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Diplomatic strategy, Institutional Architecture, and Mediation by Pakistan**

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The diplomatic vacuum created by the conflict between the US and Iran on 28 February was a shock to the world, and no state was ready to fill that vacuum without the loss of its credibility. At this critical moment, Pakistan, a country having good relations with both states, came forward and successfully brokered a two-week ceasefire, announced on 8 April 2026, following weeks of devastating military confrontation. Pakistan officially hosted the US and Iran in Islamabad on 11 April 2026, which marked the first direct talks between the two states in 47 years. This paper analyses Pakistan's mediating role in a major twenty-first-century geopolitical conflict, examining its historical background and dynamics. The strategies used by Pakistan and the institutional development in Pakistan regarding mediation, particularly the International Mediation and Arbitration Centre and the ADR reforms, support Pakistan's expanding role in domestic and international dispute resolution.

Keywords: USA-Iran Conflict, Pakistan's Role, Ceasefire, Asim Munir, Shahbaz Sharif

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The Unlikely Broker: Pakistan's diplomatic breakthrough in the US-Iran conflict (2026) Diplomatic strategy, Institutional Architecture, and Mediation by Pakistan



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Abstract

The diplomatic vacuum created by the conflict between the US and Iran on 28 February was a shock to the world, and no state was ready to fill that vacuum without the loss of its credibility. At this critical moment, Pakistan, a country having good relations with both states, came forward and successfully brokered a two-week ceasefire, announced on 8 April 2026, following weeks of devastating military confrontation. Pakistan officially hosted the US and Iran in Islamabad on 11 April 2026, which marked the first direct talks between the two states in 47 years. This paper analyses Pakistan's mediating role in a major twenty-first-century geopolitical conflict, examining its historical background and dynamics. The strategies used by Pakistan and the institutional development in Pakistan regarding mediation, particularly the International Mediation and Arbitration Centre and the ADR reforms, support Pakistan's expanding role in domestic and international dispute resolution.

Keywords: *USA-Iran Conflict, Pakistan's Role, Ceasefire, Asim Munir, Shahbaz Sharif*

Introduction

On 6th April, 2026, Shahbaz Sharif, Prime Minister of Pakistan, through his social media, announced to the world, holding its breath, that IRAN and the USA, along with their allies, have agreed to an immediate ceasefire (Hussain, 2026), further inviting delegations from both the USA and IRAN to Islamabad for negotiations. This announcement was made ninety minutes before the deadline given by the US President Donald Trump to Iran to begin what he called a civilisation-ending strike. Both states publicly credited Pakistan for the ceasefire. As this war was ceased by Pakistan, it came as a surprise to the world, knowing Pakistan as geographically exposed, domestically volatile, and economically fragile, yet it was Pakistan that both Washington and Tehran turned to, as the channel through which the war might end.

This paper is going to analyse how Pakistan was able to broker a ceasefire between both the states and it is in multi dimensions, first is the geopolitical location of Pakistan and its long-termed back-channel facilitation, second is the inter-state relations that gave Islamabad access to the highest levels of both governments, then comes Pakistan's mediation strategies that helped Pakistan to negotiate between both the states and last is the institutional development of Pakistan.

Historical Background: The 2026 US–Iran War

The 2026 US-Iran war was a result of long-standing tensions over Iran's nuclear program, its support for the non-state militias across the Middle East and the growing US-Israeli cooperation during the second Trump administration. Tensions that had steadily escalated for ten years finally boiled over into a US-Iran war in 2026. The conflict began on 28th February when the US and Israel started a coordinated campaign against Iran and



launched an airstrike against Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. Among the casualties was the killing of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a pivotal moment that transformed Iran's decision-making structure, making the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a dominant voice in Iran.

