. Pakistan was a country which gave us hope. We grew up feeling that this is a country with a destiny, and then things started going wrong from 70s onwards. And, I was playing cricket for two decades, international sports, when I finished in the early 90s, and my initial thought after playing sport was to go into social work. I'd already started building a cancer hospital, my mother had died of cancer, and I realized that there was no Cancer Hospital in Pakistan. So, I thought I would build one, specifically because poor people cannot afford cancer treatment. So, I spent six, seven years of my life after cricket building and then running the hospital.

But, it was during that time I realized that this is a big country, social work was not going to change it. The only way would change our country is joining politics. Change only comes through when you had a government and bring about a change. And, the reason why I joined politics was because I realized politics was going in a direction which was a leading Pakistan to nowhere. Problem with most ex-colonial countries is exactly what was Pakistan was facing.

If you look at Africa, you look at the independence movements in Africa, and then the leaders who came from the independence movement, once they assumed government, a similar pattern took place. The moment they got power, they use power for benefiting themselves. Corruption was the main reason why countries could not reach their potential. And, Pakistan was exactly that country which in '60s while was going, taking off, from mid-'80s onwards, it started going down because of corruption -- corruption of the ruling elite.

So, my main, when I formed my party in 1996, it was on an anti-corruption platform. And, I campaigned for 15 years in the political wilderness, talking about corruption, and could not make people understand the relevance of the relation between corruption and poverty. People could not relate the truth somehow in ex-colonial countries. People thought taking money from the government was nothing

wrong with it because it was not your government, it was a foreign government which was ruling over you.

So, if you evaded taxes, there was, you know, you were you're not doing anything wrong and similarly, corruption. So, I formed my party as I said, in 1996. For 15 years, I had only a few people with me and no one thought I had a chance. But then, suddenly, people began to understand what I was saying. So, the party then began to take off about seven years ago. And, in 2013 we formed a government in one of the four provinces, and because of our performance in that one province in 2018 we won elections.

So, what have I – What has been the main challenge since we've come to power 10 months ago? Number one challenge was inherited, inheriting a country which was bankrupt. We had the biggest current account and fiscal deficits. But worse, what corruption does is it's not just a question of bankrupting our country and money being laundered out of the country. What happens is the ruling elites, when they make money out of corruption, they then have to take it out of the country because otherwise people would know, ask them questions, "where did the money come from?" So, you suffer in two ways. Number one, money which should go to human development ends up going into people's pockets. But secondly, that that money leaves the country.

And, in my opinion, which I spoke to President Trump yesterday, the biggest problem that the world faces is about a trillion dollars leaving developing and poor countries and either going into offshore accounts, or they end up in Western countries. And, this is impoverishing, this is causing more deaths than to terrorism, than through drugs. The amount of people dying of hunger and disease, lack of education, not having clean drinking water, is because of the ruling elites and developing world, taking that money out and putting it into, as I said, offshore accounts or Western countries. So, we've faced a similar situation. We had the biggest current account deficit and fiscal deficit.

But the other aspect of corruption is that, in order for the ruling elites to take money out, they have to destroy the state institutions. Because if the institutions are strong, they will not be able to take the money out. For instance, if your anti-corruption body is strong, if your justice system is working, is robust, if your taxation department, you're like – equivalent to the Inland Revenue or the IRS here – if these institution are strong, you cannot take money out of the country, but that's the biggest damage these corrupt, ruling elites do to developing world that destroy these institutions. So, you can recover the money, but what you can't – to build institutions takes time. So, the biggest challenge we have faced since we've been in power is trying to build state institutions. And, you know, we have succeeded, we have turned around various institutions, but it is a slow process.

The relationship which we had with our neighbors, other priority we have tried to instill in Pakistan amongst the people is that we must have good relationship with all our neighbors. Because Pakistan at the moment, most of all, needs stability. We need stability for economic progress, we need peace, and so, for peace we need to have a good relationship with our neighbors. So, first was me trying to reach out to India. India is, you know, a country which we've had a turbulent relationship with.

But, unfortunately, because of one issue of Kashmir whenever we have tried, whenever relationship has got started to move in the right direction with India, some incident happens, and that's all related to Kashmir, we go back to square one. And so, I reached out to my counterpart in India, the Indian prime minister, assured him that you know, you come one step towards us we will go two steps towards you

because the biggest problem India and Pakistan face is poverty. And, the best way we can reduce poverty is if we start trading with each other.

The next was Afghanistan. We again have had a difficult relationship with Afghanistan. And so, we have reached out, I have invited President Ghani to Pakistan. And, you know, it's a long story, but we are moving towards, fortunately we are all moving towards the same direction. There's a convergence now in Pakistan, in the U.S. that there is no military solution in Palestine. We are all working towards the peace process.

Similarly, with Iran, we've had sort of a decent relationship with Iran without – it's not really a warm relationship, but a decent relationship with them. So, we reached out to all our neighbors, and the next is the U.S. U.S. as a superpower. You have to have a good relationship with the U.S., whether you like it or not.

