

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# Pakistan's Mediation in the West Asia Crisis: Strategic Survival and Diplomatic Utility

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## **S***ummary*

Islamabad is seeking to transform economic fragility, security exposure, and strategic dependence into relevance by positioning itself as a useful intermediary in a moment of regional disorder. This is not evidence of a fundamental transformation in Pakistan's status. It is evidence of adaptive opportunism.

Pakistan’s effort to position itself as a mediator in the 2026 West Asia crisis has attracted unusual attention. During the war involving the United States, Israel and Iran, Islamabad emerged as one of the more active actors seeking to facilitate communication between Washington and Tehran, even signalling its willingness to host direct talks. At first glance, this may seem to reflect Pakistan's unexpected rise as a regional diplomatic broker. A closer reading suggests otherwise. Pakistan’s mediation bid does not reflect newfound regional leadership so much as a strategy of geopolitical survival through diplomatic utility.

This distinction matters. Pakistan is not acting from a position of strength.<sup>1</sup> It remains economically fragile, strategically dependent, and internally vulnerable. Yet precisely because of these constraints, it has strong incentives to manufacture relevance in times of crisis. Mediation offers such an opportunity. It allows Islamabad to present itself not as a chronic source of instability, but as a useful interlocutor capable of reducing escalation and facilitating contact. In that sense, mediation is less a peace project than an instrument of state survival.

This diplomatic activism becomes even more striking when viewed against the backdrop of India’s greater strategic constraints.<sup>2</sup> The 2025 India–Pakistan crisis and the 2026 West Asia war together reveal an important contrast: while India’s size, ambitions and regional stakes often narrow its room to manoeuvre, Pakistan has attempted to convert its relative weakness into tactical diplomatic relevance.

## **Pakistan’s Mediation as a Strategy of Survival**

The first driver of Pakistan’s activism is economic vulnerability. Pakistan remains heavily dependent on external support, Gulf remittances and imported energy. Any disruption in maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz or any sharp increase in oil prices is quickly transmitted into domestic economic stress. Under such conditions, the war in West Asia is not a distant geopolitical event but a direct threat to internal stability. By projecting itself as a relevant diplomatic actor, Pakistan seeks to signal to Gulf monarchies, foreign investors, and international financial institutions that it remains strategically valuable.

Second, Pakistan has a strong security interest in preventing further regional spillover. Its long and sensitive border with Iran, especially across Balochistan, could become a source of acute instability if the conflict broadens. Refugee flows, militant movement, sectarian tensions, or Iranian–Pakistani friction would impose additional

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<sup>1</sup> Omer Azhar, “[How Pakistan Became the Iran War’s Indispensable Mediator](#)”, *Asia Times*, 25 March 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Sushant Singh, “[Pakistan’s Peace Making Is a Setback for India](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 3 April 2026.

burdens on Pakistan’s already stretched security apparatus. For Islamabad, therefore, de-escalation is not merely normatively desirable, it is materially necessary.

Third, mediation serves a regime-management function. A state facing economic weakness and domestic fragility can use external activism to project coherence, relevance and utility.<sup>3</sup> In Pakistan’s case, diplomatic engagement helps shift attention away from structural weakness and recasts the country as a necessary interlocutor in a major regional crisis. The value of mediation lies not only in possible diplomatic outcomes, but also in the symbolic repositioning it enables.

## Why Pakistan Could Matter

Pakistan is not a classic neutral mediator of the Omani or Qatari type. It lacks the reputation for quiet diplomacy, discretion and insulation that often characterises successful middle-power mediation. Its relevance instead derives from a different configuration of assets: geographic proximity, military credibility, Islamic legitimacy, nuclear status, and access to multiple regional and extra-regional actors.

Its ties with Saudi Arabia remain especially important. Pakistan has long maintained close political and security relations with Riyadh, and recent steps to deepen that relationship suggest that Islamabad is trying to consolidate its position within the broader Islamic strategic sphere. At the same time, however, Pakistan cannot afford open hostility with Iran. This creates incentives for calibrated diplomacy: Islamabad must reassure Gulf partners without provoking Tehran, and maintain lines of communication with Tehran without alienating Riyadh or Washington.

Pakistan’s military establishment also plays a central role in this process. The prominence of Field Marshal Asim Munir indicates that Pakistan’s mediation effort is not simply a matter of conventional foreign ministry diplomacy. It draws on military channels, personal networks, and informal access to power centres in Washington. This reflects a recurring feature of Pakistani statecraft: influence is often pursued less through institutional standing than through personalised, transactional and security-driven diplomacy.

This logic extends to economic opportunism. Pakistan appears increasingly willing to leverage diplomatic openings for commercial advantage, including unconventional cross-border financial arrangements and politically mediated investment deals.

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<sup>3</sup> [“US-Iran War: Pakistan’s Peacemaker Play may have a Hidden Agenda worth Billions of Dollars”](#), *The Economic Times*, 25 March 2026.

These moves suggest that Islamabad sees crisis diplomacy not only as a way to gain visibility, but also as a means of attracting capital and stabilising a fragile economy.

In parallel, Pakistan has pursued hedging strategies to protect its energy supplies, including reliance on Saudi routes and efforts to secure safe passage with Iran. These are not marginal details; they show that mediation is embedded in a broader survival strategy combining diplomacy, economic pragmatism and risk management.

