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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Pakistan's Strategic Role and Policy Choices in the 2025–26 U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict****Shakeel Shaheen**

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magray06@gmail.com**Abstract**

This article examines Pakistan's strategic role and policy choices in the context of the 2025–26 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict. It critically analyzes the origins and escalation of the conflict, highlighting the role of U.S. and Israeli military interventions as acts of aggression that have undermined regional stability and violated international legal norms. In contrast, Iran's responses are interpreted as defensive measures aimed at preserving sovereignty and deterrence.

The study further explores the challenges faced by Pakistan, including geopolitical pressures, economic vulnerabilities, sectarian sensitivities, and competing alliances. It evaluates various strategic options available to Pakistan—ranging from alignment with major blocs to sustained neutrality—and argues that active mediation and strategic hedging represent the most viable policy pathways.

Drawing upon recent developments, including Pakistan's role in brokering ceasefire negotiations and hosting U.S.–Iran talks in Islamabad, the article concludes that Pakistan has the potential to emerge as a significant diplomatic actor. However, this requires careful balancing of external pressures and internal constraints.

Keywords: Pakistan, Iran War 2026, U.S.–Iran Conflict, Israel-Iran Tensions, Strategic Neutrality, Middle East Geopolitics, Diplomacy, International Law, Regional Stability

Introduction

The evolving geopolitical confrontation between the United States, Israel, and Iran during 2025–26 marks one of the most consequential crises of the contemporary international system. Unlike earlier regional tensions, this conflict has escalated into a multi-dimensional war involving direct military strikes, cyber warfare, economic coercion, and maritime blockades. The crisis has not only destabilized the Middle East but has also generated far-reaching implications for global energy security, international law, and the balance of power.

Pakistan, situated at the crossroads of South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, finds itself in a uniquely delicate yet potentially influential position. As a nuclear-armed Muslim-majority state with longstanding ties to both Iran and the Gulf monarchies, and a historically complex relationship with the United States, Pakistan is compelled to navigate a highly volatile strategic environment. Its role as a mediator in ongoing diplomatic efforts underscores its relevance in global conflict management.

This article argues that the United States and Israel have acted as primary aggressors in the 2025–26 conflict through unilateral military actions and coercive strategies, while Iran has largely operated within the framework of sovereign self-defense and international legal norms. Within this context, Pakistan's strategic challenge is to maintain neutrality while maximizing its diplomatic leverage, ensuring internal stability, and safeguarding its long-term geopolitical interests.

Analysis and Background of the U.S.–Iran Conflict

Historical Roots of Hostility

The antagonism between the United States and Iran dates back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which transformed Iran into an anti-Western Islamic republic. Over the decades, tensions have been exacerbated by sanctions, proxy conflicts, and disputes over Iran's nuclear program. Israel, perceiving Iran as an existential threat, has consistently advocated for aggressive containment strategies.

Escalation in 2025–26: From Tension to War

The 2025–26 conflict represents a dramatic escalation. The war began with coordinated U.S.–Israeli airstrikes on Iranian territory in February 2026, targeting nuclear and military infrastructure.

These strikes included the targeting of senior Iranian leadership and critical infrastructure, actions widely interpreted by analysts as violations of sovereignty and international law.

In addition to kinetic operations, the United States and Israel launched large-scale cyberattacks, disrupting Iranian communication systems and civilian infrastructure.

Such coordinated attacks indicate a deliberate strategy of overwhelming Iran's defense capabilities, raising serious ethical and legal concerns.

Iran's Response: Defensive Posture and Deterrence

In response, Iran launched missile and drone strikes against Israeli and U.S. targets in the region. These actions can be interpreted as retaliatory measures under the principle of self-defense, as recognized in international law.

Iran also engaged diplomatically, proposing peace frameworks and participating in negotiations mediated by Pakistan. Notably, Iran agreed to a temporary ceasefire proposal in April 2026, signaling willingness to de-escalate.

This reflects Iran's dual strategy of resistance and diplomacy.

Recent Developments

Recent developments highlight continued volatility:

- The United States imposed a naval blockade on Iranian ports, escalating economic warfare
- Israel's military campaign has failed to achieve decisive results despite extensive strikes
- Iran rejected what it termed "unreasonable demands," maintaining its sovereign position
- Pakistan successfully brokered a temporary ceasefire, praised internationally
- Direct U.S.–Iran negotiations were held in Islamabad, reflecting Pakistan's diplomatic importance

These developments underscore the asymmetry between aggressive military actions and Iran's defensive and diplomatic responses.

Challenges to Pakistan in this Conflict

Pakistan's position in the 2025–26 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict is defined by a complex intersection of geopolitical, economic, security, and domestic constraints. These challenges are not merely reactive but structural, requiring careful strategic calibration.