Iran's response after the airstrikes was rapid. Iran launched missile and drone strikes in retaliation against Israeli territory and U.S. bases in the Gulf. Iran also closed the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial maritime checkpoint through which approximately 20% of global oil shipments transit. Through the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, Iran paralysed the global energy market by triggering an economic crisis across the world. Pakistan was also severely impacted by this blockade as it relies on this narrow waterway for the majority of its imported oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), particularly from Gulf producers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

On 6 March 2026, US President Trump made an announcement that there would be no deal until Iran's "unconditional surrender." The conflict continued through airstrikes, even after Trump repeatedly claimed victory. Iran kept the Strait of Hormuz closed, and the fear of indefinite regional war grew within the GCC states. Even after these claims of victory by Trump, Iran remained unyielding, and the chaotic diplomatic vacuum created by the disagreements of Gulf states on ceasefire strategies and the bypassed diplomatic channels by the U.S. created a void that Pakistan moved to fill by emerging as the crucial mediator.

By the end of March, both states issued competing ceasefire frameworks. The US issued a 15-point proposal ("US Proposes 15-Point Plan," 2026), which required Iran to dismantle its nuclear programme and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, but Iran rejected these proposals on the same day and issued its counter-proposals demanding recognition of the sovereignty of Iran over the Strait of Hormuz and war reparations (Estrin et al., 2026). The profound lack of trust between these positions made direct talk impossible, requiring a third party to manage the talks, with Islamabad officially stepping in.

Why Pakistan? The Anatomy of an Unexpected Mediator:

Structural Qualifications

Pakistan's emergence as a central mediator in the US-Iran conflict has stunned many observers and analysts, who perceived Pakistan only through the lens of regional instability. A closer analysis of Islamabad's strategic geography and multifaceted relationships renders its unique, high-stakes diplomatic potential.

Pakistan shares a long border of almost 900 kilometres with Iran, which makes the regional instability a genuine concern for Pakistan rather than just a strategic concern. Pakistan has a direct interest in the de-escalation because the closure of the Strait of Hormuz had already affected fuel prices in Pakistan, which is almost a twenty per cent increase in fuel prices, adding economic pressure on Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's government.

Another important factor is that Pakistan did not host any US military bases, and it has no diplomatic relations with Israel, which could be a major reason that Iran did not consider Pakistan as an American ally. Iranian officials recognised that Pakistan's geographic position and internal problems, especially the domestic pressure of the active Shia community, which was alarmed by the death of Iran's supreme leader Khamenei, made it difficult for Pakistan to become a US proxy. At the same time, Pakistan also continues to hold its status of a US Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), maintaining a long-standing military cooperation with the US built over decades of joint counter-terrorism efforts.

As one of the analysts summarised, while Iran doubted Pakistan's neutrality in the Iran-Saudi rivalry, they recognised that in a US-IRAN war, Pakistan would prioritise mediation over confrontation. It maintains strong, long-standing military cooperation with the US. According to Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed, Pakistan has transitioned from being a passive messenger to an active mediator by utilising its ability to frame the timing and structure of negotiations with all the parties involved. From Tehran's perspective, another scholar, Berna Dogan-Akkas explained that choosing Islamabad as a middleman for negotiation and talk was a strategy of Tehran, Iran, which preferred a state that has no US military base on its land so that it could serve as a conduit, instead of a more powerful nation whose neutrality might be suspected (Hussain, 2026).

The Munir-Trump Relationship and Islamabad-Washington Strategic Cooperation

While the structural factors explain the reason for both states to accept Pakistan as a mediator, the reason for

the speedy and confident launch of this initiative is the cordial relationship between Pakistan Army Chief Asim Munir and President Trump.

Pakistan's arrest of the terrorist Mohammad Sharifullah, also known by his alias "Jafar", involved in the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing in Kabul, which killed almost thirteen American Service members and one hundred and seventy Afghan civilians, opened an initial channel between Pakistan and the US (Iqbal, 2025). The relationship became stronger during the conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025, in which Donald Trump claimed the credit for brokering a ceasefire between the states, and Pakistan accepted this claim (Hussain, 2026). Trump also got a nomination from Pakistan for the Nobel Peace Prize (Mir, 2026).

