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## Pakistan's Role as a Mediator in the US–Iran Conflict: Strategic Drivers and Diplomatic Implications

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This study examines Pakistan's emergence as a mediator in the US–Iran conflict during 2026 and analyses the strategic factors that enabled Islamabad to assume this role. The study contends that Pakistan's mediatory role emerged from the geographic location of the country, cross-cutting bilateral ties, having access with military-to-military ties, and the changing dynamics in the region and not from its material power or traditional diplomatic influence. This research is qualitative using secondary information such as academic literature, policy reports, government statements and international media coverage. The analysis reveals that Pakistan has played a very effective role in enabling two rival nations to hold discussion in the hope of achieving peace and building up its image on the regional and international stage. There were, however, major constraints, such as limited access to key Iranian security institutions, reliance on personal contacts, and the unresolved nuclear dispute, which continued to affect the relationship between the United States and Iran. The study concludes that the experience of Pakistan offers an important contemporary case study of the effectiveness with which an emerging middle power can leverage its influence in a regional crisis through mediation, strategic positioning, and relationship-based diplomacy.

## Introduction

The US–Iran conflict is one of the most enduring rivalries in contemporary international politics, originating from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which led to the collapse of the US-backed monarchy and the subsequent breakdown of diplomatic relations. The relationship has since been characterized by periodic diplomatic normalization, proxy conflict, economic sanctions, and conflict, all of which have led to continued instability in the Middle East.

One of the most important diplomatic achievements was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed upon in 2015 between Iran and P5+1 countries that imposed limitations on Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2016). In May 2018, however, the United States pulled itself out of the agreement, which was replaced by sanctions under the “maximum pressure” policy and tensions were heightened (U.S. Department of State, 2018; Congressional Research Service (CRS), 2023). In January 2020, the risk of confrontation further escalated after the US killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, prompting Iranian retaliation (BBC, 2020).

The 2026 US–Israel–Iran conflict caused much disruption in global energy markets, notably through instability in the Strait of Hormuz, a vital channel for international oil trade. Crude oil prices started moving more volatile due to the escalation in the

conflict, fueled mostly by concerns about supply security and regional escalation. The market response was characterised by uncertainty and prices had significant fluctuations, followed by some partial stabilisation as diplomatic signals and adjustments to supply became clearer.

The crisis caused direct strategic and economic threat for Pakistan as it is geographically close to Iran, relying on the energy routes of the Gulf countries and receiving huge remittances from the Gulf countries. In this context, Pakistan emerged as a mediator between the United States and Iran, leveraging its long-standing diplomatic channels, historical intermediary role, and balanced relations with regional and global actors.

However, Islamabad has served as an intermediary in the past, notably in 1971 facilitating US-China reconciliation. Pakistan's enhanced relations with the United States, Saudi Arabia and functioning engagement with Iran in 2026 provided favorable conditions for mediation.

Pakistan subsequently arranged communication between the parties, assisted in de-escalation and helped in the ceasefire process and in the subsequent diplomatic meetings. This development raises an analytical focus on the strategic factors that enabled Pakistan's mediatory role and the implications this carries for its foreign policy and international standing. This paper examines this question in the context of middle power diplomacy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The 2026 US-Israel-Iran conflict continues to influence regional security, diplomatic alignments, and strategic calculations across the Middle East. During the crisis, Pakistan assumed an active mediatory role in facilitating dialogue and promoting de-escalation between the US and Iran. Despite the growing significance of these efforts, existing literature provides limited analysis of the factors that enabled Pakistan to perform this role. This study addresses this gap by analyzing its strategic drivers and diplomatic implications.

### **Research Question**

- What strategic factors have enabled Pakistan to emerge as a mediator in the US-Iran conflict, and what are the diplomatic implications of this role?

### **Literature Review**

Most literature on the US-Iran conflict concentrates on its historical roots, the geopolitical aspects, and regional implications. Abrahamian maintains that the 1953 coup against the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh reinforced Iran's mistrust of the United States and has ongoing effects on Tehran's strategic perspective (Abrahamian, 2013). In the same way, Ghazvinian argues that the current conflicts stem from decades of misunderstanding, ideological differences, and diplomatic failures (Ghazvinian, 2021). Parsi also contends that regional geopolitical tensions have played a major role in shaping the course of the war, especially those between Iran, Israel, and the United States (Parsi, 2007).

The mainstream foreign policy studies on Pakistan underscore its historical attempts to pursue a balancing act between multiple regional and international relationships. Rizvi believes that security issues have always influenced Pakistan's foreign policy and the role of the military establishment has been a determining factor (Rizvi, 2000). Similarly, Shah argues that the Pakistani strategic decision making process is still dominated by security institutions, especially in the context of regional stability and external affairs (Shah, 2014).

The latest scholarship increasingly depicts Pakistan as a pragmatic state that is implementing a multi-directional foreign policy. Hassan claims Pakistan has pursued a 'hedging' approach which enables it to maintain relations with competing powers in the world and region while maintaining strategic autonomy (Hassan, 2022). Likewise, Karim argues that Pakistan's ties with Iran are defined by a mix of cooperation, security issues, and regional dynamics (Karim, 2022). Mir and Ayub argue that Pakistan's mediation between the United States and Iran reflects a strategy of diplomatic balancing aimed at enhancing Pakistan's regional relevance while contributing to regional stability (Mir & Ayub, 2026). The existing literature has amply documented the US-Iran conflict, international mediation theories and Pakistan's relations with the key actors in the region and internationally. But little scholarly research has been given to the particular strategic aspects that make Pakistan a potential mediator in today's US-Iran conflict. Furthermore, the diplomatic aspect of Pakistan's mediation in foreign policy has not received in-depth examination. This study seeks to fill this gap by looking at the strategic drivers and the diplomatic implications associated with Pakistan's mediation efforts.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is Middle Power Diplomacy Theory. The theory suggests that states that are not great nor small powers can play an active role in international affairs by means of diplomacy, mediation, building coalitions and developing multiple relationships (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993; Jordaan, 2003). Middle powers are less dependent than major powers on military or economic power and more on credibility in diplomacy, strategic location and the ability to act as a liaison between competing forces.

