ISSUE BRIEF

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PAKISTAN'S MEDIATION AND STRATEGIC BALANCING IN THE IRAN–US–ISRAEL CONFLICT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel carried out coordinated strikes on Iran, targeting senior leadership and strategic facilities in what marked a dramatic escalation in regional tensions. The operation resulted in the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The immediate aftermath saw Iran declare the strikes an act of war, followed by retaliatory missile and drone attacks against Israeli targets and U.S.-linked installations across the Gulf states. The confrontation quickly expanded beyond a bilateral exchange, with tensions spilling into multiple theatres, including the Gulf, the Levant, and key maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, raising concerns over global energy security and the risk of a broader regional conflict.

On 8 April 2026, a two-week ceasefire was agreed between the United States and Iran following intensified diplomatic efforts, with Pakistan playing a facilitative role in supporting back-channel engagements. The understanding was contingent on Iran allowing safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, easing immediate concerns over global energy flows and maritime security. Prime Minister Mohammad Shehbaz Sharif welcomed the development and reiterated Pakistan's commitment to supporting dialogue and regional stability, while also inviting both sides to engage in further talks in Islamabad. The ceasefire was linked to a broader framework of proposals, including a ten-point plan aimed at confidence-building and paving the way for structured negotiations. Building on this

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momentum, follow-up engagements were scheduled in Islamabad, including consultations on 10 April 2026, focused on sustaining the ceasefire and advancing diplomatic efforts.

The rapidly evolving crisis placed Pakistan in a delicate position, requiring an immediate response that balanced principle with strategic restraint. Henceforth, Pakistan's response was swift and unequivocal in its emphasis on international law and restraint. Prime Minister Mohammad Shehbaz Sharif strongly condemned the targeting of Iran's Supreme Leader, describing it as a violation of established international norms and underscoring that such actions undermine the foundations of state sovereignty.[1] He reaffirmed Pakistan's solidarity with the people of Iran while simultaneously calling for restraint from all sides, reflecting Islamabad's consistent position that escalation serves no party's long-term interests.

This calibrated response has remained the cornerstone of Pakistan's diplomatic posture as the situation continues to evolve. Pakistan is in a uniquely sensitive position shaped by its geography and strategic relationships. Iran is not only a neighbour but also a country with which Pakistan shares deep historical, cultural, and security linkages. At the same time, Pakistan maintains close economic and strategic ties with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia - further reinforced by the signing of the Strategic Defence and Military Agreement (SDMA) in 2025 - which are vital for its economic stability, energy security, and expatriate workforce. Alongside this, the United States continues to hold importance as a global partner in economic and security domains. These overlapping relationships necessitate a careful and disciplined diplomatic approach, where neutrality is not passive but actively managed through engagement with all sides.

Within this context, Pakistan has moved beyond declaratory diplomacy and undertaken active facilitation efforts aimed at de-escalation. A key development was the high-level diplomatic engagement in Islamabad on 29 March 2026, where Pakistan brought together a group of regional stakeholders, including Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, at a moment of heightened tensions following the February escalation.[2] The consultations were led on the Pakistani side by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Senator Ishaq Dar. Türkiye was represented by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Saudi Arabia by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, and Egypt by Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry. The consultations were designed to create a

1 "Pakistan 'Concerned Over Violation' of International Law After Iran's Khamenei Killed," Anadolu Agency, March 1, 2026. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-concerned-over-violation-of-international-law-after-irans-khamenei-killed/3845288

2 "The Consultations among the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt Have Commenced in Islamabad on 29 March 2026," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pakistan), March 29, 2026. https://mofa.gov.pk/news/the-consultations-among-the-foreign-ministers-of-pakistan-saudi-arabia-turkiye-and-egypt-have-commenced-in-islamabad-on-29-march-2026

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coordinated regional position in favour of restraint and to open space for indirect engagement between the principal parties.

The discussions in Islamabad broadly converged on several key points. Participating states underscored the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire, stressing that continued military exchanges risked drawing the wider region into conflict. There was a clear reaffirmation of the principle of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, with concerns raised over actions that target state leadership and critical infrastructure. The ministers agreed on the necessity of avoiding further strikes that could widen the conflict, particularly those that could trigger retaliatory cycles beyond control. Significant emphasis was also placed on the importance of maintaining stability in global energy and trade corridors, with all sides highlighting the need to keep critical maritime routes, especially around the Strait of Hormuz, open and secure. The consultations further stressed the importance of sustained diplomatic engagement, including the continuation of indirect communication channels between Iran, the United States, and other stakeholders. There was also agreement on supporting confidence-building measures aimed at reducing mistrust and preventing miscalculation, including the possibility of third-party facilitated dialogue platforms. Collectively, the Islamabad engagement reflected a convergence among key regional actors on the need to prioritise diplomacy over confrontation, while also signalling Pakistan's intent to play a constructive and facilitative role in efforts aimed at de-escalation. [3]

Parallel to these efforts, Pakistan broadened its diplomatic outreach to major global stakeholders, with particular focus on coordination with China. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar travelled to Beijing in early April 2026, where he held detailed consultations with senior Chinese leadership, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Both sides expressed serious concern over the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East and stressed that the use of force had further aggravated tensions. The 'Five-Point Initiative of China and Pakistan for Restoring Peace and Stability in the Gulf and Middle East Region' underscored that respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity must remain central to any international response, and that actions targeting state leadership or critical infrastructure risk undermining regional and global stability. It emphasised that disputes should be resolved through dialogue and diplomatic engagement rather than military means.

