

# Mediator or Messenger? Pakistan's Strategic Positioning Between Washington, Tehran, and Beijing

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## Introduction

Pakistan's recent emergence as a 'Peacemaker' in the fragile ceasefire efforts between the United States (US) and Iran has generated considerable diplomatic attention. What initially appeared to be a surprising and even an improbable development, with Islamabad positioning itself at the centre of high-stakes negotiations, demands closer scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> Beneath the optics of mediation lies a more complex geopolitical reality: Pakistan's role was neither entirely autonomous nor purely altruistic. Instead, it reflects a calculated convergence of domestic imperatives, regional compulsions, and, crucially, the strategic choreography of Beijing. A critical distinction must therefore be made between diplomatic visibility and strategic agency.

For observers in India, Pakistan's sudden projection as a stabilising force is particularly jarring. New Delhi has long contended Islamabad's record of harbouring and enabling militant networks, a concern that has shaped regional security dynamics for decades. Pakistan's association with figures such as Osama bin Laden, found and eliminated within its territory, continues to cast a long shadow over its international credibility.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, its rebranding as a diplomatic intermediary raises fundamental questions about both perception and intent. A critical distinction must therefore be made between *diplomatic visibility* and *strategic agency*. While Pakistan occupied a visible position in the diplomatic process, the extent to which it shaped outcomes remains open to question.

## Recalibrating Ties with Washington Under Trump 2.0

Pakistan's renewed visibility in Washington's strategic calculus also marks a notable shift in bilateral relations between the two nations. During the first administration of Donald Trump, ties were marked by deep mistrust. Trump's public accusation that Pakistan had offered the US "Nothing but lies and deceit"<sup>3</sup> reflected longstanding frustrations within the American security establishment. His successor, Joe Biden, maintained a degree of diplomatic distance, notably avoiding direct engagement with Pakistan's leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the return of Trump to the political forefront appears to have catalysed a recalibration. Pakistan has moved swiftly to position itself as a cooperative partner, particularly by emphasising its untapped reserves of rare earths and critical minerals, resources that hold increasing strategic value in an era of technological competition. Islamabad's overt diplomatic gestures, including praise for American leadership during regional crises such as India's Operation Sindoor<sup>5</sup> and symbolic endorsements of peace initiatives including a Noble Peace Prize for President Trump<sup>6</sup>, signal a deliberate attempt to rebuild goodwill.

At the same time, personal rapport also has played a role. Trump's public commendation of Pakistan's military leadership, including his favourable remarks about Army Chief Asim Munir<sup>7</sup>, underscores the transactional and personality-driven nature of contemporary diplomacy. These gestures, however, should not obscure the structural asymmetries that continue to define the relationship.

## Strategic Necessity, Not Altruism

Pakistan's involvement in the US–Iran ceasefire process is best understood as a function of strategic necessity rather than principled mediation. The country's economic and security vulnerabilities make regional stability an urgent priority. Iran's ability to disrupt shipping

through the Strait of Hormuz poses a direct threat to Pakistan's energy security, given its heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil and gas imports.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Islamabad's defence commitments, particularly its agreement with Saudi Arabia, introduce additional layers of risk. A broader regional conflict could have forced Pakistan into difficult strategic choices, potentially entangling it in a confrontation with Iran.<sup>9</sup> Its geographic proximity to Iran, coupled with the presence of one of the largest Shia populations outside Iranian borders<sup>10</sup>, further complicates the domestic and regional implications of escalation.

In this context, Pakistan's diplomatic engagement was less about brokering peace and more about mitigating risk. Its role as a conduit for communication between Washington and Tehran reflects both its geographic positioning and its ability to maintain working relationships with multiple, often adversarial, actors. From Iran's perspective, engagement with Pakistan was driven by necessity, not trust. Despite scepticism, escalation risks and sanctions pressures made Pakistan an acceptable, though limited, intermediary.

