

Pakistan's Diplomatic Campaign in Iran-US-Israel Crisis 2026: Balancing Mediation, Security and Economic Survival

Fatima Faiz

fatimafaizbhayo@gmail.com

DHA Suffa University, Pakistan

Dr. Samreen Bari Aamir

DHA Suffa University, Pakistan

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Abstract

The 2026 Iran–US–Israel crisis emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical conflicts of the contemporary Middle East with ramifications stretching beyond the region. The situation not only posed threat to regional security but also to international energy markets, shipping lanes and the stability of a large number of developing nations. In the midst of this crisis, Pakistan took an unprecedented proactive diplomatic approach through shuttle diplomacy, coalition building and multilateral consultations to ease tensions and avert further escalation (MOFA, 2026). This study explores the underlying reasons behind Pakistan's mediatory role in the face of serious domestic and structural limitations, the prospects of its diplomacy for improving its international status and assesses how Islamabad would implement a hedging approach in its foreign policy.

The methodology used in the research is qualitative interpretivist by method of process tracing, analyzing official statements, diplomatic communiques and international reporting. The research is based on Neorealism and Hedging Theory, which suggest that Pakistan's diplomatic activism was mainly for national security reasons and economic survival instead of moral or ethical arguments for conflict resolution. The results indicate that Pakistan was able to make use of its strategic position, ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and the United States, and its developing identity as a middle power, in becoming a credible dialogue facilitator. Although, Pakistan could not resolve the conflict but it managed to play the role of a conflict-damper and a diplomatic facilitator. The study suggests that Pakistan's mediation approach is an adaptive hedging strategy aimed at maintaining strategic autonomy, avoiding international economic disruptions and ensuring international relevance in the face of the multipolar international system.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The Iran–US–Israel 2026 crisis has become one of the most important geopolitical conflicts of the modern international system. After years of strategic competition, proxy conflict and tensions about Iran's regional presence, nuclear programme, the crisis ultimately turned into a direct confrontation involving military strikes, retaliations and rising regional tensions. The involvement of the United States alongside Israel transformed a regional conflict into an issue of global concern due to its potential impact on international security, global energy markets and maritime trade.

The crisis occurred in highly contested middle eastern/ west Asian region, known as the heart of the world economy. The Persian Gulf is a significant portion of the world's energy export and the Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important choke points in international trade. Any disruption in this area directly impacts the global oil prices, shipping and the stability of the world economy (UN, 2026). The impact of continued instability is more severe for developing countries like Pakistan, that rely on imported energy and financial flows.

Pakistan's direct export that is around \$1.5 to \$2 billion to GCC Countries is at stake due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and because of this crisis Pakistan's imports from the GCC countries, predominantly energy, could drop by \$3 billion. If the crisis persists then it could destabilize Pakistan's local production and global exports. This crisis will also increase Pakistan's import bill by \$4.5 billion and will eventually increase Pakistan's current account deficit and external debt (Shah & Islam, 2026).

In this rapidly changing security scenario, Pakistan adopted a diplomatic approach which aimed to strike a balance between different interests, and called for de-escalation (MOFA, 2026). Pakistan tried to establish a rapport with all major actors, unlike many other regional players who openly took sides. Islamabad approached Iran via diplomatic avenues, worked closely with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations, kept in touch with Washington and maintained ongoing strategic ties with China. This was a multi-directional interaction and an attempt to maintain regional peace and stability in the interest of Pakistan.

Pakistan's involvement in the crisis is particularly remarkable due to its geopolitical location. Pakistan shares a long border with Iran, has a strong security and trade relationship with Saudi Arabia, and a strategic partnership with China, and functional relations with the United States which places it in a unique position in the regional diplomatic arena. These interwoven connections allowed Islamabad to serve as a middleman between actors that had limited interaction and opposing geopolitical interests.

In the past as well, Pakistan has served as a mediator in regional and international affairs time and again. This includes its role in facilitating a secret diplomatic exchange between the United States and China in the early 1970s, peace negotiations with Afghanistan and in the promotion of regional and political reconciliation in the Muslim world. The 2026 crisis, therefore, has given yet another opportunity to Pakistan to revive its diplomatic relevance and reinforce its traditional role as a strategic mediator, with a new twist to suit the modern geopolitical landscape.

The crisis also came at a juncture when Pakistan was trying to change its image on the international stage. In the wake of the India-Pakistan standoff in 2025 and in the context of emerging multipolarity, Islamabad wanted to present itself as a responsible middle power with a role to play in global peace and stability of the region. Pakistan's diplomatic campaign is therefore, not only driven by external reasons but also to cope up with the internal security dynamics and economic concerns.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What factors motivated Pakistan to become a crisis mediator despite significant handicaps?
- How did Pakistan operationalize its hedging strategy during the Iran–US–Israel crisis?
- To what extent did Pakistan's diplomatic campaign enhance its international standing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the research conducted by Mohammed Alkhafaji, it is noted that Pakistan became an active mediator between the United States and Iran due to the heightened tensions and the failure of the traditional diplomatic approach. Pakistan's shuttle diplomacy efforts and confidence-building measures helped to bring both countries together for dialogue and peace-building efforts. It was motivated by domestic security and economic weakness, energy needs, and a desire to strengthen regional influence. Pakistan played a key role in establishing a temporary ceasefire, reopening communication and facilitating direct peace talks in Islamabad. The Pakistani failure to impose final settlements did not stop it from showing a change of attitude towards proactive diplomacy and regional crisis management (Alkhafaji, 2026).

