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POLICY BRIEF

Pakistan's Mediation in the US-Iran War

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Cover Images:

1. US Vice President JD Vance, President Donald Trump, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Field Marshal Asim Munir and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (right to left) meeting at the White House on September 25, 2025. Source: [White House](#)
2. Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, being received by Pakistan Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, Army Chief Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi in Islamabad on April 25, 2026. Source: [X/@MIshaqDar50](#)
3. Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia on April 16, 2026. Source: [X/@CMShehbaz](#)

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Contents

Introduction	1
Enabling Factors	2
Pakistan's Compulsions.....	3
Risks	4
How Should India View This Development?	5
Conclusion	6

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Introduction

Pakistan's emergence as an intermediary in the US-Iran war is one of the more striking diplomatic developments in the current West Asian crisis. At first glance, Islamabad appeared an unlikely candidate for such a role, particularly as its international image has often been shaped more by instability, economic fragility, and contested regional conduct, rather than by diplomatic problem-solving.

Pakistan has also spent much of its recent history on the receiving end of Washington's strategic ambivalence. Its relationship with Iran had also deteriorated, just two years ago, into an exchange of missile strikes on each other's soil. It is a Sunni-majority Islamic state with extensive defence ties to Saudi Arabia, Iran's principal regional rival. At the same time, it is fighting an undeclared war against the Afghan Taliban on its western front, while managing persistent brinkmanship with India to the east.

Yet, as the US-Iran war continued and the need for indirect communication between Washington and Tehran became more urgent, Pakistan found itself positioned not at the margins but near the centre of the diplomatic process. Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan, Reza Amiri Moghadam, publicly stated that Tehran would hold talks in Pakistan "and nowhere else" because it trusted Islamabad.¹ President Donald Trump has also regularly credited Pakistan for its role in helping sustain the current ceasefire, apart from heaping praise on its "hybrid" military-civilian leadership.

This development has not been viewed without scepticism. Much of the commentary in the Indian media has questioned Pakistan's neutrality, diplomatic weight, and credibility as an intermediary. There has also been unease in New Delhi over Pakistan's sudden prominence in a crisis in which India has significant interests. A dispassionate assessment, however, requires moving beyond reflexive scepticism to examine the convergence of geography, regional alignments, domestic pressures, and diplomatic opportunity that have made Pakistan a useful, if not ideal, intermediary.

This policy brief addresses four questions. First, what enabled Pakistan to assume the role of intermediary in a war involving the United States and Iran? Second, what compulsions pushed Islamabad into this role? Third, what risks does Pakistan face in positioning itself as a mediator? Fourth, how should India view this development?

Enabling Factors

Pakistan's role as an intermediary in the US-Iran war was enabled less by neutrality than by utility. In a fast-moving crisis where direct engagement between the United States and Iran was politically difficult, Pakistan enjoyed a rare combination of access and acceptability.

The primary enabling factor was Pakistan's access to both Washington and Tehran. At a time when direct US-Iran communication remained constrained, Islamabad offered a channel through which proposals could be conveyed, positions tested, and indirect engagement sustained. After years of mistrust between Washington and Islamabad, Pakistan's military leadership appears to have rebuilt a strong working relationship directly with the White House. Field Marshal Asim Munir has emerged as a key conduit to reach US President Donald Trump. On April 21, President Trump announced that the ceasefire with Iran was being indefinitely extended on the "request of Field Marshal Asim Munir, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif."²

Conventional diplomatic wisdom holds that Iran would not view Pakistan as impartial due to its ties with the US and Saudi Arabia. Yet, Pakistan has shown sensitivity to many of Iran's core concerns. In May 2025, Pakistan Prime Minister Sharif and Field Marshal Munir travelled to Tehran, where Sharif extended "full support for Tehran's right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes."³ Pakistan and Iran have consistently engaged in counterterrorism cooperation, frequently reaffirming their commitment to joint efforts against militancy along their shared 900-kilometre border.⁴

Pakistan was also less politically problematic for Tehran than several other possible intermediaries. The Gulf states, many of which host American bases, are embedded in the US-led security architecture and therefore stand largely disqualified. Turkey is a NATO member with its own West Asian agenda and is often seen as an assertive actor with its own regional ambitions. Beijing had an interest in de-escalation, but direct Chinese mediation would have triggered deep institutional suspicion in Washington. China officially supported Pakistan's mediation bid and the two countries also formulated a five-point peace plan, but Beijing remained outside the direct mediation process.

In this process of elimination, Pakistan emerged as more acceptable than other potential intermediaries, not because it was neutral, but because it was politically usable.

Another enabling factor was the centrality of military-led diplomacy. Pakistan's foreign and security policy remains heavily influenced by the army, and in this case, the concentration of authority around Field Marshal Munir gave Islamabad speed and

coherence of action. Prime Minister Sharif and Field Marshal Munir acted in tandem, ensuring there was no civilian-military contradiction that could undermine the credibility of its foreign policy. For both Washington and Tehran, Munir's direct involvement signalled that Pakistan's real decision-making centre was directly invested in the process.