The theory is especially relevant in the context of Pakistan's engagement in the US-Iran conflict. Pakistan may not have the material power of the great powers, but it has working links with the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and other regional powers. This unique position allows Pakistan to involve several stakeholders at once and also provide opportunities for dialogue in times of crisis. In this sense the theory is helpful to understand the strategic conditions that helped Pakistan to become a mediator in the current conflict between the United States and Iran.

In addition, the study relies on Zartman's notion of a mutually hurting stalemate, which proposes that mediation is more likely to occur when the parties to a conflict realize that avoiding confrontation is more beneficial than fighting (Zartman, 2000). Such conditions developed as a result of the 2026 US-Iran crisis, which made both sides more ready to think about engaging in dialogue via a third party. These theoretical perspectives provide an explanation of both the opportunity of mediation and Pakistan's potential to exploit that opportunity.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and relies on secondary data. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, think tank reports, official statements, policy papers, and trustworthy international media sources have been used to gather data. This study uses qualitative content analysis to analyse the strategic factors which facilitated Pakistan's mediatory role as well as the diplomatic implications of that role. By analysing diverse sources and perspectives, the research seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of Pakistan's emergence as a mediator in the contemporary US-Iran conflict.

## **Strategic Drivers Behind Pakistan's Mediatory Role**

The strategic drivers behind the mediatory role of Pakistan are discussed below. Pakistan's rise as a mediator in the United States and Iran was not simply a matter of being neutral or active in diplomacy. Instead, it was the result of geographic proximity with the conflict, longstanding ties with both sides, increased clout in the Gulf security apparatus, and close access to the decision-makers in Washington and Tehran of Pakistan's military establishment. None of these factors would have been sufficient independently. But, collectively, they established a role which was difficult for other regional players to duplicate.

## **Pakistan's Strategic Geographic Position**

Pakistan's mediation role has been based on geography but geography alone cannot explain mediation. Proximity to conflict does not guarantee a role as mediator: Afghanistan and Iraq show that it can lead to vulnerability, not influence. The significance of Pakistan was mainly due to the fact that it had working security, intelligence, and diplomatic relations, which functioned even during times of bilateral tension.

Pakistan also has a 900 km long border with Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, which has been plagued by cross-border militancy, smuggling activities and frequent security issues (The Media Line, 2024). Accordingly, the security apparatus of both Pakistan and Iran have kept in touch with each other on a regular basis, even though there are ongoing political differences. During the bilateral strain, these channels remained unaffected, and, subsequently, they offered Islamabad with a facility by which messages could be delivered quickly during the 2026 crisis.

The geographical position of Pakistan also made it one of the most affected states by the potential US-Iran confrontation. Pakistan imports almost 90 percent of its crude oil from Saudi Arabia and the UAE and about 99 percent of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from Qatar and the UAE (OEC World, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2026b). Almost all of these sources of energy run through the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, any disruption in maritime traffic directly impacted Pakistan's energy security and economic stability.

The impact on the economy was felt soon after the war began. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb on 9 March 2026 cautioned that Pakistan's oil import bill may reach around \$600 million every month (ANI, 2026). Fuel prices rose by approximately 20 percent within a week, while the government implemented energy conservation measures, such as a four-day working week for their employees, scheduled power outages, and increased online education (Reuters, 2026b; Government of Pakistan, 2026). Rising fertiliser costs further threatened agricultural production due to disruptions in Gulf trade routes.

This price was something that set Pakistan apart from a number of other possible mediators. Islamabad was not only looking for de-escalation because of the peace and stability of the region, but because it had a direct economic impact. Both Washington and Tehran could thus see that the interest of Pakistan lay in ending the war and not promoting the strategic goals of either. This enhanced Islamabad's credibility as a communication channel.

The geographical location of Pakistan also started to play a commercial role during the crisis as well. The government approved specific transit routes from Gwadar, Karachi and Port Qasim to Iran at the Gabd and Taftan border crossings, allowing goods to trade in through Pakistani territory into Iran (Dawn, 2026e). Geography, thus, co-created not only proximity to the conflict, but also tangible economic and logistic relevance that made Pakistan relevant to all concerned.

Geographic location is not the sole reason for Pakistan's role as a mediator. There are several states that reside near conflict zones, but have not gained similar political leverage. Pakistan's strength was that it had harnessed geographic proximity for practical diplomatic use with border management experience, the network of transit connectivity and continued communication with both sides. In this sense, Islamabad's influence was rooted in a key idea of middle power diplomacy, which is that influence does not have to be based on material power, but also on the ability to provide services, access and other things that larger powers can hardly create for themselves.

### **Pakistan's Relations with Iran**

The Pak-Iran relationship is often described as a partnership based on Islamic solidarity or as a conflict with sectarian and geopolitical motivations. Both explanations of the relationship are inadequate. In reality, Pakistan-Iran relations have been defined by 'managed interdependence' in which cooperation and tension both exist since neither party can afford a total failure at the bilateral level.