So, I was a bit worried when I was invited to meet President Trump. Do you know, I have never, I'd been in limelight, public life for 40 years. And, sort of when I've gone to meet people who are famous or well known or in power, you normally get advice that you know, what you should do, what questions you should ask when you meet them. But never in my life have I had so many suggestions before I was going to meet President Trump. Inundated! And, I have to say that it was one of the most pleasant surprises, not just for me, for my delegation. The way, the hospitality, the way he – straightforward, charming way he treated us. We were all blown over. We loved the meeting with the president yesterday.

But, above all, we, we decided on how we will now have a close relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. How we will now ensure that there is no communication gap. The period from 2003 or four to 2015 was the worst in the relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. Pakistanis felt that they were fighting the U.S. war. It was – No Pakistani was involved in 9/11. Taliban were in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was in Afghanistan. But, Pakistan ended up involved in that war. Then, we lost 70,000 people. We lost over 100 billion dollars lost to economy. And yet, there was mistrust. Pakistan felt it was doing its best. It could have stayed out of the war. And yet, Pakistan participated in the war, and Pakistan took a battering. There was a point when people like us thought, "are we going to survive?" because there were suicide bombs going on every day. No sports team used to visit Pakistan, forget about investors. And so, we passed through a terrible period.

But, at the same time, the U.S. thought we weren't doing enough, we're playing a double game. So that was, in my opinion, the worst, it was the worst phase between the relationship between U.S. and Pakistan. I was one of those, and I came here, I think, in 2009. And, I tried to explain to people here that there was no military solution in Afghanistan. I met, then Democrats hadn't come into power, the elections hadn't happened, just before President Obama won the elections. I tried to explain to – I had a meeting organized, this Dr. Graham here organized a meeting with Joe Biden, John Kerry, Harry Reid, towering figures of the Democratic Party, and I sat there and tried to explain to them the history of Afghanistan, of Pakistan's tribal area, and tried to explain to them that this, that there will be no military solution.

But, I realized they had no idea. People in the U.S. had no idea about the about the history of Afghanistan, and the sort of conflict that got involved in. And, fortunately, this time, everyone knows, people understand. So, why do I think that we will now have the very best of relationship with the US? Because we're all on the same page. Previously the Pakistan army was supposedly fighting for the U.S.

this this war on terror. But, the U.S. did not think we were doing enough. And, in Pakistan, we thought we had gone out of our way.

This time, the Pakistan state, our security forces, the United States, all of us are on the same page, that peace in Afghanistan will now, can only take place through a political settlement through dialogue. So, we are all now working on getting the Taliban to talk to the foreign government, they're already talking to the U.S. And, we hope that this will eventually lead to a settlement. Not easy, it's not going to be easy. Because there's no centralized Taliban-command, it's a devolved movement. But, we feel that if we all work together, we feel this is the best chance of there to be peace in Afghanistan.

Apart from that, domestically, just one final word before I take your questions. I have struggled these 23 years to get into power. Most of the, as I said, in wilderness, political wilderness. I was not fighting political parties, I felt I was fighting a mafia. And, the Supreme Court of Pakistan, actually, when there was this famous court case where the prime minister was dismissed, actually called the ruling party a Sicilian Mafia. And, I say a mafia because this is not normal politics, because the two ruling families had been in power off and on for 30 years. And, when you are in power for 30 years, the penetration was right down in the bureaucracy, in the judiciary, in the election commission. They had enormous amounts of money.

And so, we won because we mobilized the people. we mobilized the youth of Pakistan. We were very fortunate that Pakistan has a – 60% of Pakistanis are below the age of 30. They became a big support, the young people rallied around us. And, we did, it was the biggest public movement in Pakistan in the last 50 years. And so we won, despite having coming up against big money, despite the penetration in media, the most vilification campaign, personal attacks. And, despite that, we won because of social media. This is the new – had there been no social media, probably we would not have been able to beat the established parties.

And, since we have been in power, we are still up against the mafia. We have been, the problem has been to fix the economy. But, at the same time, we have had the entire opposition trying to destabilize the country. So, twice they have tried to create this uncertainty that there's been a run on the rupee, we almost had a run on the rupee, because of them predicting that the, all fake news, that IMF had told us that the rupee would go to a certain number, all wrong, but putting pressure on the economy all the time. Finally, I can say right now, after 10 months, we have finally stabilized the economy.

And, we feel now that we are, now after stabilizing the economy, we feel that we can now move ahead and start our reforms. Our reforms are very straightforward. We believe that real development is human development. So, we are going to, all our money, all the each, we've decided that all the money which we retrieve from the criminal mafia, we've started a massive accountability campaign. We will then direct it towards human development. We've started one of the biggest poverty alleviation program in Pakistan's history, despite having financial constraints.

But, we believe that a country cannot rise if there's a small lot of rich people and a mass of poor ones. This is what's happened in Pakistan, the gap between the rich and the poor has gone, has grown with each year. And, the whole system just caters for a tiny elite. The education system caters for just a tiny elite. To give you an example, we have a total of students coming from what are the elite schools, English medium schools, are 800,000. The children to go to government school, they are about 33 million. And then, children who go to the Madrasas is 2.5 million.

