***Journal of Religion & Society* (JR&S)**
Available Online:
https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index
Print ISSN: 3006-1296Online ISSN: 3006-130X
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

Middle-Power Mediation in a Fragmenting Order: Pakistan's Diplomatic Balancing in the Gulf–Iran Rivalry

Fatima Soomro
BS International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.
Rabia Bibi
M.Phil. International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.
Hira Shehzadi (Corresponding Author)
M.Phil. International Relations, International Relations, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Central Punjab, Lahore.

ABSTRACT
This study looked at the connection between need assessment, gender, and religiosity among probationary offenders in Rawalpindi District, Pakistan. The research addressed three objectives, to examine the effect of gender on the need assessment of offenders on probation, to examine the effect of religiosity on the need assessment of offenders on probation; and to examine the combined effect of gender and religiosity on the need assessment scores of offenders on probation. The research design adopted was quantitative cross-sectional research and the data gathering instruments were structured questionnaires which were administered to 100 offenders on probation. The questionnaire included socio-demographic data, the Muslim Religiosity-Personality Inventory (MRPI-A) for an assessment of religiosity along with the Probation Service Assessment Planner (PSAP-25) for assessing rehabilitation needs in four areas (Life Necessities, Relationships, Economic Capital and Personal Factors) and a Gender-Responsive Factors Scale. All instruments had acceptable to excellent internal consistency as shown by reliability analysis. The descriptive statistics showed that the respondents were moderately to highly religious and low to moderately rehabilitative needs. Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis were used for inferential analyses. The results showed that gender was not a significant predictor of the offenders' need assessment scores ($p = .409$), and religiosity was not a significant predictor of need assessment ($p = .943$) when considered separately. The overall regression model ($F (3,96) = 3.048$, $p = .032$) was statistically significant, suggesting that the effect of gender and religiosity combined is significant in explaining offenders' rehabilitation needs. There was an 8.7% variance explained in the need assessment ($R^2 = .087$). The study concludes that the influence of gender and religiosity is not the only one affecting the offenders' rehabilitation needs, but also social and economic factors. The findings add to the scant empirical studies conducted in Pakistan and highlight the need for a multi-dimensional assessment of the offenders in its probation process.

***Keywords**: Intersectionality, Gender, Religiosity, Probation, Need Assessment, Rehabilitation.*

1. Introduction

Half a century of organized security of the Gulf is unraveling. In such a "multiplex" world in which there is no single power or model to dominate, and regional players have more space – and, more importantly, more responsibility – to managing their own conflicts, as observed by Acharya (2014). The post-2011 Middle East is a region of weak states, transnational conflicts and unstable alliances, where it is no longer possible to expect

protection from outside, Lynch (2016) demonstrates. The splitting apart within the Gulf itself as revealed in the 2017 blockade of Qatar discussed by Ulrichsen (2020) is a reminder that even its institutions designed to bring the Gulf together are fragile. The ability to manage conflict in this context more and more relies on the mediation of third parties who do not play the role of great powers, nor of direct belligerents.

One of the most prominent seem to be Pakistan. It has a long, bickering border with Iran, access to Saudi Arabia via military ties back to the 1960s and a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed in September 2025, remittances, oil and emergency monetary support from the Gulf states and ties with China and a mending relationship with Washington. On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel commenced strikes on Iran, which were followed by Iran retaliating against Israel and several Gulf states, Pakistan condemned both the strikes on Iran and the attacks on the Gulf, offered to host talks, and press reports indicated that Pakistan became a key conduit between Washington and Tehran in April 2026 and was instrumental in reaching a temporary agreement in June 2026. In October 2026, however, reports surfaced that Iran questioned Pakistan's neutrality, as Islamabad started deploying forces to Saudi Arabia in the wake of the new defense pact. These events are recent and are continuing, so this article should be treated with the same level of caution.