The study examines the role of Pakistan in the US-Iran relations during the period of heightened tensions in the Middle East in the context of the developing mediator role of Pakistan. With ongoing distrust and strategic competition between both Washington and Tehran, Pakistan has been working to defuse the situation through neutral and proactive diplomacy. The study concludes with the findings that Pakistan adopted shuttle diplomacy, arranged negotiations and supported back-channel communication with the help of regional actors like Türkiye and Egypt, using qualitative analysis of policy developments, diplomatic initiatives and secondary sources. Its equitable attitude towards both nations added to its credibility. But it is hampered by its lack of leverage and by some longstanding geopolitical issues. In conclusion, Pakistan's mediation efforts highlight the practice of strategic diplomacy and the rising significance of middle power diplomacy (Mir & Ayub, 2026).

This study is about the use of soft power in the modern diplomacy particularly in case of Pakistan. It contends that soft power, or the power of attraction, cultural influence, public diplomacy and ideas, is becoming a more significant factor in foreign policy. This study analyzes the soft power assets of Pakistan such as its diaspora, cultural heritage, sports, and diplomacy and their impact on Pakistan's image overseas. The study is qualitative in nature and highlights the success and failures in Pakistan's soft power strategy. It suggests that strengthening and using soft power in consistent manner can boost Pakistan's reputation in the international arena, its influence and its long-term foreign policy goals (Sohoo, Asghar, & Husna, 2026).

Another study analyzes the role of Pakistan as a middle power mediator between the United States and Iran in the ongoing rivalry between them in between 2015-2026. Based on mediation theory and middle power diplomacy, it finds that Pakistan's influence is not in terms of material power but rather in terms of its balance between Washington and Tehran. Pakistan's role is mainly to act as a backchannel, for crisis management and de-escalation rather than for the resolution of fundamental issues like nuclear policy and the imposition of sanctions. Its strategic position and diplomatic access adds to its utility but its structural asymmetries, economic limitations and lack of leverage are its constraints. The study ends with a conclusion that Pakistan is a typical case of the emerging role of middle powers in informal diplomacy in the management of complex international conflicts (Lasani, 2026).

Looking at Pakistan's strategic mediation in the United States-Iran conflict, this study views it on the basis of diplomacy, ceasefire politics, and crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. It examines Pakistan's approach

towards balancing its policy to ease tensions, aid ceasefire processes and maintain maritime security in the Persian Gulf. The findings indicate that bilateral diplomacy was a significant component of mediation, and ceasefire support and oil supply risks were significant factors in regional geopolitics. The findings show that the regionality dialogue has improved, tensions have decreased and Pakistan's status as a middle power mediator in the crisis has enhanced. Overall, the research finds that Pakistan's mediation had a positive impact on communication, de-escalation and the significance of regional diplomacy in the international arena (Shoaib, Abro, Hussain, & Ayaz, 2026).

Since the Arab Spring, Pakistan's involvement in Middle East politics has grown and it has emerged as a judicious mediator and a strategic security ally. It harmonizes the interests of defense cooperation, economic development and diplomatic neutrality, and involves important regional players, including Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE. Pakistan's foreign policy has been a continuity in the changing geopolitics, rooted in the historical links built on the basis of Cold War alliances and Afghanistan related linkages. It has sought neutrality in conflicts such as those in Yemen, beefed-up defence ties with Gulf countries and handled energy related interaction with Iran. In summary, Pakistan is a pragmatic power that plays a stabilizing role in the region through careful diplomacy and strategic positioning (Naeem, Liaqat, & Mustafa, 2026).

In the context of a changing Asian geopolitical landscape of waning unipolarity and emerging pluricentric power systems, this article explores the changing dynamics of Pakistan's role as a balancing middle power. It claims Pakistan has adopted a flexible policy of balancing its relations with the big powers, especially the US and China, and enhancing its engagement with the Gulf countries. With economic fragility and asymmetrical dependencies Pakistan resorts to "strategic waffling" and economic statecraft to maintain autonomy and relevance. Its limited but flexible foreign policy, driven by regional rivalries and global realignments, is highlighted. Finally, it argues that Pakistan's stance is a pragmatic and risk-managed one to play a conciliatory and stabilizing role in a more divided international order (Shahid & Bashir, 2026).

Pakistan's attempts to be a neutral broker in US-Iran relations are a result of the growing tensions between Washington and Tehran in the region that is threatening to jeopardize the stability of the region. It adopts shuttle diplomacy, organizes back-channel communication in cooperation with regional actors Türkiye and Egypt to lower the risk of conflict and facilitate dialogue. Pakistan's credibility is built on its relationship with the US and Iran, which allows for some limited, but significant, mediation efforts. Limited influence, geopolitical tensions, and structural constraints limit its effectiveness, even in the midst of a vigorous diplomatic balancing act. The study concludes that the role of Pakistan in the region highlights middle-power diplomacy for regional peace and to strengthen its strategic role (Mir, Faiza; Ayub, Muhammad, 2026).