Pakistan's Compulsions

Pakistan's mediation was not a choice made from a position of strength, but a response to a convergence of pressures that directly endangered the country. The US-Iran war threatened Pakistan's fragile economy, energy security, internal stability, Gulf interests, and external alignments.

The most immediate compulsion was economic. The war pushed oil and gas markets into turmoil and disrupted energy flows through the Gulf, forcing Islamabad into emergency conservation measures. Pakistan announced stringent nationwide austerity measures, including a four-day workweek for government offices, school closures, reduced fuel allowances for departments, and the cancellation of the Pakistan Day parade.⁵ A report by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) warns that Pakistan's exports to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries could fall by \$1.5 to \$2 billion if disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz continue. Rising oil prices could add \$4.5 billion to Pakistan's import bill, widen the current account deficit, and further strain foreign exchange reserves.⁶

Simultaneously, out of \$38.3 billion in remittances Pakistan received in 2025, nearly \$20.89 billion originated from GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. These remittances account for nearly ten per cent of Pakistan's GDP. Any sustained disruption to Gulf labour markets affects Pakistan's balance of payments, household incomes, and foreign-exchange position.

Pakistan's mediation has brought some economic relief. Saudi Arabia has transferred \$3 billion to the State Bank of Pakistan and extended a prior deposit of \$5 billion for an additional two years.⁷ Saudi Arabia has also guaranteed oil shipments to Pakistan via the Yanbu Port on the Red Sea. (The UAE, in contrast, recalled a maturing \$3.5 billion loan).

The second compulsion arose from the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SDMA) with Saudi Arabia, signed in September 2025, which confronted Pakistan with a difficult and potentially destabilising strategic choice. Addressing the Senate on March 3, three days after the war began, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar said that Pakistan had a defence pact with Saudi Arabia "and the whole world knows about it". He added that he had personally conveyed Pakistan's obligations under the pact to

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.⁸ Pakistan has also deployed fighter aircraft to Saudi Arabia under the SDMA.

However, Pakistan also does not want a destabilisation of the sensitive border with Iran, where separatist, sectarian, and militant networks have long operated across poorly governed spaces. A hostile Iran on Pakistan's western border, combined with an active conflict with the Afghan Taliban, would have left Pakistan in an extremely vulnerable situation. Mediation offered a way to demonstrate alliance solidarity to Saudi Arabia while simultaneously attempting to prevent the escalation that would have forced the treaty's invocation.

The third compulsion was domestic sectarian management. Pakistan's Shia population, the second largest in the world after Iran, has historically been a politically active constituency with strong emotional and religious ties to Tehran. The killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei led to violent protests in Karachi and other urban centres, including at the US Consulate in Karachi, leaving 35 civilians dead.

For the government, the optics of alignment with Washington against Iran carried real domestic risk. A government perceived as having facilitated, or passively accepted, the destruction of Iran's leadership risked opening sectarian fault lines that could outlast the immediate conflict. Mediation, therefore, served a dual domestic purpose. It gave the Shia constituency visible evidence that Islamabad was advocating for Iranian interests at the highest levels, while simultaneously giving the government a basis to call for restraint at home.

Risks

Pakistan's mediation role carries significant risks because Islamabad does not possess decisive leverage over either principal party. With the second round of talks between the US and Iran called off, the risks are becoming more evident.

The most immediate risk is President Trump's negotiating style. Trump's approach to the US-Iran crisis has combined threats, deadlines, abrupt reversals, public signalling, and personal diplomacy. This can generate momentum in negotiations, but it also makes the process highly unpredictable. After the first round of Islamabad talks, Trump claimed that Iran had agreed to hand over its enriched uranium holdings and said that both countries were "close" to a peace deal.⁹ Iranian officials publicly rejected the assertions. Trump has also threatened to bomb Iran "back to the Stone Ages" if it did not accept Washington's terms. Pakistan wants to stay in the good graces of an unpredictable Trump administration, but that dependency leaves it vulnerable to unilateral American actions it cannot control.

Washington's rhetoric also narrows the space within which Pakistan can credibly assure Tehran of American good faith. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian told

Prime Minister Sharif in a phone call that Tehran would not enter "imposed negotiations" under threats or blockade.¹⁰ If it appears that Pakistan is merely serving as the US's chief messenger and interlocutor, it could erode Iran's confidence in the mediation. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's recent visits to Oman and Russia suggest that Iran may no longer be relying on Pakistan as the sole bargaining channel.

There is also an inherent structural tension between the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia military alliance and Pakistan's mediation role. Invoking the SDMA, Pakistan has already deployed fighter aircraft in Saudi Arabia. If the ceasefire collapses and Iranian strikes on Saudi territory resume, the SMDA's obligations will come into play, and Pakistan will no longer be able to straddle the mediator's position and the alliance partner's position simultaneously. It then risks being pulled directly into a conflict it has sought to avoid.