So, we have three-tiered system. So, the first thing our government is trying to do is to synthesize the syllabus, bring in science subjects, other subjects into the Madrasas, which are the religious schools, some bring them into the mainstream. Similarly, in the medium schools, teach them English, so that we equip them for higher education. So, we're trying to bring the education system, which is the biggest problem our country faces and the most difficult problem. So, that's number one.

Secondly, is the Pakistan taxation system. We have the lowest tax GPD ratio in the world. We have, out of a population of 210 million people, we have only taxpayer, barely people, a 1.5 million people pay taxes. So, there's no way you can sustain a country if you do not expand the tax base. So, we are now in the process, very difficult process, convincing everyone to come into the tax net, a lot of strikes going on right now. But, we feel that we will be able to overcome them. Because it's imperative now that Pakistan, the Pakistani people pay taxes.

The challenge, of course, has been that this mafia, I call this mafia, in 10 years, just so that you understand what they have done to our country. Because later on people, you might ask me, why is this political victimization, what I call accountability, people say political victimization, but I'll just tell you what they've done to our country in 10 years. The total debt of Pakistan in 2008, before these two parties came in, when General Musharraf left, the total debt of Pakistan in 60 years was 6 trillion rupees. In the last 10 years, they've taken it from 6 trillion to 30 trillion rupees.

So, where has this money gone? I've set up a commission, a debt commission, which is now going to find out where this money disappeared. So, which is why we are going to, we are going through this problem of finding out what happened to our country, how come we got so indebted. The problem with having such a huge debt is that in the last year, the total tax revenue which we collected, half of it went to servicing debts. So, you can't have 210 million people just surviving on this, already a very low tax base, and then half of it going into debt servicing. So, for that we are expanding our tax base.

But, what we are doing now in Pakistan, is the first time since the 1960s any government is going to take the step, we are now moving towards encouraging industrialization. In 1960s. Pakistan, Pakistan's industrial production was equal to Four Asian Tigers industrial production, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, that combined industrial production was equal to Pakistan's in 1960s. After that, unfortunately, we deindustrialized. Our exports, actually, went down because our policies just did not encouraged industrialization.

So, we now have embarked on a program of industrializing our country. We are giving incentives to industry. So, we have – the main programs in Pakistan are, number one, poverty alleviation, we have allocated the biggest amount to alleviate poverty, any money returning from these big crooks will go straight into the poverty alleviation program. Secondly, industrialization, we are now encouraging our industry, specifically export industry. We have trade agreements, one with China where we hope that we will be able to, free trade agreement with, a preferential trade agreement with China where we hope to export our stuff to China. China has imports of \$2 trillion dollars. So, industrialization.

And, third, is agriculture. Pakistan is basically an agricultural country. And, we are hoping to get technology transfer from Europe, from China, hopefully, we've spoke to companies in the United States, so that we can improve our yields. Pakistan has the lowest yields, one of the most productive lands, but the lowest yield. So, what we hope is that this three prong attack, we will be able to raise Pakistan's

economy, provide employment to our people, improve productivity. So, this is basically where we're headed. Thank you.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Thank you, Prime Minister, thank you for a very rich view of the challenges you're facing and the approach that you're taking. I wanted to start, you gave us a taste of your meetings yesterday with President Trump, and, in the past, you've spoken also about your commitment to take a different approach to U.S.-Pakistan relations than previous Pakistan leaders, and I'm curious if you wanted to say a bit more about what is the difference with your approach, and how is that resonating during this visit in Washington, and how do you see the future between U.S. and Pakistan?

**Imran Khan:**

Nancy, I always felt that the relationship between Pakistan and the United States was never multi-pronged. It was basically a transactional relationship. So, for instance, the 80s, Pakistan was fighting the jihad against the Soviets. And so, the U.S. was helping Pakistan, was providing aid. And, and Pakistan was, you know, the various groups created in Pakistan, but then conducting attacks inside Afghanistan against the Soviets. The moment that jihad, the Afghan jihad ended, the U.S. packed up and left. And, not only did they leave, Pakistan was slapped with sanctions.

So, Pakistan then was left with 4 million of foreign refugees, a number of militant groups, which had been created to fight the Soviets, all dressed up and nowhere to go. We had heroin, drugs that were used to, at some point, to pay for the fighting in Afghanistan. So, Pakistan, then first time we had the sectarian attacks and by sectarian militant groups, which were, first time we heard of sectarian attacks inside Pakistan.

Then comes 9/11, and Pakistan, again, joins the U.S. I was then, I only had one seat in Parliament at the time, and I remember when General Musharraf was consulting all of us that the U.S. wants us to join them in the war. I opposed it. I thought Pakistan should stay neutral, and, I'll tell you why I thought Pakistan should stay neutral. We had created these jihadi groups in the 80s. We had indoctrinated them in the idea of jihad, that foreign occupation in Afghanistan, it was a religious duty to fight them. So, all these groups, including al-Qaeda, arrived in Pakistan.

