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Pakistani Media on the US-Israel War Against Iran: Part 3 - Mediation, Prestige and Its Limits

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Abstract
This *Issue Brief* – the final one in a three-part series – examines how Pakistani media portrayed Islamabad's mediation between the US and Iran from 14 March to 8 April 2026 which resulted in a temporary ceasefire. Based on editorials and opinion pieces from *Dawn* and *Jang*, published in English and Urdu respectively, the analysis shows a clear narrative progression. Initially, Pakistan's mediation efforts were portrayed as a historic achievement, with a boastful tone that reflected a sense of national prestige. Analysts also used the opportunity to highlight India's perceived regional isolation. However, this tone soon disappeared when tested by harsh economic realities, most notably the UAE's sudden demand for the return of a US$3.5 billion deposit. The *Issue Brief* shows how Pakistani media analysts threaded the line between diplomatic ambition, strategic competition with India, and the severe structural weaknesses of their country.

Keywords: Iran; United States; West Asia; regional security; crisis mediation; diplomacy; Pakistan foreign policy; economic crisis; India; media narratives

This is the third and final *Issue Brief* in a three-part series on Pakistani media coverage of the Iran-Israel-US conflict. While the earlier articles looked at the conflict itself – the first at its opening weeks and the second at its impact on Pakistan – this one looks specifically at Pakistan's own role in it, specifically how Islamabad's mediation between the US and Iran was portrayed from 14 March to 8 April this year.

This article is based on editorials and opinion pieces from *Dawn* and *Jang*, sorted into five themes. Rather than pitting the two papers against each other, it treats them together as one national conversation. Both papers largely agreed on the big picture, Pakistan's diplomatic standing, the mechanics of mediation, the economic costs and the India comparison. Where they differed was mostly in tone and emphasis, at specific points.

The "Islamabad Doctrine" and Diplomatic Renaissance

Pakistani analysts usually portrayed Pakistan's mediation efforts in the conflict as a moment of diplomatic elevation, although the point of emphasis often differed. For Rafia Zakaria the shift from a "pariah state" to a potential peacemaker represents "a remarkable feat of foreign and military policy," which shows a new vision for Pakistan's global and regional role. Muhammad Amir Rana frames it as "a rare moment for Pakistan's diplomacy," noting the country's return as "an interlocutor in a major global conflict after decades." He links this diplomatic capacity to Pakistan's earlier role in the "breakthrough between China and the US in 1971".

Jang uses a more prestige oriented language where Suhail Warraich claims that Pakistan has "attained honour and ascendancy across the world, diplomatically and militarily." Echoing the same, Irfan Athar Qazi characterises the leadership's success as "a historic milestone in global diplomacy". An editorial in *Dawn* takes a more cautious approach and describes Pakistan as a "key intermediary" alongside Egypt and Türkiye, while maintaining contacts with both the US and Iran.

Media coverage also differed in how it explained the basis of Pakistan's diplomatic role. Zakaria links it to the country's experience of managing complex security relationships, arguing that Pakistan's long practice of dealing with competing powers had become an asset in the changing international environment. Rana highlights Pakistan's strategic location and its ability to engage different actors as the main driver of this influence.

However, in his article for *Jang*, Sarwat Jamal Asmai paints a rosy picture translating Pakistan's diplomatic capacity into language of national recognition. He describes Pakistan's ability to be simultaneously trusted by "Iran, the US, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, as well as China and Russia" as "certainly a matter of pride for Pakistan". Hina Pervaiz Butt argues that Pakistan was "no longer just a country entangled in its internal problems," but was playing "a responsible, active, and effective role in global politics".

The idea of a distinct Pakistani diplomatic approach was also put forward with *Jang* phrasing it as the "Islamabad Doctrine." Note, for instance, Furqan Hamid's claim that "experts are now calling this thinking the 'Islamabad Doctrine'," defining Pakistan's approach as "a different path, a path that produces results through silence rather than noise". Taking this further, Sughra Sadaf views Pakistan as "not merely a party but a guarantor of peace and a serious character desiring stability that can be trusted with closed eyes".

There is also the framing of Islamabad as a venue for regional diplomacy. A *Dawn* editorial describes the capital as becoming "the hub of regional diplomacy over the weekend" as key states sent their foreign ministers there in search of a peaceful solution. Hamid Mir gives the episode a particularly boastful interpretation, making "Pakistan Zindabad" the headline itself and presents its appearance as a major moment of international media attention. He highlights that Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi ended his X statement with the words "Pakistan Zindabad" and shared a video of Iranians chanting the slogan on Tehran's streets (Araghchi 2026). Mir further stresses Araghchi's expression of gratitude for Pakistan's peace efforts, using the statement to reinforce the portrayal of Pakistan as a trusted diplomatic intermediary.