It analyses the use of mediation by emerging middle powers in an increasingly fragmented international system, specifically in the case of Turkey and Indonesia during the Russia–Ukraine war, and proposes to critique the traditional theory of middle power leadership–followership. It asserts that uncertainty and

status seeking are systemic and drive mediation, in addition to domestic political and economic pressures. Middle powers are the builders of bridges to achieve international recognition and domestic legitimacy. Mediation is a low cost, high visibility approach to the hedges between great powers. Different outcomes are illustrated in Turkey and Indonesia, ranging from substantive deals to the symbolic diplomacy. In sum, the article rethinks the notion of the middle power agency in a world of global fragmentation and changing world order (Süsler & Alden, 2026).

Exploring the process of upward status, this study analyzes the mobility of emerging middle powers in a hierarchy of great powers. It introduces the notion of the Emerging-Power Trap (EPT), a system in which formal and informal norms and institutions influence the distribution of recognition opportunities for emerging powers. The authors draw on theories of social constructivism and stigmatization to demonstrate how great powers shape the status-seeking strategies of emerging actors, yet also provide them with some agency. The study takes an empirical approach to the nuclear trajectory of India and the rise of BRICS, both individually and collectively. In general, it is an account of the ways in which status competition and hierarchy shape the politics of contemporary middle powers (Lopes, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study is qualitative in nature, which is based on the interpretivist tradition in the study of international relations. This method considers that foreign policy is not only the product of objective material conditions but also perceptions, narratives and strategic interpretations. The study thus concentrates on the perception of the crisis environment and the responses of the leadership and the diplomatic institutions of Pakistan..

Research Approach

This study follows a case study methodology with a focus on Pakistan's foreign policy efforts in the crisis between Iran, the United States and Israel in 2026. Case study method allows to examine a complex geopolitical phenomenon in a certain historical context in detail. Process tracing is also used in the research to determine the sequence of events, decisions and diplomatic efforts that influenced Pakistan's response. By this means, the study aims to draw links between structural factors, policy options, and diplomatic consequences.

Data Collection

The research relies on both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include official statements and diplomatic communiqués issued by:

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan
- President of the United States

- Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- United Nations

These sources provide direct evidence regarding official policy positions, diplomatic engagements and strategic objectives.

Secondary sources include reports and analyses produced by:

- Chatham House
- Reuters
- Associated Press
- Al Jazeera English
- Arab News
- Dawn News
- New York Post

These materials provide contextual understanding and independent assessments of regional developments.

Process Tracing

Process tracing is employed to narrate the chronological development of Pakistan's diplomatic campaign. This method facilitates the identification of key events and policy decisions that influenced Islamabad's behavior during the crisis.

The analysis focuses on:

- Diplomatic consultations
- High-level visits
- Telephone diplomacy
- Multilateral initiatives
- Shuttle diplomacy efforts

By tracing these developments over time, the study identifies the mechanisms through which Pakistan attempted to influence crisis dynamics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neorealism

One of the most apt theoretical frameworks through which Pakistan's diplomatic actions in the Iran–US–Israel crisis of 2026 can be explained is the approach of neorealism. Neorealism is a theory developed by Kenneth Waltz which states that the international system is anarchic and that this makes it imperative for states to focus on survival and security over any other goal. There is no central authority able to ensure security, and states must implement self-help measures and continually evaluate their threat coming from the outside world. In this context, foreign policy is not determined first and foremost on an ideological or moral basis but rather on the basis of calculations of national interest and strategic necessity.

The Iran–US–Israel crisis created a very volatile regional scenario for Pakistan with the risk of escalation, which was harmful to national security and economy. Thus, Pakistan can be seen as an active player in international politics not as a peace mission but as a rational reaction to the structural pressures created by an anarchic international system. The state's mediation, facilitation and de-escalation was tied to its own survival interests.

With Pakistan facing a possible escalation of the conflict across the region, the possibility of economic recovery was jeopardized and security spillovers were a risk along with the disruption of vital trade routes. In such a situation, diplomacy was a way of survival. Pakistan's mediation, therefore, served as a preventive security measure to minimise the chances of regional destabilisation. Islamabad was trying to influence the regional climate by diplomacy as opposed to waiting for the impact of war on its national interests.

Significance in Pakistan's Mediation Policy

Pakistan's diplomatic efforts are in line with what is expected in neorealism. Islamabad did not only mediate on the basis of mere ideology but, mediation was developed as a strategic tool to serve the national interest (Shahid & Hayat, 2026). Escalation loomed on Pakistan's western border, endangering maritime trade routes and jeopardizing the fragile economic recovery programme supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The official statements of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeatedly spoke of "regional stability, restraint and de-escalation (MOFA, 2026). This discourse was not a normative commitment, but about national security. Thus, from a neorealist point of view, Pakistan's mediation was a sensible move for maintaining stability in its near geo-strategic neighbourhood.

Hedging Theory

While Neorealism explains why Pakistan sought stability, Hedging Theory explains how Pakistan pursued its diplomatic objectives. In the field of international relations, hedging is a key concept in the current literature, especially in areas with uncertainty and multiple power centres.