Following enhanced diplomatic and commercial ties, including cryptocurrency sectors and critical mineral agreements, Trump hosted the Army Chief of Pakistan at the White House, a historic visit because that was the first time a Pakistani Armed Forces officer had visited the White House. Trump's public admiration of Gen. Asim Munir was something unexpected and remarkable, calling him 'an important guy', 'a great fighter', and an 'exceptional human being'. Trump publicly highlighted his trust in Pakistan, saying, 'Pakistan knows Iran very well (Mir, 2026). This trust was one of the reasons that facilitated the ceasefire negotiation. On the night of 6th April, Gen. Asim Munir was in constant contact with the US Vice President JD Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff for negotiation ("Iran and US Receive Plan," 2026).

Constraints and Vulnerabilities

Despite the efforts of Pakistan to mediate between both states, Pakistan faced serious domestic challenges, massive protests of the Shia community across Pakistan after the assassination of Khamenei, which resulted in the killing of almost 23 protestors in clashes by March 2026 ("Anger on Pakistan Streets," 2026). In response to these challenges, Field Marshal Asim Munir summoned Shia clerics to Rawalpindi to prevent this internal sectarian escalation, a careful balancing act of negotiation that ran parallel to Pakistan's external diplomatic initiatives (Syed, 2026). Alongside this, Pakistan was also waging an active military campaign against the Afghan Taliban and confronting a severe crisis of fuel and fertiliser because of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

After the death of Khamenei, the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps) emerged as the dominant decision-making authority, and Pakistan officials could not find reliable lines of communication with the IRGC as it displaced a civilian government with which Islamabad had established relationships (Karim & Slavin, 2026). These limitations show that Pakistan's mediation was neither free nor effortless.

Pakistan's Mediation Strategies:

Shuttle Diplomacy and Multi-Track Engagement

Pakistan's mediation between the US and Iran relied on the shuttle diplomacy involving both military and civilian leaders. Army Chief and Prime Minister, by operating as a single team, coordinated to manage the conflict, signalling toward an integrated and harmonious foreign policy.

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif went to Jeddah to meet Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman, signalling solidarity with Riyadh while urging restraint (Raza & Hamza, 2026).

In a coordinated diplomatic push, Foreign Minister Dar conducted parallel shuttle diplomacy across Tehran, Washington, and other regional capitals. Field Marshal Asim Munir was in direct contact with Trump on 22–23 March. That direct link proved crucial as Trump announced a five-day pause of strikes on Iranian energy infrastructure, a pause that provided space to formalise a ceasefire offer.

Pakistan adopted a policy of balance and acted as a neutral mediator, while condemning attacks by all sides, it avoided joining any military campaign against Tehran, ensuring it remained a credible partner to both sides by refusing to be dragged into a direct conflict.

The Formal Mediation Offer and Ceasefire Framework

Pakistan's approach began not with dramatic headlines; it started quietly, with the nation serving as a pure neutral messenger between both states (Iqbal, 2026). On 24 March 2026, an official offer from Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif on X was given to negotiate the conflict by directly tagging Trump, Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi, and US Special Envoy Witkoff a symbolic gesture that transformed a quiet diplomatic

conflict. On 25th March 2026, Pakistan delivered a "15-point proposal" from the US to Iran, which was rejected by the Iranian officials on the same day, and they issued a counter proposal. Pakistan carried that proposal and sent it to Washington. This slow, behind-the-scenes communication was the foundation of everything that followed—it created enough trust for both states to maintain engagement without committing to anything.

On 31st March 2026, Pakistan, with the help of China, delivered its own 5-point proposal for peace and shifted its role from being a messenger to an active peacemaker. The proposal demanded an end to hostilities and facilitated humanitarian aid (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026). By proposing this framework, Pakistan established itself as an invested third party. To bolster this initiative, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia gathered in Islamabad; through this meeting, Pakistan reinforced regional backing for its peace efforts.

The "Islamabad Process" acted as the cornerstone of Pakistan's diplomatic strategy; it established a structured framework that brought the two states physically into the same room for negotiation for the first time in 47 years. The talk lasted for 21 hours between April 11 and 12, and consisted of three rounds, the first round was indirect, proceeding towards the second and third being direct face-to-face negotiation (Al Jazeera Staff, 2026). This strategy exemplified a professional mediation where trust is built with the parties before entering into a direct negotiation. Prime Minister actively facilitated this process by personally receiving US Vice President JD Vance, signalling as the primary guarantor for the security and integrity of the negotiations.