This is evident in the missile exchanges of January 2024. Iran hit suspected militant sites in Pakistan, and Pakistan's military retaliated with an attack on militant strongholds in Iran (Reuters, 2024). Both governments promptly began to defuse the situation and resume normal diplomatic relations. Security institutions kept in touch throughout the crisis. These channels remained available when mediation efforts intensified in 2026.

It is not the proximity of this relationship that is important, it is the balance. Neither Tehran saw Islamabad as a formal ally nor as a hostile actor. This enabled Pakistan to keep the communication channels open even in times of tension. This aligns with the growing middle power paradigm, where trust can be gained through the ability to navigate between the competing political and ideological poles, even if not through neutrality. Pakistan's reaction to the US-Israeli military campaign further strengthened its credibility in Tehran.

At the onset of the strikes on 28 February 2026, Pakistan was the only regional state to take a clear stance against the attacks on Iran (Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN, 2026). This move was not a blanket approval of Iranian policies, but rather a sign that Islamabad was not prepared to give up a relationship with a neighbouring country to join with Washington or Riyadh. Later, the Iranian leadership officially recognized Pakistan's contribution. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi offered "gratitude and appreciation" for "tireless efforts" by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir after the ceasefire announcement. He also said Iran had agreed to the ceasefire in response to PM Sharif's "brotherly request" (Report News Agency, 2026). This was important because for Tehran, Islamabad was not just a logistics hub, but a trusted channel that could pass assurances in a tense conflict.

This relationship is also determined by domestic politics. The Shia population of Pakistan, which is estimated at 21-25 million, created internal pressures, limiting Islamabad's ability to maneuver (World Population Review, 2026). Protests broke out in several cities following the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei during the conflict, leading to a minimum of 22 fatalities, including some attempts to break into diplomatic facilities (The Guardian, 2026a). These developments strengthened Tehran's sense that Pakistan was unlikely to be able to take a clear stance against Iran without facing domestic political consequences.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's influence in Tehran is also severely constrained. Islamabad had more favorable relations with President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Araghchi, but much less influence on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which became a powerful decision-making force after Khamenei's assassination. Pakistani officials reportedly had difficulties getting in touch with key IRGC officials, leaving questions about the impact of messages sent via civilian channels on strategic decision-making (Karim, 2026). Thus, Pakistan had access to Iran but it did not have influence on the players who were ultimately responsible for the security policy. The access is adequate for mediation, but not enough to determine Iranian decision-making.

### **Pakistan's Relations with the United States**

The improvement in Pak-US relations in 2025-26 was a pivotal factor for Pakistan's mediation between Washington and Tehran. Islamabad's role as an intermediary, irrespective of its access to Iran, was not possible without confidence from Washington. During Trump's first term, differences on Afghanistan, counterterrorism and military aid have taken a toll on Pakistan's reputation in Washington. The improvement was the outcome of Islamabad's conscious effort to re-establish political and strategic relations with the second Trump administration.

After the India-Pakistan conflict in May of 2025 Pakistan had nominated Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was widely seen as an attempt to cultivate goodwill with the White House. At the same time, Pakistan pushed for cooperation on critical minerals and investments in cryptocurrencies and counterterrorism, all of which were important to the Trump administration. (Chatham House, 2026)

The most impactful was on 18 June 2025 when Trump invited Field Marshal Asim Munir to lunch at the White House. The meeting, initially scheduled for one hour, reportedly lasted more than two hours and continued into the Oval Office (Dawn, 2025). The importance of the meeting was not just the time but the symbolism. This was the first time a Pakistani army chief was hosted by any U.S. president without the presence of any senior civilian leadership from Pakistan. Trump's comments following the meeting further elevated Pakistan's position. He said: "I was honoured to meet him today. They know Iran very well, better than most, and they're not happy about anything. It's not that they're bad with Israel. They know them both, actually, but they know Iran better." (U.S. Senate Democratic Leadership Newsroom, 2025) This was a tacit acknowledgment of Pakistan's particular access to Iran and its potential as an intermediary.

Over the next few months, Trump repeatedly praised Munir, calling him "an exceptional man", "a great fighter" "a very important guy," and "my favourite field marshal" (Fox News, 2026). These endorsements were significant as it sets the credibility of Pakistan before the crisis reached its most critical level. By the time of mediation, Washington had already taken the view that Islamabad had valuable access to Tehran. The Pakistani government thus went into the war with more political confidence than other regional actors.

US-India relations, which had already weakened, became an additional contributor to this trend. Relations between Washington and New Delhi were seriously strained by issues of tariffs, H-1B visas and Russian oil imports to India (Deccan Herald, 2025). This removed a longstanding constraint on US-Pakistan relations. In the past, American policymakers have usually thought about Pakistan in terms of its relationship with India. This limitation was lessened when US-India relations went sour, and Washington was able to open up more options for engaging Islamabad.

Pakistan's contribution to Washington in the crisis was not in terms of economic leverage, but perhaps more in enabling access, communications and political reassurance at the right time. Islamabad was not coercive, but rather it gained influence through its intermediate utility. It is a fundamental belief of middle power diplomacy theory that countries in a middle position in the international system can play a role when larger countries are not willing or able to act directly. Early in 2026, Pakistan thus became the rare country to have access to high-ranking Iranian officials and immediate credibility from the White House. This marriage made one of the most vital bases for its mediation effort.

### **Pakistan's Relations with Saudi Arabia and Gulf States**

Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States also gave an extra level of credibility to its role in the war, which enhanced its credibility to play a mediating role in the conflict. Geography and neighbourliness were important factors in Pakistan's ability to communicate with Tehran, whereas what was important for the acceptability of Pakistan to Washington was its long tradition of being part of the Gulf security system. This positioning enabled Islamabad to play both sides and not be seen as a member of one camp or the other.