The puzzle has analytical significance. Conventional mediation theory expects intermediaries to be either neutral or to have leverage over the parties. There is no neutrality in Pakistan, as it is committed to Saudi goals and is neither a leverage rich great power nor a weight-lifting power. But it's been called in, or called itself in, to the role again and again. The article thus raises three questions. In the first place, what resources are available to a middle power with a partisan commitment to act as a mediator in the Gulf – Iran rivalry? Secondly, what undermines its credibility? Third, how does Pakistan keep playing the mediation role without hurting its security interests?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Middle powers

The idea of a middle power dates back a long time. Middle powers were systematically treated by Holbraad (1984) who defined them by their status in the state hierarchy and observed their preference for multilateral solutions and order-preserving diplomacy. Cooper, Higgott and Nossal (1993) placed greater emphasis on behaviour and indicated that middle powers are characterised by the things that they do: develop coalitions, act as catalysts and facilitators, and play niche roles in areas that they can influence. Jordaan (2003) distinguished between traditional middle powers, defined as stable, rich, sometimes western, and emerging middle powers, defined as regionally influential, economically uneven, and reformist and regionally based. Pakistan is a country that doesn't quite fall into either of those categories because it is big, it has a nuclear program, but it is an economically fragile nation. However, the behavioural definition is helpful, as the facilitative efforts of the Pakistani side are akin to catalytic and coalition-building behaviour, not great power coercion.

International mediation

There is a set of demanding conditions in the mediation literature. Touval and Zartman (1985) criticized the principle of impartiality used in mediators, saying that mediators have their own interests and that they may even sometimes be more effective when they are partial, as a trusted mediator can force his side to settle for less than they really want. In an

effort to prove that the outcome of mediation is a function of the characteristics of the parties, nature of the dispute, and the mediator's resources, rank, and strategy, Bercovitch (1997) reviewed theory and practice. Kleiboer (1996) discovered that the perception of mediator credibility and the presence of leverage are determinants of success/failure and mediator motives are as significant as mediator instruments. Beardsley (2011) recognized the mediation dilemma – mediation can resolve the problems in the short term, but if the root issues are not addressed, then the agreements may be fragile and subject to reoccurrence. Time is important, Zartman (2001) contended, and a mutually hurting stalemate in which conflicting parties see a way out are the best catalysts for success. As taken together, these pieces imply that there is a possibility of mediation through a partial mediation power, which is very sensitive to timing, the perceived credibility of the mediator and the mediator's own interests.

The Gulf–Iran rivalry and its mediators

Gause (2010) demonstrates that the perception of threat, and foreign patronal concerns, as well as the domestic concerns of regimes have influenced Gulf security, rather than just the balance of power. The current competition is more of an attempt to secure regional control and the identities of the sects are merely tools, not a cause, argues Gause (2014). Mabon (2013) sees the rivalry as a struggle for soft power and legitimacy between Riyadh and Tehran, whereas Wehrey and colleagues (2009) look at the immediate post-Saddam era, which witnessed rivalry alongside a certain level of cooperation. Takeyh (2009) has suggested that Iran's foreign policy has been a mixture of ideology and pragmatism, and Ehteshami (2017) has focused on its internal transformation and strategic isolation as the factors behind Iran's regional actions. For the more general comparative context of foreign policy analysis in the region, see the work of Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2002), who emphasize the nature of domestic structures and a penetrated regional system.

Small Gulf states have played a particularly active role as mediators. Oman's diplomatic non-politics and neutrality, as practiced by the Sultan himself (Valeri, 2009), are examined, and Qatari diplomacy is treated as a conscious process of status-seeking and security through diplomatic relevance (Kamrava, 2011). In this sense, the role of mediator could be a source of power for the states that do not have coercive power. They also note a difference with Pakistan that is not neutral and not having the financial insulation that Qatar has.

Pakistan between Riyadh and Tehran

The scholarship on Pakistan's ties with the Gulf and Iran is not as extensive but important. Rizvi (1993) outlines the geostrategic context that influenced the orientation of Pakistan towards the outside, where linkages with Muslim countries provided support for the country's diplomacy and economy. Cohen (2004) has demonstrated that Pakistan's identity and strategic thinking has been shaped against India and the military is the main custodian of the country's identity and foreign policy orientations, among which are its relationships with the Gulf states, while Shah (2014) has illustrated the process of institutionalization of Pakistani army in foreign policy, including with the Gulf states. Saudi–Pakistani ties were well established and well documented, including Saudi financial support and Pakistani military support, by Riedel (2011). Nasr (2006) suggests that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed the nature of Sunni–Shia relationship in the entire Muslim world, while Nasr (2000) shows how regional politics and domestic concerns fostered sectarian mobilization in Pakistan in the period 1979–1998. Abou Zahab and Roy (2004) explore the transnational Islamist networks which interlinked Pakistan and Afghanistan, where Saudi and Iranian

support overlapped with local militancy. Baloch nationalism, which crosses the Pakistan–Iran border, keeps the frontier as a perennial bilateral security issue, which Greare (2006) has studied.