Geopolitical Pressures and Strategic Overstretch

Pakistan is simultaneously engaged with multiple power centers whose interests are mutually contradictory:

- The United States expects strategic cooperation, especially in counterterrorism and regional stability
- Saudi Arabia seeks political and potential military backing against Iran
- China prioritizes stability to protect Belt and Road investments
- Iran expects neutrality or diplomatic support

This creates a multi-vector pressure system, where any policy tilt risks alienating one or more critical partners. Pakistan's foreign policy apparatus is thus under constant strain to maintain equilibrium without appearing indecisive or unreliable.

The Iran–Saudi Arabia Strategic Dilemma

Pakistan's most acute external challenge lies in managing its relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia:

- Pakistan shares a 900 km border with Iran, making stability in Iran a direct national security concern
- Simultaneously, Pakistan depends heavily on Saudi Arabia for:
 - Financial assistance
 - Oil on deferred payments
 - Employment for millions of Pakistani workers

The 2025 defense agreement with Saudi Arabia introduces the risk of **entrapment**, where Pakistan may be compelled to support Saudi strategic objectives even if they conflict with its own national interests.

Economic Fragility and Energy Insecurity

Pakistan's economy is particularly vulnerable to external shocks generated by the conflict:

- Oil price volatility directly affects Pakistan's import bill
- Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz threaten energy supply chains
- Increased insurance and shipping costs affect trade

Given Pakistan's reliance on imported energy, prolonged conflict could lead to:

- Inflationary spirals
- Currency depreciation
- Fiscal instability

Thus, the conflict is not only a geopolitical issue but a macroeconomic threat.

Security Risks Along the Western Border

Pakistan's border regions, particularly in Balochistan, are already fragile. The conflict introduces additional risks:

- Spillover of militant activity
- Refugee influx from Iran
- Increased smuggling and cross-border crime

Non-state actors may exploit instability, potentially opening **new fronts of internal conflict**. The possibility of proxy warfare reaching Pakistani territory cannot be dismissed.

Sectarian Sensitivities and Internal Cohesion

Pakistan's internal sectarian landscape makes it susceptible to external polarization:

- The Iran–Saudi rivalry has historically influenced sectarian dynamics
- Escalation could intensify Sunni–Shia tensions
- External actors may attempt to exploit these divisions

This poses a serious risk to national unity and internal stability, particularly if the conflict becomes prolonged.

Diplomatic Credibility and Mediation Risks

Pakistan's emergence as a mediator is both an opportunity and a risk:

- Successful mediation enhances global prestige
- Failure or perceived bias could damage credibility

Maintaining trust between adversaries like the United States and Iran requires **exceptional diplomatic finesse**. Any misstep could undermine Pakistan's role and reduce its influence.

Strategic Autonomy vs External Dependence

Pakistan's long-term challenge is balancing:

- The desire for **strategic autonomy**
- The reality of economic and security dependence on external actors

Without careful management, Pakistan risks becoming a passive actor shaped by external pressures, rather than an independent strategic player.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan must adopt a carefully calibrated and multidimensional policy framework that not only addresses immediate challenges but also secures its long-term strategic interests. The following recommendations outline a comprehensive course of action:

Institutionalizing a Proactive Mediation Framework

Pakistan should move beyond episodic diplomacy and develop a structured, institutionalized mediation mechanism within its foreign policy apparatus. This requires establishing a dedicated diplomatic unit capable of continuous engagement with all conflicting parties, ensuring that Pakistan remains actively involved in dialogue facilitation rather than reacting to crises after they escalate. By transforming Islamabad into a consistent venue for negotiations, Pakistan can enhance its credibility as a neutral mediator and embed itself in the diplomatic architecture of the region.

Operationalizing the Doctrine of Active Neutrality

Neutrality must not be interpreted as passivity but as a deliberate and strategic posture. Pakistan should clearly articulate a doctrine of "active neutrality," wherein it maintains open diplomatic channels with all sides while refraining from military alignment. This involves consistent messaging at international forums, balanced diplomatic engagements, and a refusal to be drawn into bloc politics. Such a policy would allow Pakistan to preserve its autonomy while simultaneously maximizing its diplomatic relevance.

Deepening Strategic Coordination with China

Given China's growing role in global and regional stability, Pakistan should closely align its diplomatic initiatives with Beijing's broader strategic objectives. This coordination should extend beyond political

statements to include joint diplomatic efforts, economic stabilization initiatives, and conflict de-escalation strategies. Leveraging platforms such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor can further integrate economic diplomacy with strategic objectives, thereby strengthening Pakistan's position as a key regional stakeholder.