The Pragmatic Messenger

Pakistan's mediation efforts are also presented in more pragmatic terms than the broader claims of diplomatic elevation found elsewhere in the coverage. Pakistan was largely described as an intermediary transmitting messages between Washington and Tehran rather than as a powerful guarantor capable of determining the outcome. Muhammad Amir Rana writing for *Dawn* views Pakistan's leverage in practical terms saying that it lay in "maintaining open channels with Iran and potentially serving as a post office among Gulf states". Irfan Athar Qazi broadens this picture in *Jang* placing Pakistan within a wider group of countries involved in the mediation saying, "instead of weapons, diplomacy is now being tried" and that "China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Türkiye are playing their full diplomatic role in ceasefire efforts".

By late March, the coverage became more specific about what Pakistan was transmitting. A *Dawn* editorial notes that "the US has reportedly sent ceasefire demands to Iran via Pakistan," while Iranian officials were said to have described the demands as "unreasonable". Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry notes that Iran had also tabled five demands that the US might find difficult to accept. While Azam Malik describes the two sides' positions as apparently contradictory, he argues that "within these very contradictions lies a narrow path to reconciliation".

By early April, analysts like Moazzam Husain and Zahid Hussain refer more precisely to the "15 points" presented by the US and the five points put forward by Iran. Noting that Pakistan has only played the role of a messenger, Hussain concludes that the country made little progress in bringing the two sides to the negotiating table, as the gap between the respective demands was simply "too wide to bridge". In *Jang*, Mahmood Sham echoes this convergence with *Dawn*, confirming that Pakistan's limited role meant it "merely transmitted these demands without influencing their content."

The limits of this messenger role are further connected to the unequal power of the parties involved. Zahid Hussain warns that mediation "between the aggressor and aggrieved has its inherent pitfalls," particularly because "the weaker party may feel pressured to accept terms that are not in their best interest" when dealing with an adversary possessing "far greater power and resources". Niaz Murtaza talks about this constraint more directly on the expectations of the stronger party, arguing that "a haughty US prefers mediators who just pass messages, and don't ask it to compromise". Adding to this scepticism about Pakistan's capacity, Mahmood Sham questions whether the leadership even possesses "any prior experience of this level of global mediation." Hamid Mir views the mediation as "a welcome development" but also questions US reliability asking, "who will provide a guarantee for US President Trump?"

Yet the exchange of demands was not portrayed as entirely futile. Moazzam Husain argues that the distance between the positions was "normal at the start of serious talks," and added that "yet the process has begun". Taking a similar view, Saleem Safi goes further reasoning that Pakistan "could not arrange direct talks between the two parties at this stage" but had succeeded in exchanging their respective demands, while citing diplomatic experts who argued that "parties initially make maximalist demands and later move towards ground realities". Khalil Ahmed Nainitalwala also views Pakistan's back-channel activity as involving the "transmission of messages between the US and Iran," aimed at "preventing a possible escalation and keeping the situation under control".

Mediation as a Strategic Shield

Pakistan media presented mediation as a way for the country to manage the risks of its defence relationship with Saudi Arabia and avoid direct involvement in the war. The mutual defence agreement was identified as the main vulnerability. Zahid Hussain argues that the pact places Pakistan "in a precarious position," warning that the balancing act "may not continue if Saudi Arabia is drawn into a direct confrontation with Iran". Khurram Husain makes the financial dimension of this pressure explicit. He notes that Saudi Arabia "has considerable leverage due in part to the $3bn deposit that was rolled over in December," and stresses that "the most important thing is to ensure that Pakistan stays out of the fighting, no matter the cost".

Diplomacy was presented as a means of managing Pakistan's alliance obligations without translating them into military participation. Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry argues that Pakistan "must continue its diplomatic pursuit of peace" because "our agreement with Saudi Arabia also demands we play that role." He insists that "Pakistan must not enter the war on any side". Sughra Sadaf expresses the objective in more direct terms, describing the need "to keep Pakistan safe from the heat of gunpowder" and work "to prevent the clash of Muslim countries". Hassan Aslam Shad broadens the mediation effort to regional security arguing that Pakistan's "nuclear and conventional capabilities," together with the strategic depth of Egypt and Türkiye, could help create a "permanent firewall against external aggression" for Saudi Arabia.

The balancing act was also linked to sectarian and domestic sensitivities. Sadaf credits the government and establishment with being "on one page" regarding the objective of keeping Pakistan away from the conflict. Mirza Ishtiaq Baig portrays criticism of the defence relationship as an attempt to undermine an existing partnership, treating the alliance as an asset rather than diplomatic burden.

