
CONNECTIVITY, CONFLICT AND DIPLOMACY: PAKISTAN'S MIDDLE POWER JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Pakistan's bilateral relations with India and the US after Phase II of CPEC; it further studies the transformation in relations that transpired after the India-Pakistan military confrontation in May 2025. Based on a neorealist theoretical framework, the paper maintains that CPEC at first deepened Pakistan's partnership with China while concurrently intensifying India's anger and cooling Washington's engagement with Islamabad. The military operations of May 2025, namely India's Operation Sindoor and Pakistan's counter-offensive Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos, upturned suppositions about the conventional military balance in South Asia. These military events set in motion a chain of diplomatic outcomes that no state had predicted. Within the period of twelve months after the ceasefire, Islamabad hosted the first direct Washington-Tehran engagement in over forty years and also procured a partnership with the US. These developments are an indication that CPEC, while restricting independent action in some respects, also presented the strategic foundation from which Pakistan set up a credible deterrent in May 2025 and successively re-positioned itself as a diplomatic middle power of the region. India's response to this repositioning, evidenced by its rejection of US mediation claims and the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, reflects New Delhi's unease with an emerging regional order it did not design.

KEYWORDS

CPEC, Pakistan, India, United States, Iran

INTRODUCTION

The primary ambition of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), formally launched in April 2015, was an investment plan of approximately \$62 billion aimed at transforming Pakistan's energy sector and transport network. While

doing so, it sought to bind two neighboring states, China and Pakistan, more closely within a shared strategic architecture (Lane, 2025). The geopolitical implications of that ambition were never far from the surface. CPEC traverses Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory now claimed by India (Shah, 2017). It terminates at Gwadar, a deep-sea port whose strategic potential has not escaped the attention of any regional power with interests in the Arabian Sea. It carries Chinese capital into Pakistan that Washington had long regarded as its own difficult but indispensable partner in South Asia (Riyaz & Jaffar, 2025).

This paper began as a study of CPEC linked geopolitical implications. Between the initial drafting of this study and final revision, the regional environment changed dramatically. On the night of 6-7 May 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor, a series of missile and air strikes on some targets inside Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. Pakistan's response, Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos, was conducted across several areas and shaped military outcomes whose magnitude vibrated even beyond the four days of conflict (Inter-Services Public Relations-ISPR, 2025). A ceasefire was enacted on 10 May 2025, through US diplomatic involvement. The ceasefire is, in several respects, more far-reaching than the fighting itself.

In this background, the US President Donald Trump was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Pakistan and signed a 500 million US dollars critical minerals partnership with Washington. Later, it also formalized a mutual defense agreement with Saudi Arabia, and most strikingly brought Iranian and American delegations to Islamabad for their first substantial direct talks since 1979. The Economist (The British News/ magazine) described Pakistan's conduct during this period as that of a "deft handler of global power politics" (The Economist, 2026). India, which had entered the May 2025 crisis with the obvious expectation of signifying escalation dominance over Pakistan, found itself diplomatically outmaneuvered and openly annoyed by the manner in which Washington publicly credited the ceasefire to its own mediation. A former Indian high commissioner to Pakistan, commented over the act of the US in these words "Public opinion in India now tends to see the US as an unreliable partner" (Krishnan, 2025).

These events demand integration into any serious analysis of CPEC's foreign policy consequences. The corridor did not cause the May 2025 confrontation, but it shaped the strategic conditions within which that confrontation unfolded. The diplomatic reconfiguration that followed cannot be understood without reference to the decade of CPEC-driven alignment. This paper starts from the structural pressures generated by CPEC through the military and diplomatic events of 2025-26, and assesses what Pakistan's emergent middle-power posture means for the wider regional order.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Structural realism provides an analytical lens for the inquiry of states' changing behaviours. In Kenneth Waltz's formulation, states operating within an anarchic international system have no reliable authority above them and must therefore pursue security through self-help, capability accumulation, and strategic alignment. The distribution of capabilities at the systemic level determines state behavior more reliably than do domestic political variables or the preferences of individual leaders (Waltz, 1979). From this standpoint, CPEC represents Pakistan's rational response to a structural predicament, a security environment defined by an adversarial neighbour India, a patron in Washington whose support had grown increasingly conditional, and an economy too constrained. China offered capital, technology, and strategic assurance. Pakistan accepted.

Waltz's framework also illuminates India's response. As a rising regional power with aspirations to global status, India perceived CPEC not merely as an economic irritant but as evidence of deliberate Chinese strategic encirclement in which Beijing's southern corridor complemented its Himalayan pressure. India's subsequent deepening of ties with the United States, its investment in the Chabahar Port, and its eventual military escalation in May 2025 all reflect the logic of counterbalancing a perceived shift in the regional power distribution.