This was a significant step in this direction when Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed the Strategic Defence and Military Agreement (SDMA) in September 2025 (Reuters, 2025). It transformed the geopolitics in the region. The pact announced that aggression against Saudi Arabia would be considered as aggression against Pakistan. It was an informal security cooperation that was now formalised and underlined Pakistan's intent to institutionalise its role in the security of the Gulf.

The importance of the SDMA for mediation was less in the agreement and more in the message it sent. By 2026 Pakistan was acknowledged as a security ally of Gulf monarchies and at the same time had good working relationship with Iran. This is a mix of relationships that few regional actors had. Saudi Arabia believed and trusted Pakistan as a defence partner and Iran kept communicating with Pakistan as a neighbouring country even though communication channels were strained at times. This helped Islamabad to continue its work in a diplomatic arena not open to more explicitly pro-Islamic players.

This stance was backed up by economic factors. In July-May FY26, Pakistan's remittance inflows totalled about \$38 billion, with about 44 percent coming from the Gulf countries (Dawn, 2026d). The economic stability of the Gulf depends directly on the foreign exchange earnings of Pakistan as many Pakistanis enter the Gulf countries for jobs, and the employment of these nationals helps in enhancing the domestic labour market in Pakistan (MRC Pakistan, 2024). Meanwhile, the conflict caused disruptions in the import prices and supply chains of Pakistan. The World Bank Group lowered the growth forecast for the Middle East economy to 1.8 percent in 2026, causing a drop of 2.4 percentage points that jeopardized remittance inflows and investment opportunities (The World Bank Group, 2026). There were also other economic pressures, stemming from the conflict. Increased energy costs are also impacting production costs throughout Pakistan and, according to reports, disruptions to the Gulf trade routes have also driven up the cost of urea, potentially affecting agriculture and food security (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026). Hence Pakistan was present in the mediation as a country whose economy was directly impacted by the ongoing instability.

Meanwhile, Pakistan had to make sure the strengthening relationship with Saudi Arabia does not instil doubts in Iran's mind about its neutrality. To overcome this challenge Islamabad has always tried to redefine its diplomatic strategy in terms of regional stability and not alliance commitments. The meeting of Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia on 29 March 2026 in Islamabad demonstrated the approach of the meeting, where de-escalation was not seen as a Saudi led initiative, but rather a shared goal for the region. Pakistan's Saudi relationship was integrated into a multilateral context and thus minimized the chances of Tehran's perception of partisanship. This enabled Islamabad to continue its dialogue with Saudi Arabia and Iran, when many other regional actors were left with a dilemma to choose between the two.

### **The Role of Pakistan's Military and Security Establishment**

The mediation role of the Pakistani civilian government cannot be comprehended without considering the role of military. The country's military establishment was at the centre of both the development and maintenance and operationalisation of the channels which enabled the country to mediate. For decades Pakistan's military has been playing a major role in the strategic relations especially with the USA, the Gulf monarchies, Afghanistan and India. This was the case in the 2026 mediation.

Field Marshal Asim Munir was the main operational figure in the entire history. Though Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar were able to be seen in public, a lot of the more significant discussions were held in military and security circles.

The most obvious instance was at the time of negotiations leading up to the 8 April ceasefire. During this time, Munir was said to be communicating "all night long" with Vice President JD Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi as the final ceasefire details are being negotiated (Reuters, 2026a). During this period, Pakistan was not just a conduit for messages but also played a crucial role in resolving issues. Islamabad did that by simultaneously communicating with both sides, thereby minimizing uncertainty and misperceptions and making it easier to prevent escalation. One of the most common traits of effective mediation by middle powers is that they are able to serve as a reliable communications conduit between opposing parties.

When announcing the agreement, Trump stated that he had acted: "based on conversations with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, of Pakistan" and that both leaders had requested that he "hold off the destructive force being sent tonight to Iran" (ABC News, 2026). Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi also commended Sharif and Munir for their "tireless efforts" and said Iran had agreed to the ceasefire "in response to the brotherly request of PM Sharif" (Al Jazeera, 2026a). The importance of these declarations is that the two sides pointed to the same set of Pakistani intermediaries in making these statements public. And this is an unusual occasion for a middle powers to be recognized at such level.

Previously, Munir had been in touch with Iranian military authorities to keep the window open for mediation. In May 2025, he visited Tehran where he met with Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Al Jazeera, 2026c). Bagheri was killed in the conflict, but the military-to-military interactions did lay the groundwork for later negotiations.

The military-centred nature of Pakistan's diplomacy provided advantages. Military channels can be more efficient than diplomatic channels in this respect, and may cut out some of the bureaucratic hurdles in crises. They further allowed Pakistan to reach out directly to those engaged in operational decision-making and not only the foreign ministries.

But it was this same structure that opens up vulnerabilities. Much of the mediation was based on the relationship between Munir and the officials of the Trump administration. Relationships formed on the basis of the individual have been shown to yield quick results, but are hard to institutionalize. A change of leadership at either extreme could then make the channels that seem to be working very well less effective. The military engagement therefore proved to be positive for Pakistan's mediation, and at the same time, Pakistan was also becoming reliant on that military involvement.

## **Pakistan's Growing Regional and Diplomatic Relevance**

Pakistan's mediation efforts were made not just through its bilateral relations but also through a comprehensive process of diplomatic shift that began in 2025. Islamabad came into the US-Iran crisis with more connectivity to the region than it had enjoyed in many years and had the luxury of claiming it was more than just a South Asian player reacting to a regional crisis.