Now comes 9/11, then the U.S. admits of what is done. And, now we are trying to tell these same groups, who had closed ranks for the Pakistan army because they were created by the Pakistan army, now we are telling them that no, it's, because the good guys are there, it's no longer jihad. Now, obviously, a lot of them turned against the Pakistan army because Pakistan Army was then trying to neutralize them. So, what we went through, and I just briefly mentioned earlier, it was the worst time in our history. These groups turned against the Pakistan army and the state of Pakistan.

And not only that there were linkages between, clearly there were linkages between these groups and the Pakistani security forces, because they had created them. So, we had insider attacks, we had, I mean, the GHQ was attacked, generals were killed, ISI headquarters were attacked, the army at one point, the army could not go into the cities in military clothes or with military cars. It was that bad at one point.

And then, of course, the second thing was the tribal areas, we should never have sent army into the tribal areas because the tribal area per capita was the most weaponized area in the world. For people who don't know tribal area is the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was always an autonomous area, the British never occupied it during their rule, since 1890. So, it was an autonomous area, it ran by its own rules. So, in 2004, under pressure from the United States, Pakistan Army went into the tribal areas to flush out al Qaeda.

Now, what happened was that when after Tora Bora in Afghanistan, a few of the al-Qaeda moved into our tribal areas, which were semi-autonomous. So, when they sent the army in, you know armies are not meant to go into civilian areas, whenever you send your army into civilian areas, you can ensure that there will be human rights abuses, there will be collateral damage, there will be the innocent people killed because there's no army there. There are just gorillas operating from villages.

So, you know, the collateral damage created what became the Pakistani Taliban. There was no Pakistani Taliban before. So, we then had a, you know, the people of tribal area suffered, one point there were these militants, the other side was the Pakistan army, half of the tribal area was then internally displaced. The damage, we still haven't, the amount of damage done in the tribal area, we still haven't got the resources to compensate them.

So, basically, the country went through him. And my opinion we should have, we should have stayed neutral. That way we would have had control over these militant groups. And, we could have, in our own time, neutralized them. But, because we became a part of the U.S. war they turned against Pakistan. And so, now what I feel, there was a watershed in Pakistan and Pakistani politics.

In 2014, the TTP, the Pakistani Taliban, they slaughtered 150 schoolchildren in what was called the APS, the Army Public School. There was a reaction within Pakistan, all the political parties then signed a paper called the national action plan, and we all decided after that, that we will not allow any militant groups to operate inside Pakistan. Until we came into power, the governments did not have the political will because the, when you talk about the militant groups, they still have about 30 to 40,000. armed, people who have been trained and in some sort of a theater report either in Afghanistan, maybe in Kashmir.

So, we were the first government who has now started disarming all the militant groups. This is the first time it is happening. We have we have taken over their institutes, their seminaries. We are now, we've got administrators there. So, it is the first time in Pakistan that we have decided there will be no armed militias inside our country.

**Nancy Lindborg:**



Which relates to the next question I want to ask you, and it's been in the news a lot, it's clearly a significant element in U.S. Pakistan, relationships, and that's what you referred to, as well, the ongoing Afghan peace process and the possibilities that we might actually have some breakthroughs. Is, in building on what you just said, is the Pakistan government able and willing to make the commitments to really help move these dialogues forward, especially in the event that the Taliban and the Afghan government aren't able to get a meeting organized?

**Imran Khan:**

It's just for people's benefit. The fear amongst the Pakistan military establishment was always that there would be a two-front situation. So, there would be, you know, the eastern front, which is India, and then if Afghanistan was also in the Indian sphere of influence, then Pakistan would be sandwiched between these two. And so, this was always the worry about the Pakistan military establishment, and which is why they wanted what was called the strategic depth. But, this has changed. Today, there is no concept in Pakistan of strategic depth because we feel that by interfering in Afghanistan in order to secure the strategic depth, we've actually done a lot of damage to our own country and for no rhyme or reason we have become partisan in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

Now, and I speak for Pakistan army because, you know, normally there was, Pakistan Army is this independent entity and, you know, the governments have no control over it. I can sit here and tell you that I speak, as I speak, the Pakistan Army is exactly behind the government's program. Whatever our policies, from day one we arrived, peace with India, they were behind, when I decided to release the Indian pilot who had been shot down in Pakistan, the army was right behind me.

So, I speak to, we today speak, as you know, that there's no difference between the policies of the Pakistan security forces or the Pakistan's democratic government. And we believe that we should not ever interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Let the Afghans decide what they want, what sort of government they want, and we should facilitate the peace process. So, this is the big difference now. We're all on the same page, and fortunately, now the United States is on the same page too because, you know, after you know, the Einstein's definition of madness, trying to do the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, 17,19 years of contract, and if they had gone – thank God for President Trump – I mean, this could have gone on for another, another 19 years without a result.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

But, it sounds like you're willing to use your leverage with the Taliban to facilitate the peace process. That's a big, big welcome change.