Concept of Strategic Hedging

Strategic hedging is a foreign policy approach in which countries pursue multiple relations with several competing actors to diminish risks and enhance opportunities. Hedging is not about making exclusive alliances, but about being flexible, diversifying and being ambiguous.

The Iran–US–Israel crisis was just the kind of uncertainty that Pakistan found attractive for engaging in hedging. Such alignment with Iran might have hurt relations with Saudi Arabia and the US. On the other hand, overt backing of Washington or Riyadh might have jeopardized ties with Tehran and given birth to domestic political backlash. Islamabad thus followed a policy to ensure communication and cooperation with all stakeholders.

Relevance to Pakistan's relations with the United States and Iran and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan's ties with the United States continue to be vital in regard to security cooperation, counterterrorism and international financial support. But at the same time, Pakistan's geographical proximity with Iran via Goldsmit Line border, makes it a strong reason to have good relations with Tehran. In addition, Saudi Arabia is playing a pivotal role in the economic and strategic calculations of Pakistan as millions of Pakistani workers are residing in the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia is also providing financial aid and investment flows to Pakistan.

All of these relationships are important at the same time, making hedging an appealing option. Pakistan will have to pay a high price if it turns hostile towards any of these actors. Therefore, in the crisis, diplomatic flexibility was a must, not an option.

Pakistan's Mediation Process in the 2026 Iran-Israel–US Crisis: A Chronological Review of Pakistan's role.

The launching of Pakistan's Diplomatic Initiative (March 2026):

After the Iran–US–Israel confrontation broke out in late February 2026, Pakistan was seen as an honest broker to keep all three parties in touch. Islamabad officially stated on 24 March 2026 that it is ready to take part in talks between Washington and Tehran (MOFA, 2026). Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, with the assistance of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar, started discussions with regional partners such as Türkiye, Egypt and Gulf countries for the formation of a diplomatic channel (AlJazeera, 2026).

Sustaining Backchannel Contacts (Late March - Early April 2026):

Pakistan kept sending proposals and messages from Tehran to Washington while the tensions mounted and military threats grew. In spite of the rising tensions and negative rhetoric from both sides, Islamabad publicly reiterated its willingness to mediate on 2 April. Foreign Office officials pointed out that Pakistan was looking for de-escalation and not alignment with any bloc (MOFA, 2026).

Ceasefire Diplomacy and the April Breakthrough (8-10 April 2026):

A significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy took place when it played a key role in facilitating the initial ceasefire talks between Iran (PID, 2026) and the United States on 8 April. Both sides agreed to stop the violence, while Pakistan also called for restraint from Israel and regional actors, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said. However, there were differences on the nature of the ceasefire, but it did not seem to escalate further, and provided conditions for direct discussions (AlJazeera, 2026).

The Islamabad Peace Talks (11–12 April 2026):

The following day on 11-12 April 2026, Pakistan hosted the “Islamabad Talks”. These talks covered the issue of the ceasefire's stability, the reopening of communications and the setting up of a framework for further peace negotiations. Pakistan was not a party to the negotiations but acted as a moderator and facilitator. The talks boosted Islamabad's status as a neutral party respected by both Washington and Tehran (MOFA, 2026).

Managing negotiations during renewed tensions (April – May 2026):

Pakistan continued diplomatic efforts throughout the month of April and May. Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar continued to meet with Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, and American interlocutors. Pakistan closely coordinated with Qatar, Egypt and Türkiye and shared updated proposals and confidence building measures. Regional security, sanctions and nuclear issues were not affected as Islamabad maintained the negotiation process despite periodic military incidents and disagreements (MOFA, 2026).

Final Negotiations and Draft Agreement (June 2026):

By the beginning of June, Pakistan became the main player in the peace process. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said on 8 June that Israel would “hold fire” after diplomatic efforts by the United States and regional mediators (Caitlin Doornbos, 2026). Meanwhile, Pakistan ramped up talks with Tehran and Washington (Reuters, 2026).

Agreement on Final Text (12–14 June 2026):

On 13 June, PM Shehbaz Sharif announced the final draft of a peace accord had been agreed between the United States and Iran and the two countries were ready for electronic signing (Reuters, 2026). The agreement proposed a 60-day period for nuclear talks, a process with a series of phases for easing sanctions, the re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz and a re-start of technical discussions (Dawn, 2026). Along with Qatar, Egypt and Türkiye, Pakistan was recognized as an important mediator in the process.

Conclusion

Pakistan became the pivot between Iran and the US and Israel between March and June 2026. With relentless backchannel diplomacy, the Islamabad Talks and on-going efforts by Shehbaz Sharif and Ishaq Dar, Pakistan has been instrumental in reaching a ceasefire and in moving towards a negotiated settlement framework.