Pakistan had also strengthened bilateral relations with Central Asian republics, increased economic relations with Southeast countries, enhanced defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and broadened strategic cooperation with Turkey and Egypt. The possibility of a quadrilateral security configuration among Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2026a) was indicative of a desire to engage in a broader regional security framework, beyond South Asian security matters. These developments added value to Pakistan's foreign policy. Islamabad's communication with other States was growing more significant as it was traversed in many overlapping economic, military and political frameworks. Pakistan was in fact dealing with all the Gulf monarchies, Iran, China, the governments of the Central Asian countries and also the United States of America during 2026. None of the regional actors enjoyed the same level of access to such a broad spectrum of political groups.

History also played its role in Pakistan's effort for mediation. In 1971 Islamabad helped Henry Kissinger's clandestine visit to China, which paved the way for the US-China rapprochement (Office of the Historian, 2006). There was obviously a different context for the US-Iran conflict, but the logic was the same: Pakistan was in a position where direct interactions were not politically desirable between actors. This was compared explicitly by the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, which pointed out that Pakistan had once again facilitated the conditions for a major international conflict to be stalled, after being the bridge for Kissinger's China initiative in the past (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2026b). The comparison itself is less important, as both Washington and Tehran seemed willing to accept it. What is often more important than capabilities in diplomacy is the perception and the precedent of 1971 further strengthened the perception of Pakistan as a state that could facilitate a difficult negotiation.

Pakistan's diplomatic presence increased significantly. Islamabad was gradually emerging in the discussions of conflict management or crisis diplomacy in the region beyond Afghanistan, terrorism and India-Pakistan relations. This reorientation was not brought about by the US-Iran mediation alone, but rather hastened a shift that had already taken place.

## **Pakistan's Mediation Efforts in the US-Iran Conflict**

### **Diplomatic Engagements and Public Statements**

Pakistan's mediation did not come as a single initiative rather it evolved slowly. There appears to be a progression in the engagement from public diplomacy to the active facilitation and then to direct mediation.

On 28 February 2026, the US-Israeli military action against Iran sparked condemnations from Pakistan, the sole country in the region to do so (Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN, 2026). The Foreign Office urged "restraint and de-escalation" and PM Shehbaz Sharif expressed "unwavering solidarity with the brotherly people of Iran" (Dawn, 2026a). Meanwhile the government was trying to control domestic unrest as this time, as protests were taking place in major cities like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Peshawar. At least 22 people were killed in these demonstrations (The Guardian, 2026a).

There was a great deal of diplomacy that went on behind the scenes along with public statements. Islamabad was in touch with Tehran, while also dealing with Riyadh, Doha, Ankara, Beijing and Washington. However, in a public statement Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said that "Iran was willing to return to the negotiating table if Israel refrains from further strikes," following direct talks with Iranian officials (Gulf News, 2025). The statement effectively signalled that Pakistan was already transmitting messages between the parties.

As of March, Pakistan stopped advocacy and started providing diplomatic services. Islamabad officially put forward the offer to host negotiations on 23 March 2026. In a public message on X, Prime Minister Sharif reiterated the offer to President Trump, Abbas Araghchi and Special Envoy Steve Witkoff (The New York Times, 2026a). The offer was made public, raising the visibility and urgency to respond in a constructive manner for both Washington and Tehran. The coordination at regional level also increased. The foreign ministers of Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia met in Islamabad on 29 March 2026 for their 2nd Consultation in 10 days (The Guardian, 2026b). Pakistan was also in talks with China regarding ceasefire mechanisms, and seeking the cover of Beijing as one of the major powers.

Islamabad took up the task of controlling perceptions between the two sides as negotiations turned tense. After Trump threatened to bomb Iran "back to the Stone Ages" if it refused to meet American demands (The Guardian, 2026c), Pakistan faced challenge of not only assuring Tehran of the possibility of diplomacy but also dissuading Washington from giving up on talks. It became almost as important to keep everyone confident as the content of the negotiations was itself.

### **High-Level Contacts and Communication Channels**

Pakistan's involvement was most pronounced during the talks which led to the ceasefire of 8 April. Islamabad was now less a proponent of dialogue, and more the primary means of communication between both sides.

On 6 April 2026, Field Marshal Asim Munir continued contacts with Vice President JD Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi "all night long" as final ceasefire talks were held (Reuters, 2026a). Thus Pakistan was functioning as a transit point for which proposals and counter-proposals and assurances were sent from Washington to Tehran, and vice versa. President Trump formally admitted this role in announcing the ceasefire. He said the agreement had been reached "based on conversations with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, of Pakistan," adding that both had asked him "to hold off the destructive force being sent tonight to Iran". Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi made a remarkably similar statement, in which he said Iran had accepted the ceasefire "in response to the brotherly request of PM Sharif", and had shown "gratitude and appreciation" for his "tireless efforts" (Al Jazeera, 2026a).

Formal negotiations were prepared to show the seriousness of both sides in Pakistan's role. On 11 April 2026, Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf landed in Rawalpindi where he was received by Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and Field Marshal Munir. US Vice President JD Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner have all arrived via the same route. Over 10,000 security personnel were deployed in Pakistan and public holidays were declared in Islamabad in order to facilitate the talks (The New York Times, 2026b). They created a shift for Pakistan from being a messenger to a diplomatic forum. The main players in the conflict were no longer communicating with each other via Islamabad, they were meeting physically there.