**Imran Khan:**

Taliban delegation wanted to meet me a few months back when I became the prime minister. And, it's because I always maintained that there was no military solution, while everyone else in Pakistan's political spectrum kept sort of agreeing that there was some military solution. So, because of that I had a certain amount of credibility amongst them. They wanted to meet me, but the Afghan government, at that point, did not want me to meet them. So, I did not meet them. But, now when I go back, after meeting President Trump and also I've spoken to President Ghani, now I will meet the Taliban and I will try my best to get them to talk to the Afghan government, and so that then the election in Afghanistan must be an inclusive election where the Taliban are also participate in it.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Thanks. I want to ask something that's very important to people here. And that is the view that in Pakistan censorship and harassment of the press, of activists and dissenting voices of women is on the rise and you just spoke very eloquently about a new Pakistan, talked about the inequalities that have plagued the economy and I'm curious what are your thoughts and commitments about also protecting the pluralism in the in the freedom of speech and of the media that's so important to a democratic Pakistan.

**Imran Khan:**

For, just let me say one thing, my government, and time will prove this, will be the most inclusive government in Pakistan ever. We will try, we have already now insured full protection for our minorities. We have – I won't go into detail – but there's one element where we still have a problem. But what we have done, no government has done before. And I'll give you an example that there was this case of Asia Bibi. She was this Christian woman who was jailed and no, no judge would try them because of blasphemy and because of the strength of one particular group, which which had the previous government was held hostage by the group, they came and they literally blocked the roads and people were scared of that group.

So when the judgement was given to free her by the Supreme Court, the same group then threatened, they came out on the streets, they were rioting for two days, you know, the state was held hostage for two days. But this is the first government that on the next opportune moment actually took them out, put them in jails, we just completely and Asia Bibi was then safely, she came out and then she wanted to leave the country and we helped her.

And so all I'm saying is that this government you will see that it will treat its minorities as equal citizens. I just, there's just one thing, I don't want to go into details, but there's one aspect I can't talk about it, but we have still a problem. I'm, I'm not saying we've completely controlled the situation. But you will see that this is not out of worry about what the outer...the Western world or any other people say about us.

It's because out of our conviction, that are minorities, according to our religion, according to our constitution are equal citizens.

Now the media, you know, I have in my life, went to university in England and I spent about 18 summers of my life in England, and I've seen the British media, very open, very, very free media. The Pakistan media, in my opinion, is even freer than the British media. There is, there is the media in Pakistan, I mean is not just free, but sometimes out of control. I can tell you that in Britain, in Britain, no media would have come published things like or would said on television things like the Pakistan media has done, I can tell you since I've been in power. I mean, imagine. I don't even think in America, this would be allowed, even though the media has this love-hate relationship with President Trump. More hate than love sometimes.

But imagine that for a prime minister of a country and this man sits on television and says that I can tell you that he's getting divorced tomorrow. So if there was some truth originally, you would, okay, if he had some knowledge, but there's only me and my wife living together? Where did he get this information from? But this sort of thing, I mean, I, in the olden days, I can tell you that this guy would have been beaten up. Nawaz Sharif Stein, the previous Prime Minister, he had journalists beaten up. Asif Zardari, people were petrified of him. He would just, people would disappear.

In my time, I tried, I went to the legal channels, I reported it to the media, you know, I went into the court. All I'm saying is that what the media in Pakistan is, you will not find a media like that. And I remember the previous ambassador to Pakistan, him saying that the media was out of control. So what we need is to control the media, not through the government but through media watchdog. At the moment, I mean, the two or three things the media did.

One is that they started reporting wrongly that the IM...IMF had said that the rupee would fall, you know, to do a number they quoted, they almost, there was a run on the rupee. I mean, who would do that? First, you're fighting in the biggest economic crisis in your history. Second, you have media coming up with this false news about, causing a run on the rupee, or the finance ministers chain, and so on.

So what I'm saying, I feel very strongly that we will strengthen the...the media watchdog, it is not censorship, we will strengthen the media watchdog. But there are 70 channels or 80 channels in Pakistan. Only three channels reported that there was, that they were having some problems.

### **Nancy Lindborg:**

So we have a whole afternoons worth of questions for you. But before I go, I just need to ask you one last question. It's very important for USIP's mandate. And that is the number of international NGOs that are raising concern about the increased difficulty of working in Pakistan. And, you know, fully understanding that the government has a role in registering these groups and in regulating the space. Many of them are complaining of a very arbitrary process that ultimately is hampering very genuine efforts to work in partnership with Pakistani organizations and the government and examples of forced expulsions. Is your government committed to addressing this issue? It's been going on since before you

took office. And I think there are hopes that you might be able to do something to make it a more transparent and fair process.

**Imran Khan:**

Absolutely. The Foreign Minister has been dealing with this issue. And we have tried to work out to have these guidelines for...for NGOs. I mean, I run the biggest or, two biggest NGOs in Pakistan, which is the cancer hospital and the university but we did have problems and I can just frankly tell you the reason why these, these restrictions came.

There was an issue of Shakil Afridi was working for, for an NGO.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

The doctor.

**Imran Khan:**

The doctor and the NGO was what, Save the Children?

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Save the Children.