Research Gap

Such literatures are largely disjointed. The issue of Pakistan and Middle-power and mediation is not given much consideration by middle power or mediation scholarship. Consequently, the dynamics of a state's partisan commitments and its ability to mediate, and their implications for those commitments, have not been systematically analyzed, nor have the implications of the state's security alliances for its ability to mediate been examined. This article fills that void.

Theoretical Framework

Threat perception and the security dilemma

The states do not weigh against power, but against threats, which are characterized by the combination of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability and perceived threat intentions (Walt 1987). Saudi and Iranian threat perceptions in the Gulf are mutually reinforcing, as are those in the security dilemma, in which defensive actions by one state are perceived as threatening by the other (Jervis 1978). The takeaway for Pakistan is that both parties will be looking for any indication of alignment in Pakistan's actions and any defensive move towards one would be interpreted as an offensive move towards the other.

Hedging

According to Kuik (2008), hedging is a search for alternative policy options, often conflicting, to mitigate risks and maintain policy options in times of uncertainty. Pakistan's external relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, China and America can be seen on the basis of hedging. The process itself is a kind of hedge, as it allows a state to keep in touch with everyone and project its worth to each. But the danger is that a state that has formal pledges will be seen as being "duplicitious" especially when these pledges are implemented.

Two-level games and the penetrated region.

Putnam (1988) demonstrates that international negotiators are working at both the international and domestic levels, where domestic constituencies limit the choices and options they have to offer and accept. The domestic front consists of a big Shia minority, strong Sunni religious lobbies, an army which has a strong say in security policy and an economy which relies on the support from the Gulf. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), regional security complexes are moulded by amity and enmity, and external powers can access them through the process of 'localization' by joining local actors. Security in the postcolonial world depends as much on the weakness within the nation, as it does upon the threats that come from the outside, as Ayoob (1995) emphasizes. The following views imply that Pakistan is not just a player in the Gulf's security network, but is also an interlocutor between the security force networks of the Gulf and is also a security force network within Pakistan.

Bounded brokerage and propositions

The article introduces the notion of bounded brokerage, which characterizes mediation carried out by middle actors whose power is grounded in access, relationships and reputation, but not coercion or material reward, and whose credibility is compromised with formal commitments to one party. It proposes 3 propositions.

The mediation role of a middle power is shaped by access to all parties and by the perceived discretion, rather than by material leverage.

P2 (Credibility erosion): when the security promises mediator makes to one party come into effect and become apparent, forward deployment, the credibility of the mediation decreases.
P3 (Domestic Bounding): Domestic sectarian, military and economic structures limit the room for manoeuvre of the mediator by restricting them to specific parties.

Research Design and Methodology

The study is a single-case, within-case design of four periods: from 1979 to 1989, preceded by the Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq war, followed by the Afghan jihad; 1990 to 2014 including the decision to go to war regarding the Gulf War, sectarian violence and Pakistan's relative neutrality; 2015 to 2023 which encompassed the Yemen war decision, 2016 mediation attempt, and Saudi–Iranian rapprochement of 2023; and the period from 2023 to the date of this study (October 2026), including the 2025 defence deal and the Iran war of 2026. The case is chosen as a most-likely case of a 'partisan commitment - mediation tension' in Pakistan.

India and the Gulf–Iran Rivalry in a Fragmenting Order

The modern rivalry began after 1979, when the Iranian Revolution questioned both the legitimacy of the monarchical system and the Saudi leadership over Islam. It was exacerbated by the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003 and the 2011 revolutions which gave rise to new competition fields in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. It's not just a matter of ideology. The literature reviewed above reveals that it is motivated by mutual threat perception, regime security and competition for influence, and sectarian identity acts as a mobilising language.