### **De-escalation and Conflict Management Efforts**

Islamabad Talks on 11-12 April 2026 is the most visible outcome of Pakistan's mediation efforts. The talks, at the Serena Hotel, were the first direct talks between the United States and Iran since 1979. The discussions continued for about 21 hours, which was divided into three rounds, the first round was held indirect, and the second and third were direct contact between delegations. Talks reportedly achieved a deal on the main terms of a proposed ten-point framework. But a compromise was not reached on Iran's nuclear programme and the Strait of Hormuz, and a final resolution was not reached. Thus the talks brought about an extraordinary result: success in process but failure in substance.

However, Vice President Vance admitted the deadlock, saying, "The bad news is that we have not reached an agreement. I think that's bad news for Iran much more than it's bad news for the United States of America. They have chosen not to accept our terms." (The White House, 2026) Iranian Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf, too, interpreted the situation differently, saying that the Iranian delegation had put forward constructive proposals, but that "the opposing side ultimately failed to gain the trust of the Iranian delegation." (Dawn, 2026b) Later, Trump said, "Most points were agreed to, but the only one that really mattered, nuclear, was not". (Al Jazeera, 2026d)

Even though it was not yet a final deal, it brought down the differences greatly in the negotiations. Later, Araghchi said that they were "just inches away" from an Islamabad memorandum of understanding (TRT World, 2026). Later reports indicate that both sides had come a long way towards a compromise than their public statements suggested at that time. The talks ended but mediation was continued by Pakistan. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Araghchi, in spite of Trump's cancellation of a second negotiation round in late April, highlighted two revised proposals during two visits to Islamabad to be passed on to Washington (Dawn, 2026c). There was no official diplomatic process during this time, yet the channel was still active.

Later in May most intensive efforts were made. As negotiations entered a critical stage, Munir met President Masoud Pezeshkian in Tehran on 22-23 May as part of a "final diplomatic effort" by Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. (Axios, 2026; Deutsche Welle, 2026). There was tangible movement as a result of the effort. Trump said on 23 May that a deal was "largely negotiated" and Iranian media said negotiations had reached the "final stage" and positions were "becoming closer" (France 24, 2026).

This also aligns with the concept of a mutually hurting stalemate proposed by Zartman (Zartman, 2000). By late May, 2026, the continuing conflict had caused increasing economic, military and political damage to both Washington and Tehran. As the cost of the conflict rose, it became even more likely that negotiations would prove to be more feasible, and Pakistan's mediation efforts were likely to be more successful.

By early June 2026, there was no final agreement but the ceasefire was agreed and talks were ongoing. The House of Commons Library reports that negotiations on freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's nuclear and ballistic programmes, sanctions relief, reconstruction and a long-term peace framework continued to be mediated through Pakistan (House of Commons Library, 2026). Pakistan had thus managed to maintain dialogue even when it had not achieved a final solution.

Islamabad Talks did not achieve a formal resolution, however, help ensure the continuation of dialogue while avoiding the ceasefire's imminent collapse. Pakistan's role was then less about conflict resolution and more about its management and ensuring room for further negotiation. This represents a core point of middle power diplomacy theory that the effectiveness of middle powers is generally evaluated by their ability to enable communication, and reduce escalation rather than impose final solutions.

## **Diplomatic Implications**

### **Enhanced Diplomatic Visibility**

The mediation role played by Pakistan in the US-Iran conflict gave Pakistan a prominent place in the diplomatic arena at regional and international levels. Pakistan increased its diplomatic profile at regional and international levels by playing a significant role in the mediation efforts in the case of US-Iran conflict. Prior to the crisis of 2026, Islamabad was mainly seen from the security, Afghanistan and counterterrorism perspectives of the South Asian region. The mediation process reinforced that image by putting Pakistan in the shoes of an interlocutor who could facilitate the communication between two longtime adversaries.

The most obvious impact was Pakistan's part in the direct interaction of the US and Iranian leaders. Islamabad was able to establish a line of communication which many other traditional diplomatic figures were not able to achieve for decades. Both sides gave public recognition to Pakistan's contribution further adding to its visibility. President Trump talked several times about Pakistan's mediation efforts and Iranian officials thanked Islamabad for its efforts in establishing and sustaining the ceasefire. The recognition from Washington and Tehran at the same time provided Pakistan with a certain diplomatic legitimacy which few regional states have.

The mediation also helped to broaden Pakistan's engagement in regional diplomatic deliberations. Islamabad increasingly became a part of discussions on Gulf security and conflict management, alongside Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. Pakistan was no longer regarded just as a South Asian player; it was seen as a player in Middle Eastern affairs as well.

This development is in line with the main tenet of middle power diplomacy theory that a state need not have overwhelming military and economic force to shape global events. The influence of Pakistan in the crisis came from its relationships, geographical location and communication skills with actors which were unable to communicate effectively with each other.

### **Pakistan as a Diplomatic Interlocutor: Global Response**

The international response to Pakistan's mediation was mixed, with some recognising its successes and others questioning its sustainability.

The biggest support was from the USA. President Trump had repeatedly praised the leadership of Pakistan, calling Field Marshal Asim Munir "an exceptional man", "a great fighter", and subsequently "my favourite field marshal" (Fox News, 2026). Despite the failure of the Islamabad Talks, the Vice President, JD Vance, emphasized Pakistan's efforts to narrow the gap between the two sides, stating that any limitations were not related to the Pakistanis, who "did an amazing job" attempting to bridge the gap between two sides (The White House, 2026). This recognition by the senior United States officials enhanced Pakistan's credibility as a neutral, effective facilitator even if there was no substantive agreement.