**Imran Khan:**

So after that, the, the result was that the extremists, militants started targeting NGOs. Specifically, we had one of our biggest problem was that the polio workers were being targeted. So many of the polio workers were shot after that. So, so after that they were trying to streamline it, you know, make sure that this doesn't happen again, because that affected the activities of other NGOs. In fact, one of the NGOs give a statement condemning that NGOs should not be allowed for espionage or that sort of stuff. But we already looking at it. Were there, there were three German NGOs, which had left Pakistan, but after being cleared, they've come back and, and we're looking at a case to case basis.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I know there'd be great appreciation for that. So number of questions. None of them small. Here's from Twitter: Any progress on restarting the U.S. security assistance? Some of these we can make rather short.

**Imran Khan:**

No, no, I never asked for any assistance.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Okay (laughter, applause).

**Imran Khan:**

I asked for understanding, not assistance.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Also from Twitter, what's an ideal Kashmiri solution from the Pakistan perspective and one that you believe the Pakistan people will accept?

**Imran Khan:**

I think it should not be the Pakistani people anymore. It should be what the people of Kashmir want. And, and that really is the only solution, what do the people of Kashmir want? (applause)

**Nancy Lindborg:**

and, and, and presumably a process that services that and enables it to take hold,

**Imran Khan:**

Do you know, and I'm told, because we had three foreign ministers who were in other parties who joined us, one of them, of course, is Shah Mamood Qureshi. And two of them told me that actually, they came pretty close in the time of General Musharraf, and when Mr. Vijay was the Prime Minister of India, apparently, they came pretty close. There was some sort of convergence on, on a phased movement on Kashmir on sort of various steps to be taken and over a period of time some sort of a referendum anyway. But I don't want to say anything right now, because it's a delicate issue. But there is a solution. And the solution has to be with the will of the people of Kashmir.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

So, you, you covered this, but I see about four questions going back to this issue of media censorship. And here's one particularly that talks about TV channels are taken off, journalists are facing threats. The party's official Twitter routinely cautions journalists of committing treasons. So in a country where many journalists have been killed, do you think such rhetoric will enable and incite violence and directly affect the freedom of the press?

**Imran Khan:**

Do you know, Nancy, I am probably one of the biggest beneficiaries of the media, when we had free media, I gained the most because I was, until then, until 2001, there was only one television and that was the national television, PTV, which was totally a government-controlled television. So with the independent channels coming in, I became the biggest beneficiary because we didn't have any money, I'm mean, my party was pretty small for a long time. So I was able to go on television give my point of view. And that's how my party gained because I was, I had a way of conveying my M=manifesto, my how I would deal with various issues. So there is no question in Pakistan of ever clamping down on the media, I can just tell you that, there is no question.

What is, what happens is sometimes, and I will, you know, now that you keep asking, you were stuck on media, so I'll just go. I will just tell you a bit of truth about the media. You know, there is as Lee Kuan Yew once famously remarked, what he, what was sometimes called freedom of speech, by the media, or freedom of expression is sometimes the freedom of owners of the media channels to conduct whatever they want to do. So in Pakistan, what we've had, we had the situation where here we were fighting – I don't know how many of you know of the Panama Papers, the Panama revolutions. So this Panama revelations came about, like the WikiLeaks, and our Prime Minister's, we discovered that he had these

luxury apartments in London, most expensive Mayfair, he had these four luxury apartments. So like, opposition like and anywhere in the democracy, we asked him, where did you get the money to buy these flats? And then started this whole movement to get him to answer these, these questions. Now, there was a court case in the end, and in the court, he was convicted. But do you know, there were there was a media channel, one of the most powerful media channels, they did everything to protect him. Now, this is not what the media is supposed to do. The media did everything. They cover up for him, not just protecting him.

I, who was asking my democratic right, a question to, asking someone waiting to get the money, I was attacked, personal attacks. I mean, the, the sort of attacks, I faced no politically right challenged, no political leader would have gone through the sort of personal attacks, they were because you know, they couldn't attack me on my, on integrity, so they went on these personal attacks. So this is not normal for media to do this. Media is not supposed to do this. Media is supposed to be a watchdog, to bring out, you know, play the role of an opposition, but they're not about personal attacks and trying to blackmail you. We just had another case right now.

There's a judge who convicted the previous Prime Minister. Now this judge, the opposition brought out a video, blackmailing him, about him with some compromising, with you, with some woman, this (unintelligible), this happens in Italian mafias, it doesn't have democracy. So I mean, you know, sometimes, you know, you, I firmly believe that we eventually will have to move where the media owners will have to disclose their source of income, you know, just like anyone else, they'll have to say, how much tax do they pay? What is the source of income? Even if you ask them, how much tax you paid, some of these videos said this is a freedom, it's against freedom of expression.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

So looking at it from that perspective, versus a central citizenship regime, but more of a transparency effort is the focus.

**Imran Khan:**

See, accountable media, media should also be accountable. You can't have a media sort of protecting criminals in a society.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Okay, we're going to move it, the conversation, here, there are a number of questions about Afghanistan, I think you've covered that. But here's one, specifically asking how do you view the peace talk, the peace talks about Afghanistan, hosted by both Russia and Uzbekistan?