There are three distinguishing characteristics to the present stage. First, guarantees from the outside are less dependable. Gulf states have broadened their partnership, reaching Beijing, Turkey and Russia as well as the United States; and Iran has sought to expand ties with Beijing and Moscow. Second, a lower threshold for the use of force has been found, as exemplified by the attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, the war between Israel and Iran in June 2025 with American strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, and the war that started on 28 February 2026. Thirdly, the plurality of the regional diplomacy has come back. Saudi-Iranian relations were restored in March 2023 in Beijing, with earlier contacts arranged by Iraq and Oman, and the boundaries were challenged in 2026 when Iranian missiles and drones were fired at Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations. In October 2026, the Strait of Hormuz was still closed and negotiations between the US and Iran were deadlocked with several countries involved in mediation efforts, such as Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

This environment creates a need for middlemen between the two camps who are acceptable to at least a certain extent to Washington. It also increases the liability of failure for such intermediaries, because any state holding a middle position with respect to the spillover risks is susceptible to becoming part of the conflict.

Pakistan's Balancing, 1979–2023

The last decade (1979–1989) saw the emergence of sectarianism and the Saudi connection, as described in 6.1 Revolution, sectarianism and the Saudi connection.

It was during the 1980s that the tilt was towards Riyadh, though Pakistan was one of the first states to recognise the Islamic Republic. General Zia ul-Haq's Islamisation policies and Saudi financial aid had the effects of making Pakistan's internal religious politics Saudi and Iranian. As Nasr (2000) and Abou Zahab and Roy (2004) explain, violence made the competition a domestic issue and as a result, sectarian organizations from both sides of the

divide were dependent on outside patronages. A bilateral military pact was signed, in which Pakistan deployed substantial forces in Saudi Arabia, strengthening the trend of Pakistan being a security provider for the kingdom. Meanwhile, Pakistan played a formal role of being a neutral player in the Iran-Iraq war conflict and was engaged in Islamic diplomacy to bring the war to a close, setting a precedent of a partisanship security relationship with a neutral stance.

Neutrality under pressure (1990–2014)

In the 1990-91 Gulf War Pakistan had deployed troops to cover Saudi Arabia, but the officers and people of Pakistan were against all form of offensive and Pakistan maintained relations with Iran carefully. During the 1990s, there was a lot of sectarian violence within Pakistan and also some tension between the two countries regarding Afghanistan: Pakistan supported the Taliban while Iran backed the anti-Taliban forces. Regardless, these two states had ongoing contact and shared information on the border. This pattern was one of guarded caution; Pakistan was playing around with both sides but did not make any open moves with either side.

Declining the Yemen war and early mediation (2015–2023)

The turning point came in 2015 when Saudi Arabia asked the Pakistani forces to join the Yemen campaign. The Pakistani parliament passed a non-partisan resolution, which was a response to the domestic opposition, fear of sectarian spill-over and concerns regarding Pakistan's relations with Iran. The civilian and military leadership headed to Riyadh and Tehran in January 2016 to call for de-escalation, following the execution of a Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia and the attack on Saudi missions in Iran. A former army chief later became the leader of a Saudi-led military coalition, where Iran saw this as a dubious move. The Saudi-led mediation between Riyadh and Tehran was once again offered by Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2019. None of these efforts yielded any results, consistent with the mediation literature, which focuses on ripeness and leverage, but all helped to maintain Pakistan's reputation as an actor with access. The bilateral relationship was fragile in January 2024, when militants were attacked in both countries with cross-border strikes, but the two governments have responded swiftly to defuse their relationship, suggesting a mutual desire to tame relations on the border.

Mediation and Commitment, 2023–2026

From Beijing to Kabul

In 2023, Saudi–Iranian relations were restored through a Saudi–Iranian agreement, facilitated by China, which showed that a great power with economic power over both countries can achieve what regional powers cannot. The agreement was welcomed by Pakistan and it put itself in a supporting role. Its next actions were an indication of increased involvement with one side. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia inked a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, under which an attack on one is an attack on both, cementing a relationship that was previously based on tacit understandings.

The war of 2026 and the Islamabad channel

Upon the outbreak of war in February 2026, Pakistan condemned strikes on Pakistan's neighbor Iran and Iranian attacks on the Gulf states launched by the latter. According to press reports, while Pakistan's foreign minister told Iranian officials about the Saudi defence pact, he also assured them that Saudi territory would not be used against Iran, which was likely to coincide with a measure of restraint on Iranian drone strikes against some Gulf states. Pakistan's leaders reached out to both Riyadh and Tehran, invited them to talks and

in April 2026 hosted an Islamabad meeting of US and Iranian delegations. It is reported that Pakistan, along with other mediators, helped secure a temporary deal in June 2026, but the conditions were contested and it was also doubted that they had been implemented; Tehran has claimed that Washington had failed to fulfil its obligations.