The May 2025 confrontation introduces a dimension that classical neorealism handles imperfectly. Robert Jervis's work on misperception in international relations offers more granular analytical tools for understanding how nuclear-armed states miscalculate at the conventional level (Jervis, 1976). India's operation appears to have been premised on the assumption that Pakistan's economic problems and internal security concerns had tarnished its conventional response capability to a point at which limited military action could be conducted without triggering an equivalent military reply. The operational record of Bunyan-un-Marsoos corrected that misperception at considerable cost to India's strategic communication (The Nation, 2026).

The post-conflict diplomatic trajectory calls for a supplementary framework. The "middle power" literature in international relations, drawing on Holbraad, Cooper, Higgott, as well as Barry Buzan's theorization of regional powers, characterizes middle powers as states that seek to extend their influence through multilateral institution-building, bridge-building between larger adversaries and normative leadership (Holbraad, 1984; Buzan, 2004; Cooper et al., 1993). The success of the 1st phase of CPEC, the four day India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, Pakistan's hosting of US-Iranian negotiations, its role in ceasefire talks, and simultaneous growth of ties with China, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey all are linked to this operational template. Whether this constitutes a durable strategic repositioning or

a conjunctural advantage dependent on certain dispositions is an uncertainty this paper tackles in its concluding section.

The diplomatic middle-power framework illustrates that states get middle-power status not merely because of their material capabilities but because their functional roles explicitly contribute to regional order. This theoretical frame identifies a state's behavioral indications of middle-power conduct; a) middle powers build bridge between big rivals, b) they build multilateral institutions, c) normative leadership (Buzan, 2004; Holbraad, 1984). Pakistan's trajectory across 2025-26 can be assessed against each in turn as it aligns with the behavioral conception of diplomatic middle powers, which underscores bridge-building, mediation and niche leadership rather than quantifiable capabilities only. Middle powers' influence originates through its role of dialogue facilitator among rival states, reducing regional tensions, and serving major powers where they face political constraints.

The subsequent analysis in this paper signals the emergence of a diplomatic middle power whose influence comes out of its ability to mediate disputes, connect competing regional actors and its contribution in shaping the multipolar Asian order. The literature also indicates that this role of Pakistan is also linked with the CPEC which has converted Pakistan's geopolitical location into diplomatic agency.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on interpretive policy analysis and a comparative case-study method. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it seeks to explain foreign policy behaviour within its broader geopolitical and strategic context rather than to test causal relationships through statistical analysis. Given the complexity of CPEC projects and Pakistan's engagement with China, qualitative analysis provides the flexibility required to interpret emerging geopolitical trends and Pakistan's foreign policy towards the US, India and China during the ongoing CPEC projects. The evidence draws exclusively from primary official sources, peer-reviewed publications from internationally recognized research institutions, as detailed below.

Primary official sources consulted are the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) communiqués issued between 6th to 12th May 2025, Annual Reports of 2021-2024 of CPEC Authority Pakistan, Pakistan Article IV Consultation Staff Reports of the International Monetary Fund published in the years of 2023, 2024, 2025, Economic Memorandum Pakistan of the World Bank-2024, Military Expenditure Database (2024) published by the Stockholm International Peace Research

Institute (SIPRI), the verbatim records of the United Nations Security Council relating to the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, the Military Agreement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan (2025), and the Joint Statement of US-Pakistan following the September 2025 Oval Office meeting.

Secondary sources drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship include works cited in full in the bibliography section, published in journals. Institutional research consulted includes reports published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Stimson Center, Chatham House, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Al Jazeera and other newspapers and books.

For the May 2025 military confrontation, the study triangulates the official statements of ISPR with contemporary reporting by BBC News, Reuters, and Al Jazeera English-publications whose editorial standards meet the threshold for the reliability of secondary sources in peer-reviewed social science research. Where Pakistani and Indian accounts of specific military outcomes diverge, the paper attributes contested claims to their institutional source rather than arbitrating between them, in keeping with the methodological caution appropriate to events where independent verification remained incomplete at the time of writing.

Qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis, prepared around three analytical angles(i) CPEC's structural effects on Pakistan's bilateral relations with India and the US (ii) the military confrontation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 (iii) Pakistan's post-conflict diplomatic repositioning and its implications for regional order. Statistical data-including SIPRI expenditure figures, CPEC investment breakdowns, and IMF fiscal indicators are used as empirical tools for qualitative interpretation rather than as the subject of independent quantitative analysis.

CPEC

Structural Impact on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Pakistan's decision to accept CPEC in its original form was an asymmetric partnership with China. By the mid-2010s, Pakistan's energy sector deficit was impacting its GDP growth too and Pakistan remains mired in chronic underdevelopment (Kim, 2018). Notwithstanding progress, deep structural challenges continue to weigh on Pakistan's economic prospects. (International Monetary Fund, 2024). The national grid was shedding twelve to fourteen hours of power per day in industrial areas. Infrastructure bottlenecks along the main national highway network were limiting freight movement between the port at Karachi and production centres in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Siddiqui, 2024).