The reason why Pakistan's strategy was visible is Pakistan's unique position of being an honest broker. Pakistan's personal diplomacy became the deciding factor on the night of 6th April, when Trump's deadline for a devastating strike on Iran was approaching. Trump said that after the conversation with Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, he agreed to the ceasefire, adding that they had "requested that I hold off the destructive force being sent tonight to Iran." Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi also accepted the ceasefire in response to the request of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. Both states publicly acknowledged and gave credit to Pakistan, which is something that never happens in backchannel diplomacy (Hussain, 2026).

Managing the Post-Ceasefire Phase

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Instead of the role of Pakistan being concluded after the ceasefire, it served as a starting point for deeper mediation by Pakistan. The focus of Islamabad is now on converting the two-week ceasefire into a detailed memorandum of understanding (MOU), which will provide a 60-day window to negotiate a lasting peace framework. On 16th April, Gen. Asim Munir travelled to Tehran carrying a new message from Washington, while Pakistan's Foreign Ministry emphasised that all talks would be channelled through Pakistan initially, then finalised in Islamabad.

After the US violation of the ceasefire, specifically a naval blockade of Iranian ports announced on 14 April and the capture of an Iranian container ship ("Iran Says No Talks," 2026). Iran's participation in the peace talks in Islamabad is in doubt as it announced on 20th April that it would not send negotiators to Islamabad because of this violation (Hussain, 2026). While publicly protesting, Iran's leader spoke to Pakistan's Foreign Minister Dar by phone on 19 April, emphasising the 'need for continued dialogue ("DPM Dar Talks," 2026).' As Kamran Yousuf, an Islamabad-based journalist and expert on diplomatic affairs, said, he expected the ceasefire to be extended because neither side had an appetite to return to war ("No Date Set," 2026).

Institutional Development: IMAC and ADR Framework Reform

Any credible assessment of Pakistan's international mediation role must begin with its domestic institutional foundations. A state's effectiveness as an external mediator, to a large extent, depends heavily on its own dispute-resolution infrastructure. It is in this light that the establishment of the International Mediation and Arbitration Centre (IMAC), an initiative of the Federal Ministry of Law and Justice, acquires its full importance.

The most significant step in the development of institutional framework in the field of mediation in Pakistan is marked by the establishment of International Mediation and Arbitration Centre, which was designed to offer a credible forum to resolve commercial and civil disputes through mediation and arbitration instead of courts where civil disputes commonly take up to 15 years to resolve and the ADR processes, in contrast, resolve disputes in an average of 75 days. Alongside IMAC, Pakistan also initiated legislative reforms by introducing amendments in its ADR ACT 1940, which was tabled with the national assembly as it represents the most

ambitious legislation. Pakistan further strengthens these domestic reforms by signing the Singapore Convention on Mediation in 2025, formally adopting a standardised mechanism for enforcing mediated commercial agreements globally.

Collectively, these institutional developments mark Pakistan's transition from being an informal forum for dispute resolution toward a structured and sustainable framework, enhancing Pakistan's credibility in its role as a serious forum for international dispute resolution.

Conclusion

Pakistan is building its identity as a key "Mediation State" worldwide, as it has played a significant role as a mediator in the 2026 US- Iran War, managing to secure a ceasefire in less than 6 weeks despite facing serious internal challenges. This achievement was largely due to Pakistan's strategic position allowing it to navigate between Islamic diplomatic channels, maintain strong military credibility, sustain ties with Gulf states, and preserve its relationship with the U.S. It was further supported by coordinated leadership between Prime Minister Sharif and Field Marshal Munir. Even so, the ceasefire remains unstable, with repeated violations and lingering reluctance from Iran. Despite these concerns, the country is gradually shaping a long-term role for itself through legal and institutional developments, such as the establishment of IMAC, reforms under the Arbitration Act 2024, and progress toward adopting the Singapore Convention.

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