Some *Jang* coverage also seeks to reconcile Saudi and Iranian interests rather than treating them as inherently incompatible. Muhammad Mehdi argues that Saudi Arabia has no interest in the fall of the Iranian government, reasoning that Iran has "become a defence line for Saudi Arabia at this time".

Dawn's coverage explicitly questions whether Pakistan can maintain the appearance of an impartial intermediary while being tied to Saudi Arabia. Zahid Hussain later argues that Pakistan's "explicit backing of the Trump administration and defence treaty with Saudi Arabia, which is already embroiled in the conflict and is being targeted by Iranian missiles and drones, complicates its ability to act as an honest broker".

Diplomatic Prestige but Economic Vulnerability

Pakistani media places diplomatic prestige alongside a persistent concern about the country's economic fragility. It suggests that geopolitical goodwill and international visibility do not automatically translate into economic security. Niaz Murtaza articulates this distinction most clearly, noting that hosting talks may be seen as an enhancement of Pakistan's global status, but that "real status comes slowly by ensuring economic heft, democracy and security via good strategy and hard work". Viewing it as a strategic constraint, Muhammad Amir Rana argues that "Pakistan's weak economic profile has remained a hindrance, limiting its edge in West Asia's geopolitical and security affairs". Suhail Warraich draws an even sharper contrast. He acknowledges Pakistan's diplomatic visibility but stresses that "our honour and dignity aside, our prime minister's embraces around the world aside, the bitter truth is that our economic condition stands on the brink of collapse... world tours and frequent agreements are not filling our stomachs".

The economic argument is linked directly to national security and foreign-policy autonomy. To underline the limits of military strength without financial stability, Warraich points to the collapse of the Soviet Union observing that "despite hundreds of nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union collapsed due to economic destruction" and stresses that maintaining defence strength requires financial resources. Translating this concern into policy terms, Ishrat Husain warns against the "path of a rentier state, where geostrategic positioning is exchanged for short-term financial inflows," a reliance that Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry notes also "shrinks foreign policy choices".

The UAE deposit episode[i] provides a concrete example of this vulnerability. Before the withdrawal, Khurram Husain warns about the possible "fallout from diplomacy," suggesting that "a country like the UAE" could ask for its deposit to be returned if it is unhappy with Pakistan's decision not to provide military assistance. Muhammad Irfan Siddiqui gives it an emotional touch saying that "that brotherly country which Pakistan always gave the status of an elder brother has, in this difficult time, asked for its $3.5 billion back".

The financial consequences of the withdrawal further expose the limits of Pakistan's economic room for manoeuvre. Mirza Ishtiaq Baig notes that the return of UAE deposits would "increase pressure on the rupee's value" and that Pakistan subsequently requested Saudi Arabia to provide "$5 billion in deposits and $5 billion in deferred oil payments". A *Dawn* editorial places the episode within a broader structural problem, arguing that "years

of weak tax revenue mobilisation, coupled with rising public sector expenditures" have left the government with "little room to absorb such shocks without risking macroeconomic instability".

Both publications draw a broader lesson about economic self-reliance. Siddiqui describes the UAE episode as "more of a lesson for Pakistan than a complaint." He argues that "the world has no permanent relations, only permanent interests," and that "real honour belongs to a nation that stands on its own economy, industry, exports, foreign exchange and the strength of its overseas Pakistanis".

The economic constraint also enters directly into the discussion of Pakistan's mediation role. Kashif Ashfaq warns that "unnecessary intervention or pressure in this major conflict could negatively affect Pakistan's economy." He argues that Pakistan must prioritise "national interests, internal stability and economic priorities" when dealing with the conflict.

The Indiandia Factor

Pakistan's mediation efforts were also used to target its arch-rival India. Media coverage linked Pakistan's growing diplomatic visibility with a perceived decline in India's position, although the two publications differed considerably in how they presented this comparison. *Jang* often used openly triumphalist language, presenting Pakistan's diplomatic activity as a reversal of India's earlier efforts to limit Pakistan's international standing. By contrast, *Dawn* treated the same development more cautiously in examining how Pakistan's diplomatic gains might affect its longer-term strategic position vis-à-vis India.