**Imran Khan:**

You know, we should really get all the neighbors of Afghanistan involved with the peace talks. Because this is, it should be the interest. Pakistan, the United States, and Afghanistan, these three countries today are the most interested in having peace in Afghanistan. But not all neighbors are interested in peace Afghanistan because, you know, for various reasons, people have their, other countries have their own agendas. So I firmly believe that the U.S. should try and co-opt as many countries as possible. Because there will be people who will be trying to, you know, put a spanner in the works. And so if the neighbors are all involved, there's a much better chance of the talks going smoothly.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

And speaking of neighbors, there's a question saying what, and you mentioned this in your opening remarks, what, what role can Pakistan play in easing the rising tensions with Iran, and a number of other countries, including the United States, without damaging some of your other relationships? How are you thinking about that?

**Imran Khan:**

You see, Pakistan is, you know, we're really indebted to Saudi Arabia, we are indebted to UAE. Because the way they came forward, you know, when we were confronted with this, when we took over government, we only had two weeks of foreign exchange reserves. So we were staring at a default, and these countries came forward to help us and so we are really indebted to them.

But my worry about Iran as, I think, I'm not sure whether all the countries realize the, the gravity of the situation, if there's a conflict with Iran, people don't understand. You know, this is not going to be the same as Iraq, this could be much, much, much worse. It will have great consequences for Pakistan, adverse consequences for our, for our country. It could unleash terrorism, which would, which people would forget al Qaeda and those types, because the Iranian, the, you know, the, the Shia element in Islam is very cohesive, they have a much greater sense of martyrdom, than the Sunni Muslims, you know, the, the battle might be quite short, if, you know if, if, if it goes ahead, and, you know, bombing, airfields and so on.

But the consequences after that, my worry is that not many people fully understand it and I would strongly urge that there should not be this this conflict should not, there should not be another military...situation. Pakistan has already suffered. I said, as what we went through these last 15 years, the last thing we want is another conflict on our borders. And, you know, we would do anything, I mean, if any role Pakistan can play in this, we have already had suggested this to Iran. Until recently, Iran was



willing, but then when somehow I felt that the Iran is getting very desperate. And I do not think they should be pushed into a situation where, where this leads to a conflict.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Another question via Twitter: What are some of the concrete steps your government is taking to ensure that the military operates under civilian leadership? Something you alluded to in your earlier comments.

**Imran Khan:**

You see, in Pakistan, we had three martial laws. And the last one was General Musharraf's. I think General Musharraf's martial law was a watershed in Pakistan, in the sense that there was an open and across the board, that when you have bad democracy, the answer is not to have a military government, because the military, military government comes in, it's like, curing cancer, we're desperate. For a while you feel good, because they are organized, the, it's an organized institution. But eventually, you know, you, you, you end up in even a worse situation, because then democracy, democracy starts all over again. And what we need in Pakistan now is an extended run of democracy.

And I do, I really do believe that the, the democratic evolution of the country has reached a point where now we will go towards further democracy, or I mean, us winning the election as is, you know, who would have thought we would have won an election against these, how many times in a two-party system has a third party broken through? It's, it's unheard of, I mean, nowhere in the world has a third-party breakthrough. We broke through because of social media, we actually, despite the official media, sort of not giving us that sort of coverage, all the opinion polls were that we would not make it. But it was the social media and the young people who came out and, and made us defeat the two established parties. And I think the process will keep going on. I think that in Pakistan, people have tasted freedom. They understand, you know, the power of the vote. In fact, social media has actually democratized the whole world. Everyone now has, you know, they can they have Twitter, they can, everyone can participate.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

We're getting questions. Well, I have two related questions on, uh, that I think build on the vision that you just articulated. And the first is what will the government do to address closing space for civil society and how does that fit into your vision? Closing space for civil society and, and activists?

**Imran Khan:**

I don't understand. So how's, how's the government? We're closing space for civil society?

**Nancy Lindborg:**

There's another question about Gulalai Ismail and other activists.

**Imran Khan:**

You're talking about PTM. PTM.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I think they're saying it's a broader civil society question but...

**Imran Khan:**

It's actually, it's related to PTM. Look, you know all these years, I kept saying, you know when Pakistan, I stood up at the National Assembly in our parliament in 2004. I objected to the Pakistan Army going being sent into a tribal areas, no one understood the tribal areas, the only reason I understood the tribal areas is because some 30 years back, I wrote a book on the tribal areas, I did a travel book, I went all over and I sort of -- so, I understood the tribal areas that, as I said that it is one of the most weaponized per capita area in the world. The, it's a most devolved democracy at every villages and it is an independent entity and so, they have they have never allowed outside interference to come into the tribal areas.

So when Pakistan Army was being sent there in 2004, I kept, I stood in the parliament, tried to explain to them, that the greatest number of losses when the British were ruling India, they suffered the greatest number of losses in Waziristan, which is tribal area. So we should never have sent army there.

Whenever you send an army into civilian areas, there are massive collateral damage, and massive casualties and destruction. So all the time when I was speaking out against this, I was being called Taliban Khan. I was being called pro-terrorist. General Musharraf, I remember in a meeting said that I am a terrorist without a beard. And, and so once this whole thing was over, this young Pashtun movement started. And this Pashtun movement was correct, what they were saying. The area was

devastated, the people of the tribal areas, I mean, half of them were internally displaced, the shops were gone, the most of them relied on livestock. Livestock disappeared. The whole area was, as it is tribal areas before 2001, 75% of the people were under the poverty line. So after this military action, they even went further down.