Major chronological events of Pakistan's mediation process:

Below is a detailed chronological timeline of diplomatic steps taken by Pakistan in form of a table:

Date / period	Major events	Pakistan's mediatory step	Sources
Late March 2026	Pakistan begins backchannel diplomacy	Islamabad started relaying messages between the United States and Iran through diplomatic channels.	(Dawn, 2026)
March 23–24, 2026	Pakistan offers itself as a venue	Pakistan formally signaled readiness to host or facilitate US–Iran negotiations in Islamabad.	(NewYorkTimes, 2026)
March 29–30, 2026	Islamabad hosts multilateral consultations	Foreign ministers from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey met in Islamabad to explore de-escalation pathways.	(Dawn, 2026)
End of March 2026	Regional framework is developed	Pakistan, with partners, helped shape a five-point / joint de-escalation initiative calling for ceasefire and negotiations.	(Dawn, 2026)
Early April 2026	Pakistan intensifies shuttle diplomacy	Pakistani officials continued relaying messages and coordinating with leaders in Washington, Tehran, and regional capitals.	(Dawn, 2026)
April 2, 2026	Pakistan says it will continue mediation	Islamabad publicly stated that it would continue mediation despite obstacles and pressure.	(AlJazeera, 2026)
April 5–6, 2026	Ceasefire framework is circulated	Pakistan and partners pushed a ceasefire plan and a window for structured negotiations.	(Dawn, 2026)
April 7, 2026	Two-week ceasefire announced	Washington and Tehran accepted a temporary ceasefire, with Pakistan widely described as central to the mediation effort.	(Dawn, 2026)
April 8–10, 2026	Islamabad invited to host talks	Pakistan announced that delegations from the US and Iran would meet in Islamabad for follow-up negotiations.	(Dawn, 2026)
April 11–12, 2026	Islamabad talks begin	US and Iranian negotiators held direct or proximity talks in Islamabad under Pakistan's facilitation.	(Dawn, 2026)
Mid-April 2026	Pakistan keeps diplomacy alive	Even after initial deadlock, Pakistan continued efforts to sustain dialogue and arrange further contact.	(TheDiplomat, 2026)

EXPLAINING PAKISTAN'S EMERGENCE AS A CRISIS MEDIATOR

Overview of the 2026 Iran–Israel–US Crisis

The Iran–Israel–US crisis of 2026 is one of the most perilous periods of regional turmoil in recent years. Reduced military contacts, counterattacks and increased foreign intervention caused concern over a wider regional conflict. But the crisis had larger repercussions, not just for security but for the energy market and international trade on maritime routes and economic stability in the Middle East and South Asia.

The strategic importance of the crisis is primarily marked by the proximity to important energy facilities and shipping lanes. One-fifth of the world's traded petroleum passes through the Strait of Hormuz (EIA, 2023), making it a point of international concern. Disruptions to this corridor could lead to major price increases for oil and have a negative impact on global supply chains. It was a serious threat to the economic stability of Pakistan, which is very much reliant on imported energy resources.

In this context, Islamabad started to focus on diplomacy and dialogue more and more. The Pakistani government's official releases reiterated the call for peace, peaceful solution and observance of international law (MOFA, 2026). Pakistan was not able to settle the issue but wanted to defuse the situation by engaging in diplomacy and multilateral coordination.

Geopolitical Leverage post Indo-Pak 2025 Standoff:

Pakistan's role in promoting dialogue in the 2026 Iran-USA standoff had its genesis in the geopolitical shift which occurred after the 2025 Indo-Pakistan confrontation. The brief war highlighted Pakistan's military capability and its effective deterrence strategy. Islamabad's strategy was not to seek maximalist goals but to be both a credible deterrent and a modestly restrained actor, winning the trust of major powers and regional actors. The crisis brought Pakistan to the fore in Washington's regional equations and its longstanding relationships with Tehran and the Gulf partners and its close ties with China. This special skill of being able to communicate with competing blocs put Pakistan in a unique position to help Iran and the US, communicate when it was politically difficult. The mediation effort, therefore, was far from being a one-off diplomatic triumph, but a result of the leverage, trust, and diplomatic capital that Pakistan had built up after the 2025 standoff, which gave it a far greater diplomatic confidence, leading to the change of the security posture from being reactive to more proactive in the diplomatic arena.

Geostrategic Position

Pakistan's presence as a diplomatic player was tied to its geostrategic position of being at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan shares a border of 900 kilometres with Iran and thus had an interest in regional stability. At the same time, it has strong economic and security relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which allowed it to communicate with various parties in the crisis. Islamabad's interest was further heightened by the strategic significance of the CPEC, as any escalation in the region may pose a threat to its domestic security and connectivity projects that connect China with the Arabian Sea.

Security Motivations

One of the primary reasons for Pakistan's diplomatic efforts was its security concerns. The Saudi-Pakistan Mutual Defense Agreement created pressure from Riyadh on Islamabad to take a firm position in the conflict (AlJazeera, 2026), which Islamabad could not have afforded. Hence, taking a neutral mediatory role became a source of face saving for Pakistan, saving it from enraging Saudi Arabia while also not offending Iran or US. As crisis with Iran could spark border tensions, a refugee exodus, smuggling, and militancy in the western border. The growing threat of proxy wars in neighbouring areas also rose a cause for concern for policymakers, as Middle East wars have historically affected South Asia. These concerns were further bolstered by maritime security concerns, with Pakistan being highly reliant on trade routes through the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea. Diplomacy is therefore, a preventive security mechanism as any disruption may impact on energy supplies, shipping costs and economic activity.