Jang's coverage was particularly direct in portraying Indian discomfort with Pakistan's growing diplomatic role. Describing Indian official circles as "writhing on hot coals" over Pakistan's global popularity, Sarwat Jamal Asmai and Muhammad Mehdi claim that opposition figures were criticising Narendra Modi for his close association with the Israeli prime minister, arguing that this had contributed to India's international isolation. The same coverage contrasts this alleged isolation with what it describes as Pakistan's "continuous journey of progress on the global stage through excellent diplomacy." Uzma Gul adopts an even more confrontational tone and writes that when the possibility of mediation in Islamabad began circulating, "the Indian lapdog media seemed to catch fire" and that "many could not digest Pakistan's role as a mediator". Her discussion connects the episode to the earlier India-Pakistan confrontation and Operation Sindoor, presenting Pakistan's subsequent diplomatic reception as a reversal of that earlier episode.

Other *Jang* commentators turn this comparison into an explicit claim about diplomatic standing. Pointing to Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar's description of Pakistan's mediation as the work of a *dalal* (broker), Mirza Ishtiaq Baig presents the remark as evidence of Indian frustration with Pakistan's role. Baig further claims that India's long-standing effort to isolate Pakistan had failed and that Pakistan's international standing had instead increased.

The comparison extends to India's relationship with Israel. Baig cites criticism from Indian media and opposition figures questioning why Modi had embraced Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a time when the US and Israel were preparing military action against Iran. In *Dawn,* Abbas Nasir makes a related observation, noting that the Israeli ambassador to India had described Pakistan as a "rogue state with a nuclear weapon" while pointing to the close relationship between Netanyahu and Modi. Unlike the more mocking *Jang* coverage, however, Nasir uses this alignment to raise questions about Pakistan's "external and internal" vulnerabilities rather than to celebrate India's difficulties.

Dawn's treatment of the India comparison is generally more strategic and qualified. Muhammad Amir Rana provides the most extended strategic assessment of how the mediation could affect India-Pakistan competition. He argues that Pakistan's "goodwill in Tehran could widen the existing gulf between Iran and India, especially at a time when India appears to be in diplomatic retreat." He also suggests that stronger cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states "could help Pakistan regain the trust that had been eroding" as India expanded its strategic and economic partnerships with Arab states. Rana, nevertheless, places these developments within the longer-term reality that "India remains central to Pakistan's strategic thinking."

The security dimension further limits any straightforward reading of Pakistan's diplomatic gains as an advantage over India. Warning that Pakistan must remain prepared for "turbulent times" because India is continuing "Operation Sindoor through Afghanistan," Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry presents developments along Pakistan's western frontier as an ongoing security concern rather than merely an opportunity for diplomatic competition.

Conclusion

Pakistani media portrayed the mediation efforts as a genuine but highly unstable diplomatic gain. Early coverage, particularly in *Jang*, leaned heavily into nationalistic boasting, celebrating Pakistan's shift from a "pariah state" to a peacemaker, though this excessive self-praise shows perhaps deeper insecurities about the country's actual standing.

To justify this newfound prestige, commentators reached in different directions. Some revived memories of the 1971 US-China diplomatic breakthrough, while a few championed a newly coined "Islamabad Doctrine." In both cases, they wanted to prove the diplomatic spotlight was earned rather than accidental.

However, when the coverage shifted to the actual mechanism of the ceasefire talks, the triumphant tone soon disappeared. Both *Dawn* and *Jang* conceded that Pakistan was acting strictly as a messenger, not a power broker. Instead of vague scepticism, specific anxieties surfaced – Hamid Mir questioned Donald Trump's reliability, while others pointed out the US had little appetite for compromise, directly questioning whether Islamabad possessed the experience to manage a conflict of this magnitude.

The Saudi defence pact further fractured the narrative. While a few writers tried to spin the alliance as a source of regional weight, the dominant fear was that Riyadh's leverage would drag Pakistan into a wider war, destroying its claims of neutrality.

The harshest reality check, however, was economic. The media noted that diplomatic visibility did not fill stomachs. The UAE's sudden decision to withdraw its $3.5 billion deposit turned abstract worries about economic dependence into an immediate crisis, proving that geopolitical goodwill cannot stabilise a crashing currency.

The media's treatment of India exposed how fractured this coverage really was. *Jang* weaponised the mediation to openly mock the Indian leadership over their country's perceived diplomatic isolation. *Dawn*, however, stripped away the triumphalism entirely, viewing India's regional manoeuvring as a long-term strategic threat.

Read Part 1.

Read Part 2.

ENDNOTE

[i] The UAE held a US$3.5 billion deposit with the State Bank of Pakistan to Pakistan's support foreign exchange reserves. As the war progressed, the UAE became increasingly dissatisfied with what it thought was Pakistan's passive stance on Iranian attacks against the UAE and Islamabad's closer defence ties with Saudi Arabia. In April, Abu Dhabi declined to roll over the funds and demanded immediate repayment. Pakistan repaid roughly $3.45 billion across several instalments by late April. For more, see Jilani and England (2026).

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