So we had this young movement and, and movement stemming out of anger. And they, of course, they blame the Pakistan Army for, for all the devastation there. And we've just had elections in the tribal area, now, we've just had, first time in Pakistan's history, the tribal area has been assimilated with Pakhtunkhwa, a province. And first time we've had election and I'm very pleased to say that PTI won the election. But we have now injected the greatest amount of money in the tribal areas to develop it. Never has so much money been, been allocated for development there. But you know, the, the reason why they were problems was that the PTM leadership started attacking the army and they kept attacking the army and the last thing happened was that they actually, civilians charged an army post there were few people killed and that's why there were restrictions, but now it's settling down because we've had a peaceful elections in the tribal areas. So I think we will now move on.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Yeah, I think the question was probably triggered a bit by the New York Times article about the harassment and arrest of this Gulalai Ismail family and friends.

**Imran Khan:**

I wish that they would, The New York Times would also take the, the other point of view. Now I'm sounding like President Trump.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

So we have time for just a couple more questions. The U.S. has been asking Pakistan to do more in the context of terrorism, relates a little bit to what you were saying. They particularly were asking Pakistan to do more in the context of JEM. And after the arrest of Hafiz Saeed, is this it? Will he be, stay in custody this time, or will he allowed to go off again?

**Imran Khan:**

Now, you ask you, first, we want an independent justice system and you want me to predict what the justice system will do? Look, let me just say, I repeat one thing again. It is in the interest of Pakistan, that we do not allow any armed militias in our country. We have suffered, the country has suffered sectarian attacks, we have had the worst situation, it has affected our investment. Pakistan has not, it has destabilized us, this whole thing. While Obama, this, what happened in in February last year. It was clearly an indigenous thing. It was a Kashmiri boy radicalized by the brutality of the security forces, he blew himself up.

But because this group claimed responsibility, which was all, which was in India, as well as Jaish-e-Mohammed was operating in India, but Pakistan suddenly came in the limelight. So even before this had happened, we had already decided that we would disarm all militant groups in Pakistan. And it is in Pakistan's interest, I repeat, it's our interest because the country has had enough of militant groups. You know, we had ethnic groups, militant groups, we had in Baluchistan, we still have militant groups, then we had these various religious groups.

So there is a decision now, and by the way, it is across the party. Every political party has signed the national action plan. Pakistan is now determined and, you know, normally it was said that the security forces patronize the groups, the security forces, we would not be disarming them if the security forces were not standing behind us. You cannot disarm because the police is incapable of disarming these groups. They are trained I mean, they have, these people have experience of, of fighting in Afghanistan, some in Kashmir, the police cannot go after them. So it's the army that is helping us disarm all militant groups in our country.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Mr. Prime Minister, you have been very generous with your time, we have so many more questions that we won't be able to get to, thank you, everybody for your questions. But before we close, I want to ask one last question, which is this is your first visit here as prime minister, we have a very distinguished audience here of policymakers, people in and out of government, people who care deeply about the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. What final message would you like to leave, as a closing thought for everyone?

**Imran Khan:**

I would like to my message from my trip, first trip, as the prime minister to the U.S., I would like to have a relationship, mutu-- between the two countries of mutual trust. I would like to have a relationship as equals, of friendship. Not as it has been before, that where Pakistan has sort of been, you know, it's like, Pakistan wanting aid from the U.S. and then as for aid, Pakistan is expected to do certain things. The reason why I'm happy leaving the U.S. this time because have a relationship not based on a mutual interest, which is peace in Afghanistan and, you know, someone asked, will you get these funds? I hate the idea that we would be asking for funds, not [just from the] U.S., from anyone. Because this is aid has

been one of the biggest curses for my country. What it has done is (applause) what it has done is, it has created the dependency syndrome.

We have become, you know, when I went on my first trip to Saudi Arabia, I came back, what have you got from there? As if I'd gone there to beg for money, and I think it's humiliating for a country. Countries rise because of self-respect and self-esteem. No countries rise by begging, boring for money. So, my relationship with U.S. would be, I would like a relationship, a dignified relationship with the U.S., where never again, should we ever have this that humiliating phase. I can tell you as a Pakistani, never did I feel more humiliated when Osama bin Laden was taken out in Pakistan by the U.S. troops. Never did I feel more humiliated. Because here was a country which was supposed to be an ally. And our ally did not trust us. So as a Pakistani, it was, for every Pakistani was humiliating. We never want to be in that same position again. We want to have a relationship of friendship. And it doesn't matter, you know, friend can be rich and the other cannot be so rich. But so what, you know, it's, it's about a dignified relationship. And that's what I hope to have.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I'd like to present you with a small token of our appreciation for your visit here.

**Imran Khan:**

Thank you, Nancy.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I invite you to come back and wish you all the best. Please join me in thanking the Prime Minister.

**Imran Khan:**

Thank you.