Economic Motivations

Economy was also a factor of motivation behind Pakistan's mediation efforts. The fragile economic recovery of Pakistan was reliant on external funds, energy imports and remittance inflows at the time. The country depends on imports for most of its petroleum needs, and any disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, could have led to higher energy prices and inflation.

Pakistan also relies heavily on remittances from the Gulf countries, especially from Saudi Arabia and UAE where millions of Pakistanis were working (Jahanzaib & Khan, 2025). Regional instability may affect labour markets, lead to less remittances and affect foreign exchange reserves. Furthermore, there was a risk of conflict impacting trade, foreign investment and connectivity programmes, which could hinder economic reforms and investment frameworks like the SIFC. The prospect of higher energy costs and disruptions to trade also threaten IMF stabilization goals. As a result, Pakistan's foreign policy was more about economic self-preservation than regional peace, highlighting the growing intertwining of foreign policy and economic security (ChathamHouse, 2026).

Diplomatic Motivations

Pakistan's mediation efforts were also influenced by its general diplomatic goals. Islamabad wanted to present itself as a positive figure that can help in the region's stability and make its presence more legitimate internationally (AlJazeera, 2026). By engaging actively with the world, Pakistan was able to challenge the negative image of its security problems and political uncertainty and to project responsible state behaviour.

It was also an opportunity to build more diplomatic relevance in a multipolar world like Qatar, Oman and Türkiye did during the crisis. Pakistan is one of the largest Muslim majority nations, and the sole nuclear-armed Muslim state, and was also seeking to show leadership through dialogue and de-escalation processes, such as participation in the OIC.

Assessment

The above evidences are the findings of the first question of the Research Question which is: Pakistan became a mediator due to the interplay of geopolitical, security, economic and diplomatic considerations. Being at the heart of the South Asian, Middle Eastern and Gulf region, it provided chances and opportunities for engagement. The potential for regional spillover, border insecurity, maritime disruptions, and the need for preventative diplomacy were fueled by security concerns, and reliance on imported energy, remittances, and economic stability reinforced the incentives for de-escalation.

Meanwhile, Pakistan saw mediation as a way to increase its international profile, diplomatic significance and its reputation as a responsible player. Nevertheless, due to its economic weaknesses, political instability, limited capabilities and lack of influence on the warring parties, it was not able to influence the outcomes. Thus, Pakistan has acted as a facilitator and a diplomatic bridge as a peace broker, rather than a decisive one.

In the final analysis, Pakistan's diplomacy was more based on the interests of the country rather than on the principles of peace. Although Islamabad has a lot to lose, in both the Neorealist and Hedging Theory models, security concerns and economic necessity/strategic interest can be used to explain Islamabad's active mediation role.

OPERATIONALIZATION OF PAKISTAN'S HEDGING STRATEGY

Hedging policy in Pakistan during the crisis

Foreign policy hedging was put into practice by Pakistan in the Iran-USA- Israel crisis of 2026 (Dawn, 2026). Islamabad did not identify with any single party, instead it wanted to keep its strategic options open and have good relations with several competing players. In accordance with Hedging Theory, Pakistan highlighted de-escalation, dialogue and peaceful means to resolve the issue, and reached out to Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, China, Türkiye and other regional actors. The strategy was based on three pillars: keeping communication with all major players, engaging in multilateral diplomacy through the United Nations or Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and not taking policy stances that would harm important relationships. Pakistan's diplomacy was characterized by active facilitation as opposed to neutrality which meant disengagement.

Pakistan–United States Relations

One of the key aspects of Pakistan's hedging strategy was the relationship with the United States. Regional security, counterterrorism and economic cooperation were shared interests by both countries despite historical differences. In the crisis, there was no rhetoric against the United States and everything was done to de-escalate, uphold international law, and diplomacy. The United States still played an important role due to its influence in institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. It was thus that maintaining constructive relations was a function of broader

economic goals. Islamabad, meanwhile, had not pledged full support for American policies and always emphasized "restraint". This combination of cooperation and independence was the essence of hedging and helped Pakistan to maintain strategic autonomy while keeping stable relationship with Washington.

Pakistan–Iran Relations

The other important aspect of Pakistan's hedging policy was the relationship with Iran. Geographical proximity, border security issues and potential for economic cooperation made it essential to have a stable relationship with Tehran. In the crisis Islamabad played up the issue of respecting Iranian sovereignty and expressed concern on military escalation. Religious, cultural and historical ties also shaped bilateral ties. Pakistan has tried to assure Iran that it would not be at Tehran's expense in its dealings with Saudi Arabia and the United States. Policymakers were also aware of the benefits of increased trade and energy cooperation in the longer term. Addressing Iranian concerns involved balancing delicately and illustrated the reality of hedging skills.

Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Relations

Saudi Arabia plays a key role in Pakistan's foreign policy due to its financial support, investments, employment opportunities for Pakistanis, and historical security ties. Millions of Pakistani citizens living in the Kingdom are contributing to Pakistan's economy through remittance and Saudi financial assistance has helped Islamabad in many instances to overcome economic hurdles. These ties were reinforced by the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) signed in September 2025, under which aggression against one, would be seen as aggression against both, further strengthening their security ties and commitment to regional stability. This agreement enhanced Pakistan's strategic presence in the Gulf affairs during the 2026 US-Iran- Israel crisis and gave its firm motivation to avoid any further escalation which may directly impact the security of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Islamabad did not want to take any chances of advocating a Saudi viewpoint while continuing to communicate with Riyadh. Although Pakistan was aware of the potential for overt partisanship to affect the peace process with neighbour Iran and its credibility as a mediator. This was in keeping with the overall policy of hedging that Pakistan was following, keeping both Saudi Arabia and maintaining adequate diplomatic leverage for dialogue with competing regional powers and for conflict resolution efforts.

Hedging Through Multi-Alignment

Multi-alignment was one of the hallmarks of Pakistan's policy. Islamabad did not depend on any structure of alliances; instead, it built a number of alliances despite the rivalries among them. Pakistan continued to have good relations with Iran and its ties have been further strengthened with Saudi Arabia, continued to have good strategic ties with China, and coordinated diplomatically with other regional countries such as Türkiye, Egypt, Qatar, etc. with the United States. This was a multi-lateral diplomatic approach that allowed Pakistan to increase their space for maneuver in diplomacy (AlJazeera, 2026).

Islamabad Talks and Shuttle Diplomacy as Tool of Hedging

One of the most overt expressions of Pakistan's hedging policy was through diplomatic facilitation and shuttle diplomacy. Islamabad was not a formal mediator, but rather served as a communication facilitator between competing players. Pakistan tried to maintain dialogue and provide opportunities for de-escalation through bilateral consultations, multilateral meetings, and ongoing diplomatic outreach (MOFA, 2026). This was the from the experience of Pakistan's past foreign policy that had made it possible to communicate among rival states. It was not a matter of material power but of credibility, access and trust, and diplomatic connectivity.

Assessment

This part addresses Research Question Two by establishing that Pakistan adopted a hedging approach to its foreign policy by engaging with multiple actors at the same time, not aligning with just one, and adopting a proactive diplomatic facilitation stance. Islamabad had good relationship with United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China and other regional powers, which enabled it to retain strategic autonomy and not get caught up in the rival geopolitical camps. The results suggest that Pakistan's policy was not traditional neutrality but rather was active hedging through communication, multi-alignment and coalition building. This crisis demonstrates the need to be flexible, diversified and diplomatic in the face of geopolitical uncertainty, and shows the increasing importance of strategic hedging in a multipolar international system.

PAKISTAN'S DIPLOMATIC CAMPAIGN AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL STANDING

Pakistan's Diplomatic Campaign

On February 28, 2026, Pakistan made its first formal offer to mediate with Iran following the US-Iran strikes, on March 24, 2026. PM Shehbaz Sharif stated that Pakistan is ready to assist in talks between Washington and Tehran, calling for dialogue rather than military action. Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar said Pakistan will "continue mediation irrespective of challenges" and asked for de-escalation without joining any bloc (AlJazeera, 2026).

On March 29, 2026, Pakistan had a four-nation diplomatic initiative with Egypt, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to put the groundwork in place for de-escalation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs made statements through the spokesperson of the ministry Tahir Andrabi to explain Pakistan's neutral intermediary role. On 8th April 2026, Pakistan arranged a ceasefire agreement and on April 11-12, 2026, hosted the Islamabad Talks in Serena Hotel (MOFA, 2026).

International Responses

United States: President Donald Trump publicly backed Pakistan's mediating efforts, saying: "No, they're great. I think the Pakistanis have been great". Trump applauded Pakistan's leadership, describing Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir as "very extraordinary men" who have been "kind and very competent" in holding Islamabad talks (ArabNews, 2026).

Iran: Iranian President reiterated PM Shehbaz Sharif's pledge that "Pakistan would continue to play a constructive role for bringing peace" (PID, 2026).

Saudi Arabia: Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal stated that "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia agreed to continue to coordinate their positions closely in order to secure peace and stability in the region" (PID, 2026).

China: China strongly supported Pakistan's approach stating it "closely matched Beijing's principles of non-interference and peaceful resolution" which is in line with the principles of non-interference with CPEC framework (ICC, 2026).

OIC/UN: Pakistan got platforms to project its diplomatic position on the international stage.

Effect on Pakistan's Global Positioning

Pakistan's diplomatic efforts boosted its credibility with tangible crisis management skills. Foreign policy recalibration was announced by Deputy PM Ishaq Dar as Pakistan's "expanding engagement across Middle East, Central Asia and ASEAN". The Guardian termed Pakistan's achievement of the ceasefire as "the biggest diplomatic victory in years" (The Guardian, 2026) .

According to TRT World, Pakistan is also playing a pivotal role as a 'key mediator' to end the US-Israel war over Iran (TRT, 2026). Chatham House viewed Pakistan's mediatory efforts as a pragmatic diplomatic achievement (ChathamHouse, 2026).

The Nation highlighted Pakistan as "primary conduit for indirect talks between United States and Iran" while highlighting "restored trust in our diplomatic apparatus" (Nation, 2026). Pakistan's strategic significance was due to its geographical location and its capacity to maintain a balance of action against two or more than two actors at the same time.