### **The Beijing Factor**

To interpret Pakistan's actions solely through the lens of bilateral or regional dynamics would be incomplete. China's strategic influence looms large over Islamabad's foreign policy choices. As Pakistan's most significant economic and military partner, Beijing has a vested interest in preventing instability in the Persian Gulf, a region critical to its energy supply chains and global trade routes.<sup>11</sup>

China's approach to the crisis was characteristically understated yet highly coordinated. Rather than assuming a visible leadership role, Beijing worked through a network of regional actors, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Pakistan, to facilitate de-escalation.<sup>12</sup> Its objective was not to dictate outcomes but to ensure that the conflict did not spiral into a broader war that could jeopardise maritime security and economic flows.

Within this framework, Pakistan functioned as a strategic intermediary, a buffer that could engage with all parties while shielding China from any kind of direct exposure. Reports indicate that Islamabad hosted key meetings, transmitted proposals, and even facilitated indirect communication between the US and China.<sup>13</sup> This multi-layered engagement underscores the extent to which Pakistan's diplomatic activity was embedded within a larger, China-led architecture.

This pattern reflects China's broader preference for what may be termed as 'Delegated Diplomacy'—leveraging partner states to advance strategic objectives while minimising direct exposure. By operating through intermediaries such as Pakistan, Beijing can shape outcomes indirectly while preserving deniability and avoiding diplomatic risk.

### **Mediation in a Fragmented System**

Pakistan was not the sole intermediary; actors like Saudi Arabia and Qatar also engaged through their own channels, creating a fragmented yet complementary mediation process without central coordination.

The narrative of Pakistan as a successful mediator simplifies what was a fragmented and non-linear negotiation process. There was no single negotiating table or unified framework. Instead, the ceasefire emerged from a patchwork of parallel initiatives, with each actor pursuing its own objectives.

In such a fragmented system, Pakistan's role remained inherently constrained. It functioned primarily as a conduit—facilitating exchanges and hosting interactions—without possessing the leverage required to shape outcomes or reconcile competing strategic interests.

This distinction is critical. True mediation implies the ability to shape terms, build consensus, and enforce commitments. Pakistan's involvement, by contrast, was contingent and auxiliary. It was valuable, but ultimately subordinate to the priorities of more powerful actors.

### **Fragility of the Ceasefire**

The ceasefire itself underscores the limitations of this approach. From the outset, it was marked by ambiguity and divergent interpretations, particularly regarding actors such as Lebanon. Continued military activity and unresolved disputes quickly eroded its credibility, revealing the gap between diplomatic signalling and on-the-ground realities.<sup>14</sup>

Crucially, the agreement failed to address core issues, including the long-term security of the Strait of Hormuz and the broader strategic rivalry between the US and Iran. In this sense, the ceasefire functioned more as a temporary de-escalation mechanism than a durable solution. It managed the optics of the crisis without resolving its underlying drivers.

Such ceasefires are increasingly transactional in nature—designed to manage escalation rather than resolve underlying conflicts. They reflect a broader shift in contemporary conflict management, where temporary stabilisation takes precedence over durable settlement.

### **Domestic Pressures and Narrative Construction**

Pakistan's enthusiastic portrayal of its role must also be viewed through the lens of domestic political economy. The country faces significant fiscal pressures, including looming debt repayments, constrained foreign exchange reserves, and persistent inflationary challenges. In such a context, projecting diplomatic relevance serves both external and internal purposes.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, projecting diplomatic relevance serves to enhance Pakistan's external credibility while reinforcing a narrative of competence domestically amid economic strain.

### **The Paradox of Pakistan's Role**

Pakistan's position in this episode encapsulates a broader paradox. On one hand, it seeks recognition as a responsible stakeholder capable of contributing to regional stability. On the other, its longstanding associations with militancy and non-state actors continue to undermine its credibility.

This duality is not incidental but structural. Pakistan has historically relied on a mix of conventional and irregular instruments to advance its strategic objectives, particularly in its rivalry with India. While this approach has yielded tactical advantages, it has also entrenched a reputation that complicates its diplomatic ambitions.

The attempt to reposition itself as a mediator must, therefore, contend with this legacy. Without substantive shifts in policy, particularly regarding militant networks, Pakistan's claims to constructive engagement will remain subject to scepticism.