This phase is a representation of Proposition P1. Pakistan's added value was its links and its access: its military leadership and civilian government had connections to the Iranian government, connections to the Gulf capitals and connections to Washington, which, in 2025, had taken a shine to Islamabad. It didn't depend on material incentives or force.

Alliance becomes operational

The second half of 2026 demonstrated the reduction of mediation capacity as a result of commitments. In August, it was reported that Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey signed a collective defence language trilateral defence accord. The lack of an adversary in the text is welcome ambiguity that points to the fact that the message was meant to calm Tehran, analysts said. In the meantime, however, Pakistani forces and partners reportedly are speeding up troop movement to Saudi Arabia, a country under constant assault from the Iran-backed Houthis. Pakistani authorities say their troops will not fight against the Houthis. The deployment has, however, drawn criticism from Iranian officials and media, who have criticized Pakistan's attempts to become a mediator. In October, Pakistan's top military official made a trip to Tehran for consultations, which included, according to reports, both the US–Iran track and the Yemen dimension, and Pakistani officials kept repeating the merits of the previous deal. Analysts cited in the media called Pakistan as being in between the devil and the deep blue sea when it comes to mediation and Saudi commitments.

Mediation by stage

Breaking up mediation into steps helps to understand its areas of success in Pakistan. Pakistan did well at the convening stage as it provided a venue, the trust of its leadership and a place that both Washington and Tehran could agree to. Its ability to carry out the message-carrying role was moderate to strong as interlocutors on both sides seemed to appreciate its role in passing on positions without embarrassment in public. It was used at the drafting stage, it cooperated with other mediators and it did not take credit for the results. However, at the implementation stage it did not have that many instruments. Pakistan cannot provide Iran with any relief from sanctions, security guarantees to the United States and nor can it be able to monitor Iran's nuclear or maritime commitments. Implementation issues such as conflicting interpretations over who had failed to live up to the June agreement were therefore not within its scope. This stage-based pattern aligns with the mediation literature which suggests that weaker mediators would be more useful at the beginning of a mediation process and would be least useful if enforcement is needed.

Analysis: Sources of Leverage and Constraint:

Pakistan's leverage is low and has nothing to do with material capacity. It does not have Qatar's money or the neutrality of Oman and it can be no match for either of them. Its features are geographic proximity to Iran; military experience in Saudi Arabia; nuclear status, which endows it with prestige and a stake in its stability because its interlocutors are the United States; and an operational relationship with Washington, meaning that Tehran has an avenue to the United States that does not go through an adversary. Its leaders have also created the personal and institutional avenues that enable a message to be carried, particularly through the army. This aligns with the notion that mediators may also act

effectively by means of trust and access, and the behavioural description of middle-power diplomacy, as catalytic and facilitative.

There is an indirect resource, too, in China. Small (2015) and Markey (2020) argue that the China–Pakistan partnership is deep and strategic, and Beijing's own interest in the energy flow of the Gulf and in a stable Hormuz makes it an incentive to de-escalate. The mediation process of Pakistan is based on a relationship which no one else in the Gulf has, and which it enhances.

The record for 2026 is all but conclusive for Proposition P2. The highest level of Pakistan's credibility was when its commitment to Saudi Arabia was dormant and legal, as opposed to operational, and lowest when forces were deployed and a trilateral pact was signed. There are several features of the Iranian reaction of interest. Iran seems to have a difference of opinion on defending itself, and on Yemen, it seems it is not willing to cross that line. And Pakistan's public statements of non-engagement aim to maintain that separation. However, the security dilemma applies here as well from Tehran's standpoint, Pakistani forces in the kingdom make it more difficult to make decisions, no matter what their mission is. The mediation dilemma defined in the literature is also relevant, as a temporary solution which fails to address the deeper issue of the dispute puts the mediator at risk if the solution fails.

The room for manoeuvre for Pakistan is limited by structures that bind it to certain parties. Any perceived stance against Iran is sensitive domestically because of its sizeable Shia minority, estimated to be as high as one fifth of the population, and because its Sunni majorities are powerful and the history of Saudi patronage is on its side. The Baloch border region between Pakistan and Iran renders Pakistan a country which is reliant on Iran's cooperation for border security. Pakistan's economic dependency is on the Gulf States, for its oil and gas requirement, remittances, and emergency financial assistance which in 2026 has been reported to get extra relief from Saudi Arabia. Mediation is done by the same institution that looks after the Saudi relationship, the army. These factors are very much part of the reasons why Pakistan cannot credibly claim to be neutral and why mediation in this instance can be said to be bounded.