## **The India–Pakistan Backdrop: Escalation, Nationalism and Narrative Control**

Pakistan’s current diplomatic posture cannot be fully understood without reference to the 2025 India–Pakistan confrontation.<sup>4</sup> That crisis, triggered by the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, illustrated how domestic political incentives, nationalism and narrative competition shape the behaviour of both nuclear-armed states. Public pressure for retaliation intensified rapidly, producing a classic rally-around-the-flag effect that narrowed the room for de-escalation. In such an environment, leaders are constrained not only by military logic but by domestic expectations of resolve, prestige and punishment.

The 2025 confrontation was particularly dangerous because it suggested an erosion of previous thresholds. The loss of aerial assets, strikes on densely populated areas, and heightened public rhetoric all indicated that some of the earlier limits on escalation were weakening. This is significant because repeated crises do not merely reproduce old patterns; they can normalise new levels of risk.

Yet the same crisis also revealed the importance of narrative management. Social media disinformation, inflammatory television coverage and mutually contradictory claims created a dense fog of war. While this intensified public anger and confusion, it also created political space for both governments to step back. By controlling the domestic narrative and framing the ceasefire as compatible with victory, each side was able to retreat without openly conceding. This is an uncomfortable but important point: information disorder did not only fuel escalation; it also facilitated crisis termination.

This matters for the Pakistan story because it highlights a transition in how Islamabad seeks to be perceived. In 2025, Pakistan was again part of a dangerous nuclear confrontation shaped by escalation pressures and nationalist politics.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Clary, “[Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025](#)”, The Stimson Center, 28 May 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Elian Peltier and Zia-ur-Rahman, “[How Pakistan is Trying to Reshape Its Image Abroad](#)”, *The New York Times*, 24 March 2026.

2026, by contrast, it sought to appear as a channel of communication and crisis management. The shift should not be exaggerated, but it is analytically important. Pakistan is trying to broaden its international image from that of a security problem to that of a state with diplomatic utility.

## **Pakistan’s Diplomatic Visibility Versus India’s Strategic Constraint**

It is here that India enters the analysis meaningfully. Pakistan’s rise in diplomatic visibility does not simply reflect its own activism. It also reflects that India, despite being materially stronger and more internationally consequential, has faced greater strategic constraints.

India’s difficulty lies in the burden of scale. As a larger power with extensive ties to Israel, the Gulf states, the United States, and broader West Asian energy networks, New Delhi cannot manoeuvre as freely as Pakistani rhetoric sometimes implies. Its doctrine of strategic autonomy has long rested on balancing multiple relationships without collapsing into rigid alignment. Yet in moments of crisis, this balancing act becomes harder to sustain. The pressures of energy dependence, domestic politics, regional partnerships and American expectations can significantly narrow India’s room for manoeuvre.

This does not mean that Pakistan has outperformed India in any comprehensive sense. It means something narrower and more important: Pakistan has tried to exploit a window in which India’s status imposes caution, complexity and constraint. India must protect wide-ranging long-term interests across West Asia. Pakistan, by contrast, can sometimes act more tactically, with fewer responsibilities and lower expectations. Relative weakness, in this case, can create a form of agility.

That contrast should not be romanticised. India remains the more capable and more structurally important actor. But Pakistan has shown that in fragmented regional crises, temporary relevance can be generated by states that know how to present themselves as useful. Islamabad’s mediation posture should therefore be read as a tactical effort to convert vulnerability into relevance, not as evidence of durable regional leadership.

## **Pakistan’s Limitations**

For all this visibility, Pakistan’s limitations remain severe. First, it lacks the economic leverage, institutional credibility and strategic autonomy required to function as a

decisive broker. A state dependent on IMF frameworks, Gulf support and shifting American preferences cannot easily present itself as a fully sovereign mediator.

Second, its relationship with Iran remains uneasy. Border tensions, Baloch militancy, sectarian dynamics and long-standing mistrust all limit Tehran’s confidence in Islamabad. Pakistan may be useful as a conduit, but usefulness is not the same as trust.

Third, Pakistan’s internal civil–military imbalance complicates its diplomacy. Because the military establishment remains central to external decision-making, Pakistani mediation is often perceived as tactical, transactional and regime-centred rather than strategic in a broader diplomatic sense. This may produce short-term flexibility, but it undermines long-term credibility.

Finally, Pakistan’s current visibility does not eliminate the deeper structural risks surrounding it. In a region marked by weak restraint mechanisms, emerging military technologies, militant networks and intensifying nationalism, the security dilemma remains acute. Pakistan may gain diplomatic attention in one crisis while remaining highly vulnerable in the next. Tactical mediation cannot substitute for structural stability.

## Conclusion

Pakistan’s attempt to mediate in the 2026 West Asia crisis should be understood primarily as a strategy of geopolitical survival through diplomatic utility. Islamabad is seeking to transform economic fragility, security exposure and strategic dependence into relevance by positioning itself as a useful intermediary in a moment of regional disorder. This is not evidence of a fundamental transformation in Pakistan’s status. It is evidence of adaptive opportunism.

The importance of the case lies partly in the contrast it offers with India. While India’s size and regional ambitions make crisis management more constraining, Pakistan has tried to exploit its relative weakness to create tactical diplomatic space. That contrast helps explain why Pakistan’s activism appears more visible than its actual capabilities would suggest.

Still, visibility should not be confused with strategic weight. Pakistan can open channels, transmit messages, hedge its risks, and perhaps contribute to short-term de-escalation. It cannot determine outcomes or impose a diplomatic settlement. Its role is real, but limited. The broader lesson is that in a fractured regional order, even vulnerable states can generate temporary relevance. But temporary relevance is not the same as durable power.

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