Restrictions on Diplomatic Success

While Pakistan made progress, it was evident that there were certain constraints:

- **Non-binding mediation:** Pakistan acted as "mediators, not guarantors".
- **Financial limitations:** Pakistan did not have the funds to provide incentives similar to those of big mediators such as Qatar or Oman.
- **Structural constraints:** Deep strategic rivalries and ideological tensions were not under the control of Pakistan.

Assessment

Pakistan's diplomatic efforts saw qualified improvement in its diplomatic credibility, strategic relevance and global visibility. On June 13, 2026, PM Shehbaz Sharif announced that the text of the final peace agreement between the US and Iran has been agreed upon with e-signing within 24 hours. Gains were

relative, however long-term influence was limited by structural constraints, economic concerns and limitations of the material capabilities. Pakistan had some degree of success in diplomacy as it had enhanced its image as a responsible middle power and proved itself as a useful instrument of diplomacy in a wider geopolitical context. The crisis has put Pakistan in a new role as a diplomatic bridge builder.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Major Findings

According to the study, Pakistan's diplomatic activism in the crisis of the Third Gulf War started on 28 February 2026, was not motivated by the moral idealism but majorly by its national interest. The mediation efforts were driven by security concerns over the potential for spillover effects across the 900 km-long Iran-Pakistan border, vulnerabilities related to energy supply and remittance inflows from the Gulf states (USD 18.2 billion from July 2025 – April 2026 FY26, as per (SBP, 2026), and geopolitical positioning. On March 24, 2026, PM Shehbaz Sharif made an official mediation offer, stating that Pakistan was “honored and prepared to hold significant and substantive talks for a comprehensive solution” (NewYorkPost, 2026) . Diplomatic efforts to improve international reputations bolstered engagement even more.

Pakistan's diplomatic efforts enhanced its credibility, strategic value and soft power, but could not gain a complete shift in its geopolitical status. Its hedging policy was implemented through multi-alignment, keeping itself engaged with competing powers, yet keeping its autonomy. This entailed cooperation with the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, Türkiye, and Qatar without exclusive alignment, which aligns with the Neorealism and Hedging Theory.

Conclusion

The crisis illustrates that the foreign policy of Pakistan can be best explained by Neorealism and Hedging Theory. Neorealism provides an explanation for its behaviour as a reaction to the pressure of survival in an anarchic system and Hedging Theory provides an explanation for its strategy of flexibility and diversification. Pakistan was a facilitator not a power broker, and used diplomacy as a tool of influence within structural limitations. The endorsement by President Trump that ‘Pakistanis have been great’ and ‘very extraordinary men,’ for PM Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshall Asim Munir respectively, validated Pakistan's role as a credible intermediary (ArabNews, 2026).

The Islamabad Talks (April 11-12, 2026) brought first-ever in-person agreement between American and Iranian officials since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and established Pakistan as "essential international peace broker". The ceasefire of April 8, 2026, for two weeks showed the effectiveness of the middle power diplomacy.

The case represents an overall trend in which middle powers are more likely to use connectivity and diplomacy than material power. But the constraints of structure (IMF conditions, financial limitations)

restricted Pakistan's agency, furthering the boundaries of middle power agency. Leverage was limited by the IMF warning (EnergyUpdate, 2026) on Pakistan's reliance on the Gulf (81% fuel imports, 55% remittances from GCC).

In 2026, Pakistan's foreign policy stance and effort in the Iran-USA-ISRAEL crisis was primarily a search for survival, relevance and strategic flexibility. In the wake of security concerns and economic vulnerabilities (Energy-Remittance Double Shock) and with the help of sophisticated hedging diplomacy, Pakistan tried to avoid regional escalation as well as strengthen its international profile. Islamabad, however, showed that despite the limitations of its resources and structural problems, it was increasingly becoming important in a multipolar world to enegage through middle power diplomacy (TheDiplomat, 2026).

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan needs to institutionalize crisis diplomacy, by setting up dedicated mechanism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and utilizing the framework of mediation offer of 24 March 2026. The need to diversify the economy, especially in energy and trade (decline dependency on fuel imports by GCC by 81%), is critical to mitigate external shocks. Maintaining a balance with all key great powers (US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China) and maintaining strategic independence is very important.

Embracing economic diplomacy and investment promotion should be given greater importance in keeping foreign policy objectives in line with economic resilience (CPEC, export-led growth). Public diplomacy has to be strengthened to improve the international perception and soft power of Pakistan to make its diplomatic efforts (Islamabad Talks, ceasefire facilitation) known to the world.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of caveats to be noted. First, because of the dynamic nature of the crisis in 2026, a certain degree of diplomatic happenings might not be publically reported or may be classified. Second, mediation can take the form of confidential negotiations, which are not available to researchers. Third, official statements may be a strategic communication rather than an honest signal on policy goals. Despite these drawbacks, the analysis of Pakistan's diplomatic actions during the crisis using relevant official information and process tracing is a strong tool to understand its actions.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Author Contributions: Fatima Faiz: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, analysis, and writing of the original manuscript. Dr. Samreen Bari Aamir: Supervision, conceptualization, research direction, methodological guidance, critical intellectual input, and review of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to the refinement of the research and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures



Figure 1

Legend not included with this version.

The image has been taken from the official website of Dow University of Health Sciences.