Comparative benchmarks: Oman, Qata and Turkey

By comparing Pakistan with other regional intermediaries, one can get an idea for what is unique about Pakistan. As mentioned above, Oman's mediation is based on discretion and no alliance commitments that would be seen as hostile by Tehran. Qatar's relies on financial resources, media exposure and the benefits of diplomatic relevance, and it has been proven by its own experience of the Gulf rifts. Pakistan doesn't have either of these assets. It is, on the other hand, a security-related mediator whose relationship with one party is military and possibly operational. This is a unique mix and is why Pakistan's credibility is more responsive to security developments than that of Muscat or Doha.

Turkey provides a partial parallel. It is a member of the trilateral pact and is an active player in the diplomatic arena, and it has a similar dilemma that a balance needs to be struck between commitment and mediation. The introduction of mediation in 2026, which was a multi-national project involving Turkey, Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, indicates that national stakeholders are aware of the issue of the single, dedicated mediator. A division of labour might thus be a growing trend, whereby security states deal with convening and substantive, more neutral states deal with the substantive channels, and that is something Pakistan would be interested in fostering.

Discussion

The results corroborate the bounded-brokerage concept. The mediation process in Pakistan is effective in the early, convening phase of the process, where access is key, but faces challenges in the implementation and trust-preserving phases, where credibility is crucial. The case also validates the thesis of the partiality of the mediator as a benefit. Partiality increases leverage only when it is not viewed as threatening the other party, and narrowing of the margin because of the operationalisation of the Saudi commitment.

Dimension	Enables mediation	Constrains mediation
Geography	Border and maritime proximity to Iran and the Gulf	Vulnerability to spillover and Baloch border insecurity
Security ties	Military credibility with Riyadh	Defence pacts and deployments read as alignment by Tehran
Economy	Gulf financial lifelines create shared interest in stability	Dependence on Gulf support limits independence
Society	Shared Islamic identity and multi-sect legitimacy	Sectarian divisions amplify external pressure
Great powers	Renewed US channel and Chinese backing	Risk of being seen as an instrument of either

Theoretically, the mediator's problem is not only partiality, but making his commitments evident. If a state's security relationship is dormant, it can still be a mediator. Once it gets up and running, the mediator will need either to separate the parts institutionally, or to posture to be less credible.

10. Policy Implications

Islamabad must first draw a distinction between mediation and alliance roles in the institution, concentrating civilian and foreign-ministry roles on the mediation aspect and making it very clear that deployments to Saudi Arabia are solely for defensive purposes. Second, it should also seek from all stakeholders in writing any clarification of scope of its obligations, including that it will not conduct offensive operations in Yemen. Third, it should be multilateralised, in cooperation with the other mediators including Turkey, Qatar, Oman, Egypt and China, so that the burden and the responsibility in case of failure are shared. Fourth, it should make bilateral progress with Iran on border security, trade and energy, to de-dependency on the Gulf supply and to enhance its position. Fifth, it should focus on its economic weakness: If it diversifies its energy and financial flows, any patron's leverage will be lessened.

Sixth, Pakistan needs to make its mediation principles transparent and clear. The uncertainty of what Pakistan will and will not do, such as its refusal to join in the offensive operation and its commitment to keeping the parties' communications confidential, as well as its willingness to accept other mediators, could make it more difficult for rivals to question Pakistan's involvement. This level of transparency is a cost-effective way to strengthen trust when the formal structure of its alliance is being called into question.

Conclusion

This article has claimed that Pakistan is bounded broker in the Gulf–Iran rivalry. Being a middle power, which can convene, carry messages and mitigate the risk of escalation, but at the same time has strong commitments to one, Pakistan can have limited capability to sustain mediation due to security obligations, domestic structures and economic dependence. In the history of 1979-2026, Pakistan has never been inclined to make any irreversible moves, hedged around its partners, and made mediation a possibility, especially

when the order in the region is in danger. It also indicates that the more it is able to put its alliances into practice, the greater its mediation status is challenged.