In May of 2026, Senator Lindsey Graham said that Pakistan is not a fit mediator and Trump, in response, publicly supported Islamabad, saying: "I think the Pakistanis have been great. The field marshal and the prime minister of Pakistan have been absolutely great". (The News International, 2026) These remarks were significant as they showed that despite domestic U.S. criticism of Pakistan, the White House still held confidence in Pakistan.

There was also strong support from China. Pakistan's efforts were commended by the Chinese officials and Islamabad was in close coordinating with them for a ceasefire. In a visit by the Deputy Prime Minister of Pakistan Ishaq Dar to China in March 2026, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Beijing's support for Pakistan's mediation efforts to restore stability in the region (Al Jazeera, 2026e). Further international praise was received from the United Nations. UN Secretary-General's spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric thanked Pakistan (along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt) for its mediation, calling the Islamabad-hosted talks a positive and meaningful step towards renewed dialogue, and encouraging the continuation of support for the process to ensure the ceasefire remains intact (United Nations, 2026).

All the aforementioned endorsements, from the US, UK Parliament, the UN and China, indicated that Pakistan was beginning to have some diplomatic legitimacy and visibility in a high-stakes conflict, a level that few other regional states possess in such a scenario. It was a further sign of Pakistan's diplomatic versatility that it was able to act as an interlocutor for both Washington and Beijing at the same time.

Recognition also came from the western policy circles. The House of Commons Library singled Pakistan out as a key intermediary in the ongoing US-Iran negotiations, thus placing Islamabad's role under a new spotlight within the policy arena (House of Commons Library, 2026). The Indian diplomatic reaction to Pakistan's elevation was quite critical. On their part, India's External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has questioned Islamabad's involvement calling Pakistan a "dalaal" or broker (HindustanTimes, 2026). The comment was meant to be a criticism but it also served as way of recognition of Pakistan's role in mediation.

But there is uncertainty whether it is a short-term success or an evolving role for peace-making. For Pakistan's mediation, it is mainly dependent on military networks and personal relationships, as opposed to formal diplomatic institutions. The inability to reach a final agreement highlighted the constraints of Pakistan's influence as it move from ceasefire management to issues like Iran's nuclear programme.

### **Opportunities and Constraints**

The mediation process opened up a number of opportunities for Pakistan's foreign policy and economic approach. First, it deepened Pakistan's linkages with the highest decision-makers in Washington. The enhancement of relations happened alongside discussions on critical minerals, energy cooperation, trade and technology partnerships.

Secondly Pakistan's diplomatic significance made it more appealing to Gulf investors. All three countries, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, considered regional stability as crucial to ensure energy infrastructure and trade routes protection. Pakistan's efforts to maintain that stability enhanced its investment portfolio, particularly in sectors like infrastructure, mining, and energy.

Third, mediation boosted the image of Pakistan as a responsible regional player. This positive publicity may help Islamabad's hand in future IMF bailout negotiations, multilateral forums and investment talks. Still, there are many limitations. Pakistan's influence is tied closely to the continuation of the US-Iran dialogue. If negotiations fail and war breaks out again, all the diplomatic progress made through the mediation would rapidly be lost. When mediation works, it generates prestige, when it doesn't, it hurts credibility.

Another constraint is Pakistan's access to Iran. Islamabad's engagement with President Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Araghchi was successful, but its interaction with the IRGC was comparatively limited. Considering the influence of IRGC over Iran's strategic decision making, this limited the capacity of Pakistan to play any role in defining the most sensitive part of the negotiations. The fourth challenge stems from Pakistan's dependence on personal relationships. Much of the mediation process relied on the rapport between Trump and Munir. Personal diplomacy can generate opportunities rapidly, but it's very fragile since it relies on personal relationships with individuals who must be in power.

Competing strategic commitments are also on Pakistan's agenda. Its defence ties with Saudi Arabia, its neighborly ties with Iran, its economic reliance on remittances from the Gulf, its security ties with the United States, and its strategic partnership with China don't always go together. The complexity of the crises makes managing these relationships more difficult. Thus Pakistan has done well in their diplomacy but it is not permanent.

### **Future Prospects of Pakistan's Mediatory Role**

Whether the current diplomatic gears can be translated into a more durable process or not is a major question for the future of Pakistan's role as a mediator.

The first determining factor is the outcome of US-Iran negotiations. Pakistan's reputation as a mediator will get a boost if it is able to help facilitate an accord on sensitive issues like Iran's nuclear programme, the matter of sanctions, and issues related to maritime security. On the other hand, if the confrontation is resumed, it will raise questions on the effectiveness of Islamabad's role.

The second is the sustainability of Pakistan's bonds with the stakeholders. The trust-building process among Pakistani, American, Iranian, Saudi, and Turkish officials in the crisis provided opportunities that were not available before. Holding on to those bonds after the war will be crucial for Pakistan to be part of any future diplomatic effort.

The third one is institutionalisation. The informal communication networks, personal contacts and military channels were the basis for much of the mediation in 2026. Permanent structures are needed to have long-term diplomatic influence. If Islamabad is unable to develop institutionalized mechanisms, mediation efforts in the future will continue to be subject to changes of leadership and political change.

Pakistan thus has a strategic dilemma. It can treat 2026 as an extraordinary moment due to favourable circumstances, or it can use the experience to develop a diplomatic capability. The Islamabad would involve investment of professional mediation skills,

communication systems and ongoing interaction with various regional actors. The extent to which Pakistan can become a regular mediator or just a facilitator will depend largely on how it is able to build on the successes of 2026 and establish a long-term diplomatic framework within the country.

## **Critical Assessment**

### **Successes of Pakistan's Mediation Efforts**

Pakistan's mediation efforts have brought about a number of tangible results which set it apart from the mediation efforts of other countries in the past.