### **Implications for India**

Pakistan's role as a diplomatic intermediary has three key implications for India: it aids Pakistan's image normalisation, reflects closer China–Pakistan alignment, and underscores the need for India to strengthen its diplomatic outreach in West Asia.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's role in the US–Iran ceasefire process is best understood not as a breakthrough in independent diplomacy but as a reflection of its embeddedness within larger geopolitical currents. Its actions were shaped by immediate strategic needs, facilitated by its geographic and political positioning, and significantly influenced by China's broader objectives.

It also underscores the importance of distinguishing between visibility and agency. Pakistan may have occupied the diplomatic spotlight, but the script was largely written elsewhere.

For policymakers and analysts, the key takeaway is clear: Pakistan remains an important, if constrained, actor in regional geopolitics. Its ability to serve as a bridge between competing powers is real, but so are the limits of that role. Understanding this balance is essential for any meaningful engagement with the complex dynamics of South Asia and the wider Middle East. Pakistan may have occupied the diplomatic spotlight, but the script was largely written elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhea Mogul, Sophia Saifi, "How Pakistan became an unlikely bridge between the United States and Iran", *CNN*, 09 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/09/asia/pakistan-islamabad-talks-us-iran-ceasefire-intl-hnk>

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Osama bin Laden Report: Was Pakistan Clueless or Complicit in Harboring Bin Laden?", *Brookings*, 12 Jul 2013, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pakistans-osama-bin-laden-report-was-pakistan-clueless-or-complicit-in-harboring-bin-laden/>

<sup>3</sup> Betsy Klein, "Trump tries to say told you so on bin Laden capture", *CNN*, 20 Nov 2018, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/01/politics/donald-trump-2018-pakistan>

<sup>4</sup> Madiha Afzal, "The Biden administration's two-track Pakistan policy misses the mark", *Brookings*, 02 Mar 2023, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-biden-administrations-two-track-pakistan-policy-misses-the-mark/>

<sup>5</sup> Business Today Desk, "Pakistan lobbied in US to 'somehow stop' India's military response after Op Sindoor: Report", *Business Today*, 06 Jan 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.businesstoday.in/india/story/pakistan-lobbied-in-us-to-somehow-stop-indias-military-response-after-op-sindoor-report-509622-2026-01-06>

<sup>6</sup> Max Matza, "Pakistan to nominate Trump for Nobel Peace Prize", *BBC*, 21 Jun 2025, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyx5yw8y28o>

<sup>7</sup> Abid Hussain, "How Pakistan managed to get the US and Iran to a ceasefire", *Al Jazeera*, 08 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/31/how-pakistans-asim-munir-became-trumps-favourite-field-marshal>

<sup>8</sup> Rhea Mogul, Sophia Saifi, "How Pakistan became an unlikely bridge".

<sup>9</sup> Karishma Vaswani, "Opinion | Failed Iran-US Talks Show Limits Of Pakistan's Peace Push", *NDTV*, 13 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-iran-war-pakistan-saudi-secret-defence-pact-strategic-mutual-defence-agreement-details-11355801>

<sup>10</sup> Cultre, "Shia Population by Country 2026", *World Population Review*, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/shia-population-by-country>

<sup>11</sup> Iranwire, "China Reacts to Strait of Hormuz Blockade: Global Energy Security at Risk", 13 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://iranwire.com/en/news/151161-china-reacts-to-strait-of-hormuz-blockade-global-energy-security-at-risk/>

<sup>12</sup> Staikou Dimitra, "Pakistan's Illusion of Mediation in the Iran-USA Ceasefire!", *Pressenza IPA*, 13 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://www.pressenza.com/2026/04/pakistans-illusion-of-mediation-in-the-iran-usa-ceasefire/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Saeed Shah, "Why the Iran-U.S. Peace Talks Failed", 13 Apr 2026, accessed 14 Apr 2026, <https://time.com/article/2026/04/13/iran-us-peace-talks-islamabad-war-nuclear/>

<sup>15</sup> Staikou Dimitra, "Pakistan's Illusion of Mediation".

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