The bigger picture is that intermediaries play a more important role in such a fragmenting order, but are at the same time more vulnerable. Middle powers cannot hope to replace trust with access, nor to retain formal alliances and mediation without institutional checks and balances. The challenge for Pakistan is that of building a lasting and believable role in the international arena amidst the dangers of entrapment, by transforming its geography, relations and reputation. Whether or not it can or not will determine not only its security, but also its ability to control one of the most perilous rivalries in the international system.

References

Abou Zahab, M., & Roy, O. (2004). *Islamist networks: The Afghan–Pakistan connection.* Hurst.

Acharya, A. (2014). *The end of American world order.* Polity Press.

Ayoob, M. (1995). *The Third World security predicament: State making, regional conflict, and the international system.* Lynne Rienner.

Beardsley, K. (2011). *The mediation dilemma.* Cornell University Press.

Bercovitch, J. (1997). Mediation in international conflict: An overview of theory, a review of practice. In I. W. Zartman & J. L. Rasmussen (Eds.), *Peacemaking in international conflict: Methods and techniques* (pp. 125–153). United States Institute of Peace Press.

Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security.* Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, S. P. (2004). *The idea of Pakistan.* Brookings Institution Press.

Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R. A., & Nossal, K. R. (1993). *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order.* UBC Press.

Ehteshami, A. (2017). *Iran: Stuck in transition.* Routledge.

Gause, F. G., III. (2010). *The international relations of the Persian Gulf.* Cambridge University Press.

Gause, F. G., III. (2014). *Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East Cold War* (Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper No. 11). Brookings Institution.

Grare, F. (2006). *Pakistan: The resurgence of Baluch nationalism* (Carnegie Paper No. 65). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Hinnebusch, R., & Ehteshami, A. (Eds.). (2002). *The foreign policies of Middle East states.* Lynne Rienner.

Holbraad, C. (1984). *Middle powers in international politics.* Macmillan.

Jervis, R. (1978). Cooperation under the security dilemma. *World Politics, 30*(2), 167–214.

Jordaan, E. (2003). The concept of a middle power in international relations: Distinguishing between emerging and traditional middle powers. *Politikon, 30*(2), 165–181.

Kamrava, M. (2011). Mediation and Qatari foreign policy. *The Middle East Journal, 65*(4), 539–556.

Kleiboer, M. (1996). Understanding success and failure of international mediation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 40*(2), 360–389.

Kuik, C.-C. (2008). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia, 30*(2), 159–185.

Lynch, M. (2016). *The new Arab wars: Uprisings and anarchy in the Middle East.* PublicAffairs.

Mabon, S. (2013). *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft power rivalry in the Middle East.* I.B. Tauris.

Markey, D. S. (2020). *China's western horizon: Beijing and the new geopolitics of Eurasia.* Oxford University Press.

Nasr, S. V. R. (2000). International politics, domestic imperatives, and identity mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979–1998. *Comparative Politics, 32*(2), 171–190.
Nasr, V. (2006). *The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future.* W. W. Norton.
Putnam, R. D. (1988). Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games. *International Organization, 42*(3), 427–460.
Riedel, B. (2011). *Deadly embrace: Pakistan, America, and the future of the global jihad.* Brookings Institution Press.
Rizvi, H.-A. (1993). *Pakistan and the geostrategic environment: A study of foreign policy.* Macmillan.
Shah, A. (2014). *The army and democracy: Military politics in Pakistan.* Harvard University Press.
Small, A. (2015). *The China–Pakistan axis: Asia's new geopolitics.* Oxford University Press.
Takeyh, R. (2009). *Guardians of the revolution: Iran and the world in the age of the ayatollahs.* Oxford University Press.
Touval, S., & Zartman, I. W. (Eds.). (1985). *International mediation in theory and practice.* Westview Press.
Ulrichsen, K. C. (2020). *Qatar and the Gulf crisis.* Hurst.
Valeri, M. (2009). *Oman: Politics and society in the Qaboos state.* Hurst.
Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances.* Cornell University Press.
Wehrey, F., Karasik, T., Nader, A., Ghez, J., Hansell, L., & Guffey, R. A. (2009). *Saudi–Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam: Rivalry, cooperation, and implications for U.S. policy.* RAND Corporation.
Zartman, I. W. (2001). The timing of peace initiatives: Hurting stalemates and ripe moments. *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 1*(1), 8–18.