There is also a domestic sectarian risk. If the ceasefire collapses and US and Israeli strikes resume, and if Iran suffers further significant losses, Pakistan's Shia community will hold its own government partly accountable as the mediator that ultimately served American strategic objectives. The failure of Pakistan's mediation role, which was partly designed to assuage the Shia community, could sharpen sectarian faultlines. Prolonged instability in Iran could also spill over into Pakistan's Balochistan province, which is already facing a heightened insurgency.

Finally, there is the long-term risk of a further consolidation of military primacy in the country's foreign policy. The US-Iran negotiation process has been closely associated with Field Marshal Munir, whose personal access to Washington and Tehran has made him the central figure in Pakistan's diplomatic effort. This reinforces an old institutional pattern in which elected leaders remain present, but the army defines the strategic direction. If the mediation is seen as successful, it will strengthen the military's claim to be Pakistan's most effective external actor. If it fails, the civilian leadership will absorb the political cost while the army continues to retain control over policy. Either way, what will outlast the current crisis is a political system with reduced civilian control and the erosion of institutional checks on the military.

How Should India View This Development?

Much of the commentary in India has been sceptical of Pakistan's mediation and defensive about why India does not want to be a broker in the conflict. There is need for cooler heads and a more clear-eyed assessment.

India's immediate interest is de-escalation, irrespective of who helps bring it about. The conflict has direct implications for India's energy security, trade flows, merchant shipping, diaspora safety, and wider regional stability. The Ministry of External Affairs has described India as a "proximate neighbour with critical stakes in the

security and stability of the region." It has also stressed the importance of unimpeded freedom of navigation and global commerce through the Strait of Hormuz.¹¹ An end to the conflict is a better outcome for India than a prolonged war in which Pakistan's mediation fails.

At the same time, New Delhi should recognise that Pakistan has derived a real diplomatic benefit from the crisis. For most of the past two decades, India has occupied a position of advantage in Washington, being seen as a responsible, democratic, economically dynamic partner, while Pakistan was viewed with a mixture of periodic utility and lingering suspicion. Pakistan's mediation role and direct access to the White House have enabled it to create diplomatic space for itself in the Trump administration's highest decision-making circle.

It could be stated that the fundamentals of the US-India relationship rest on a far broader and deeper foundation than any single issue. However, the past year has seen a very public US estrangement from India, including the imposition of 50% tariffs and sharp rhetoric from US administration officials. This suggests that India's assumption of a permanent structural advantage in Washington's South Asia policy may need to be recalibrated.

India should also avoid overstating the extent of Pakistan's achievements and distinguish between Pakistan's visibility and its leverage. Visibility has clearly increased. President Trump's public references to Pakistan and Iran's acknowledgements of Islamabad's role have given Pakistan diplomatic recognition. However, Pakistan does not have the leverage to shape outcomes, impose costs, or guarantee compliance. Its role, therefore, remains limited and vulnerable.

India should focus on its own material interests and diplomatic visibility by intensifying engagement with the US, Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and other Gulf partners on maritime security, energy stability, and protection of the Indian diaspora. This would well align with India's stated concerns about ending the war and ensuring freedom of navigation. India should also protect its strategic equities in Iran, including connectivity and access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, without allowing Pakistan's mediation narrative to become the dominant lens through which India views the ongoing crisis.

Conclusion

Pakistan's role in the US-Iran war reflects an unusual convergence of utility, compulsion and opportunity. Islamabad's relevance emerged from its access to Washington, a working relationship with Tehran, the absence of more credible alternatives, and a strong economic and security incentive to prevent escalation of the US-Iran war. Yet, these same conditions also expose the fragility of its position. If the

ceasefire collapses, Pakistan risks being blamed by Tehran, pressured by Washington, constrained by its defence commitments to Saudi Arabia, and exposed to renewed sectarian and border instability at home.

For India, the development calls for a clear-eyed assessment, separating optics from outcomes. Pakistan's visibility is real, but its leverage is limited. De-escalation serves India's interests in energy security, maritime trade, diaspora protection, and regional stability. At the same time, New Delhi should closely monitor the renewed Pakistan-US back channel and pursue a course aligned with securing its core national interests. Sustaining those interests, through active and direct engagement with all parties to the conflict and regional actors, is both more productive and more consistent with India's stated foreign policy goals in West Asia.

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⁹ "In Huge Claim, Trump Says Iran Has Agreed To Hand Over Its Enriched Uranium." Accessed April 27, 2026. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/in-huge-claim-trump-says-iran-has-agreed-to-hand-over-its-enriched-uranium-11368603>.

¹⁰ "Trump Cancels Envoys' Pakistan Trip, in Blow to Hopes for Iran War Breakthrough | Reuters." Accessed April 27, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-negotiators-go-islamabad-iran-says-no-direct-talks-2026-04-25/>.

¹¹ "Statement by Official Spokesperson on Ongoing Conflict in the West Asia Region (March 03, 2026)." Accessed April 27, 2026. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F40844%2Fstatement_by_Official_Spokesperson_on_ongoing_conflict_in_the_West_Asia_region_March_03_2026=.



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