Balancing Relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran

Pakistan must carefully recalibrate its relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to avoid strategic entrapment. This requires sustained high-level engagement with both countries, emphasizing Pakistan's commitment to regional peace and non-interference. By positioning itself as a facilitator of dialogue rather than a partisan actor, Pakistan can reduce tensions between these rivals while safeguarding its own interests. A balanced approach will also prevent the erosion of trust that could arise from perceived alignment with one side.

Strengthening Economic and Energy Resilience

The conflict underscores the urgency of reducing Pakistan's economic vulnerability to external shocks. Pakistan must accelerate efforts to diversify its energy sources, including investment in renewable energy, regional energy corridors, and alternative suppliers. At the same time, building strategic reserves and improving energy infrastructure can help cushion the impact of supply disruptions. Economic resilience should also involve strengthening trade partnerships and reducing dependence on volatile regions.

Enhancing Border Security and Internal Preparedness

Given the likelihood of spillover effects, Pakistan must adopt a proactive approach to border management and internal security. This includes strengthening surveillance mechanisms, enhancing coordination among security agencies, and preparing contingency plans for potential refugee inflows. Special attention should be given to vulnerable regions such as Balochistan, where instability could be exacerbated by external developments. A robust internal security framework will ensure that external conflicts do not translate into domestic crises.

Preventing Sectarian Polarization

Pakistan must take deliberate steps to insulate its internal social fabric from external geopolitical rivalries. This requires promoting sectarian harmony through state-led initiatives, regulating foreign influence on religious institutions, and encouraging inclusive narratives of national identity. By proactively addressing potential sources of division, Pakistan can prevent the conflict from triggering internal unrest and maintain social cohesion.

Expanding Multilateral Engagement

Pakistan should actively engage with international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to build collective pressure for de-escalation. Multilateral diplomacy not only distributes the burden of conflict resolution but also enhances the legitimacy of Pakistan's efforts. By working within these frameworks, Pakistan can amplify its voice and contribute to a broader consensus for peace.

Ensuring Military Non-Involvement with Strategic Vigilance

While Pakistan must avoid direct military involvement in the conflict, it cannot afford complacency in defense preparedness. Maintaining a credible defensive posture is essential to deter potential threats and reassure domestic audiences. This involves strengthening internal defense capabilities, conducting

strategic assessments, and ensuring readiness for any unforeseen escalation that could impact national security.

Formulating a Long-Term Middle East Policy Doctrine

Pakistan's response to the current crisis should serve as a foundation for a comprehensive long-term strategy toward the Middle East. This doctrine should integrate diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions, providing clear guidelines for engagement with regional actors. By adopting a forward-looking approach, Pakistan can move from reactive policymaking to strategic foresight, ensuring consistency and coherence in its foreign policy.

Conclusion

The 2025–26 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict represents a critical inflection point in contemporary geopolitics, reflecting not only a regional power struggle but also a broader contest over international norms, sovereignty, and the use of force. The conduct of the United States and Israel—marked by preemptive strikes, coercive economic measures, and strategic escalation—has reinforced perceptions of unilateralism and the erosion of international legal frameworks. In contrast, Iran's response, grounded in deterrence and selective diplomatic engagement, underscores its attempt to assert sovereignty while avoiding full-scale war.

Within this turbulent strategic environment, Pakistan emerges as a state navigating between constraint and opportunity. Its geographical proximity to Iran, economic ties with Saudi Arabia, and strategic partnership with China position it uniquely as both a stakeholder and a potential stabilizer. However, this position is inherently precarious, requiring Pakistan to balance competing external pressures while maintaining internal cohesion and economic stability.

The central argument of this study is that Pakistan's optimal strategy lies in the pursuit of active neutrality complemented by proactive diplomacy. By avoiding military entanglement and instead investing in mediation, Pakistan can preserve its strategic autonomy while enhancing its international standing. The country's recent efforts in facilitating dialogue and brokering ceasefire arrangements demonstrate its capacity to function as a credible intermediary, but sustaining this role demands consistency, institutionalization, and strategic clarity.

At the same time, Pakistan must recognize that diplomacy alone is insufficient without internal resilience. Economic stability, energy security, border management, and sectarian harmony are integral components of a comprehensive national strategy. Failure to address these internal dimensions could undermine Pakistan's external posture and limit its ability to act effectively on the international stage. Looking ahead, the conflict is unlikely to be resolved in the short term, given the entrenched interests and strategic calculations of the involved actors. This prolongation increases both the risks and the opportunities for Pakistan. If managed effectively, Pakistan can transition from a reactive participant to a proactive architect of regional peace, contributing to conflict resolution while safeguarding its own national interests.

Ultimately, Pakistan's success will depend on its ability to convert geopolitical vulnerability into strategic leverage. By maintaining balance, exercising restraint, and promoting dialogue, Pakistan can play a constructive role in mitigating one of the most dangerous conflicts of the contemporary era, while simultaneously redefining its position in the evolving global order.

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