The biggest success of the year was the ceasefire that was announced on 8th April 2026. It suspended hostilities for a while and then it was prolonged, giving room for diplomacy. Washington and Tehran publicly recognized Islamabad's mediation efforts, and the Islamabad had been awarded such a level of recognition rarely given by others.

Pakistan also was instrumental in the Islamabad Talks on 11–12 April 2026 that paved the way for Iran and the United States to meet for the first time since 1979. The negotiations yielded no final agreement, but they set a negotiating process that one thought to be unfeasible.

The other achievement of Pakistan was to maintain communication links after the talks failed to yield anything. Islamabad did not pull out and instead kept conveying messages back and forth between the two sides, holding further consultations and making new offerings. This continuity helped avoid the ceasefire collapse in the face of several bouts of tension.

Pakistan's contribution to this progress was also felt during May 2026 when both sides said that talks had reached the stage of a formal understanding. Trump said the deal was "largely negotiated" while Iranian officials said negotiations were in their "final stage" (France 24, 2026).

No final agreement was reached, but steps were taken that were more advanced than most expected. The results prove that Pakistan was not only a venue provider but also played an active role. It played an active role in communication, minimized misunderstandings, and assisted in maintaining negotiations at times when direct communication may have stalled.

### **Limitations of Pakistan's Influence**

In spite of these success, Pakistan's influence was still limited by factors which were out of its control.

Islamabad was best equipped to help ease tensions, but could not solve the conflict's root causes. The Iran nuclear controversy, sanctions relief, missile development and regional security issues were essentially political matters and could only be resolved by Washington and Tehran.

There were also restrictions within the borders of Iran for Pakistan. It had good ties with civilian leaders but relatively weak links with the IRGC. The IRGC has a significant impact on Iran's security affairs, so this was a blow to Pakistan's ability to shape the country's key strategic decisions.

Another restriction was the military orientation of the mediation. A lot of Munir's personal connections and the communication network of the Pakistani military was used in the process. These channels proved useful and worked well during the crisis but are less durable than institutional diplomatic channels.

Likewise, the Strategic Defence and Military Agreement (SDMA) of Pakistan with Saudi Arabia, reliance on remittances from the Gulf and the relationship with the United States raised doubts about Islamabad's ability to be entirely neutral. Although both Washington and Tehran accepted Pakistan as a mediator, perceptions of bias remain a potential challenge.

Last but not least, domestic political and economic constraints restricted the Pakistani's resources to continued diplomatic effort. Yet, economic turbulence, security issues, and domestic political rivalry all limit Islamabad's capacity to exercise a wide foreign policy sway over a long duration.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study explored the strategic factors that helped Pakistan to emerge as a mediator in the US-Iran conflict and evaluated the diplomatic significance of its mediation. The results indicate that Pakistan's role as a mediator was influenced by the geographic location, the cross-cutting bilateral relationships, the military-to-military access and the changing regional dynamics. Pakistan's 900-kilometre border with Iran, its economic ties with the Gulf region and the fact that it can maintain a relationship with the United States, Tehran, Riyadh, and Beijing provided it with an extra set of advantages that few other regional players had at

the same time. All these made Islamabad the place where it was easier to communicate, during a time when regional tensions were high.

The analysis also shows that Pakistan's mediation was far more than a symbolic diplomatic gesture. Pakistan actively facilitated dialogue, facilitated the 8 April 2026 ceasefire, hosted the first direct talks between the United States and Iran since 1979, and maintained dialogue even when formal efforts have stalled. Meanwhile, the study reveals that the influence of Pakistan was limited due to structural factors such as restricted access to the IRGC, competing regional obligations, and the nuclear issue that continues to haunt the US-Iran relations. Pakistan was able to facilitate negotiations, but it could not determine their ultimate outcome.

Theoretically, the case validates the assumptions of Middle Power Diplomacy Theory and Zartman's theory of a mutually hurting stalemate. Pakistan's power was not rooted in material strength but in its relationship, strategic positioning and diplomacy. The case highlights the ability of an emerging middle power to act as a meaningful force in a crisis when the big players need an interlocutor who can span political and strategic divides. The question remains whether this could become a permanent posture in Pakistan's foreign policy, or if it would be sustained only as long as it serves the goals that led to it.

## Recommendations

- For Pakistan, greater institutionalisation of the communication channels developed during the US-Iran mediation process may help preserve diplomatic gains beyond individual leadership tenures.
- A development of a more clearly articulated middle power diplomacy framework could contribute to the consistency of mediation and conflict-management efforts in the future
- Existing diplomatic goodwill could provide avenues for increased economic ties with the United States, Gulf countries, and other regional partners, including energy, critical minerals, infrastructure, and trade.
- Broader engagement with multiple centres of decision-making within Iran could strengthen Pakistan's ability to facilitate communication during future crises.
- Additional investment in mediation, negotiation, and conflict-resolution expertise within Pakistan's diplomatic institutions may enhance the sustainability of future facilitation efforts.
- Continued maintenance of balanced relationships with competing regional actors may help preserve the credibility that enabled Pakistan's mediatory role in the first place.
- Regional and international organisations may benefit from recognising the constructive role that middle powers can play in conflict management and diplomatic facilitation.
- Greater support for structured dialogue mechanisms between the United States and Iran could help reduce the risk of future escalation and strengthen existing communication channels.
- Multilateral engagement involving actors such as Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, and Gulf states may provide additional avenues for confidence-building and regional de-escalation.
- Future mediation efforts could be strengthened through institutional support, technical assistance, and diplomatic coordination rather than relying exclusively on crisis-driven initiatives.

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