The joint statement also called for an immediate ceasefire and urged restraint to prevent further escalation. It emphasised safeguarding key maritime routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, given

[3] "Pakistan Hosts Regional Powers for Iran Talks, with Focus on Hormuz Proposals," Reuters, March 29, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-hosts-regional-powers-iran-talks-with-focus-hormuz-proposals-2026-03-29/

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their importance for global energy security, and warned of wider economic consequences of any disruption. Both sides opposed unilateral actions, stressed the role of multilateral frameworks, and underscored the need for dialogue, confidence-building, and sustained diplomatic engagement. China also expressed support for Pakistan's mediation efforts and its role in facilitating regional consultations. The meeting reflected a convergence of views between Islamabad and Beijing on the need for a political solution and reinforced Pakistan's position as a credible interlocutor capable of engaging both regional and global actors.[4]

At the same time, Russia has coordinated with China in multilateral settings, opposing unilateral actions and resisting measures which might escalate tensions. For instance, on 7 April 2026, Russia and China vetoed a U.S.-backed Security Council resolution aimed at reopening the Strait of Hormuz, saying that the resolution was unbalanced and risked legitimising further escalation, instead calling for a diplomatic approach to address the crisis. Russia has previously signalled its readiness to support a diplomatic resolution, with the Kremlin stating it is prepared to assist efforts aimed at moving the conflict "to a peaceful course as soon as possible." Iran, for its part, has acknowledged broader mediation efforts involving Pakistan, China, Türkiye, Egypt, and Russia, indicating a willingness to engage through indirect diplomatic channels rather than direct negotiations under current conditions.

Pakistan has signalled that it intends to persist with its mediation efforts between Iran and the United States despite growing challenges on the diplomatic front. Speaking during a weekly briefing in Islamabad on 2 April 2026, Foreign Office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi acknowledged that there are "obstacles" in advancing negotiations, though he did not elaborate on their precise nature. His remarks came at a time of heightened tensions, following statements from U.S. President Donald Trump threatening severe military escalation against Iran, which in turn prompted strong warnings from Tehran. Despite this increasingly hostile environment, Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to encouraging dialogue, emphasising that it will continue efforts to nudge both sides towards negotiations aimed at ending the conflict. Islamabad has maintained that it remains willing to facilitate talks if the parties agree, reflecting a consistent position that diplomacy, even in difficult circumstances, remains essential to preventing further escalation and stabilising the region.[5] At the same time, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held extended discussions, lasting over an hour, with

4 "Five-Point Initiative of China and Pakistan for Restoring Peace and Stability in the Middle East," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Egypt, April 2, 2026. https://eg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/202604/t20260402_11885732.htm

5 "Pakistan to Continue with Iran–US Mediation Despite 'Obstacles'," Al Jazeera, April 2, 2026. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/2/pakistan-to-continue-with-iran-us-mediation-despite-obstacles

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Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, during which he briefed Tehran on Pakistan's ongoing diplomatic outreach and efforts to facilitate dialogue.

Pakistan has also played a role in facilitating indirect contacts and confidence-building measures, with Islamabad emerging as a key back-channel intermediary between Tehran and Washington. Reports indicate that Pakistan has conveyed proposals from the United States to Iran and maintained sustained diplomatic communication with both sides, reflecting its role in relaying messages and exploring off-ramps to the conflict. At the same time, Islamabad has formally offered to host talks, with officials stating that it stands ready to facilitate dialogue if both parties agree, and early indications suggested that potential meetings involving senior U.S. and Iranian representatives could take place in the Pakistani capital. While progress has been constrained by mistrust and differing positions, Pakistan's involvement in message-passing, proposal-sharing, and venue facilitation underscores its evolving role as a credible intermediary in efforts to reduce tensions.

While tangible breakthroughs have remained limited due to entrenched positions on all sides, Pakistan's continued engagement has helped sustain diplomatic avenues at a time when military options dominate the discourse. This approach is driven not only by principle but by necessity. Any deviation from a balanced stance risks significant consequences, including destabilisation along Pakistan's western border, strain in relations with Gulf partners, and complications in its broader international engagements. Moreover, the crisis also tests Islamabad's ability to translate its traditional balancing posture into effective diplomatic influence, and also highlights both its strategic relevance and its structural constraints. While Islamabad has demonstrated its ability to facilitate dialogue and maintain engagement across competing blocs, the effectiveness of its mediation will ultimately depend on the willingness of principal parties to de-escalate. Nevertheless, Pakistan's continued engagement reinforces its position as a responsible regional actor capable of contributing to crisis management in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment.

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