The energy portfolio under CPEC has added approximately 5,000 megawatts of installed generation capacity to Pakistan's national grid through coal, hydropower, wind, and solar projects (Ellahi, 2025). The Multan–Sukkur motorway section (392 km) of the Main Line-1 railway upgrade, the Karakoram Highway Phase II, and the Gwadar Port expansion have materially improved connectivity between Pakistan's western frontier and its central economic arteries (Transport Infrastructure Projects under CPEC (2022). Nine Special Economic Zones have been gazetted under the CPEC framework, with the Rashakai zone in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Allama Iqbal Industrial City in Faisalabad at the most advanced stages of operationalization (Industrial Cooperation/Special Economic Zones (SEZs, 2024), The transport infrastructure projects were carried out in the districts of the southern Punjab, southern KP and Southern Balochistan based on equitable regional development of the poor districts especially in the transport sector with the Federal funding (Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, 2023, p. 161). Overall, Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives report 2023-24 depicts the progress;

Table: 1 Major Achievements Across Sectors (Annual Plan 2023–24)

Sector	Achievement / Progress
Macroeconomy	GDP stabilization measures, improved current account balance, and higher national savings.
Agriculture	Continuation of the Agriculture Emergency Programme and food security initiatives.
Industry	Support for manufacturing, commerce, and mineral development projects.
ICT	Expansion of broadband services, Digital Pakistan projects, and technology parks.
Higher Education	Increased HEC funding and additional university development projects.
Energy	Expansion of power generation, transmission, and distribution capacity.
Water Resources	Investment in large dams, flood protection, and climate-resilient water management.
Transport & Logistics	Investment in roads, railways, and multimodal transport infrastructure.
CPEC	Progress towards Phase II with focus on industrialization and Special Economic Zones.



Governance	Governance reforms, digital public services, and public sector modernization.
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Source: Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives. (2023). *Annual plan 2023–24*. Government of Pakistan. https://pc.gov.pk/uploads/annualplan/annual_plan_24.pdf

The geopolitical costs of the collaboration of China-Pakistan have been substantial. Washington, under both the Biden and Trump administrations, treated CPEC as a component of China's broader effort to establish logistics, intelligence, and the source of militarization along the Indian Ocean Region (Iqbal & Javaid, 2020). This interpretation guided the US decision makers to deepen the strategic partnership of US with India through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the construction of an Indian connectivity alternative in the India, Middle East, Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the New Delhi G20 Summit in September 2023 (Hassan et al., 2024). Each of these initiatives was partly designed to offer Non-Chinese infrastructure and technology to countries in China's projected sphere of influence.

There is a general belief that India is ideologically inclined towards US and strategically can be used against China, as US nuclear-powered, armed vessels lurk in the Indian Ocean Region (Sharma, 2019). Therefore, Islamabad's alignment with Beijing doubled the very American support for India that compounded Pakistan's regional security deficit for Pakistan, close Indo-US strategic partnership created an uncomfortable structural position in the regional as well as global politics. The CPEC partnership, in short, was simultaneously a solution to Pakistan's economic vulnerability and a cause of the diplomatic isolation it was meant to relieve (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2025). This structural tension was never resolved through negotiation, it was eventually marked by military confrontation.

India's Efforts to Counter CPEC: Strategic Dimensions

India's opposition to CPEC has rested on two distinct foundations. First, the objection on the passage of CPEC. This objection holds that the corridor's northern alignment, traversing Gilgit-Baltistan, which it considers the violation of Indian territorial sovereignty. This position has been articulated in bilateral representations to China and Pakistan, India's refusal to approve BRI related connectivity and resolutions within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, highlights its hostile position against CPEC (Naqvi, 2017).

Behind this objection lies a strategic anxiety which is more fundamental than any territorial claim, India perceives Pakistan one of its biggest threats (Bhuiyan &

Wang, 2023). CPEC connects China's western interior to the Arabian Sea at a location that allows the Chinese Navy future access to a warm-water port within conspicuous distance of the Strait of Hormuz. It runs the length of Pakistan's western border, tethering Chinese infrastructure investment to Pakistani military geography in ways that complicate Indian contingency planning. And it gives Pakistan access to Chinese satellite intelligence, weapons systems, and logistics support that India cannot easily counter through its own procurement timeline.

India's strategic response has taken several forms. Investment in the Chabahar Port in Iran, operationalized in phases between 2018 and 2024, was explicitly designed to give India an alternative maritime gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia that does not require transit through Pakistani territory and does not benefit from CPEC-related traffic (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) sub-regional connectivity framework, the International North-South Transport Corridor with Russia and Iran, and IMEC each represent distinct strands of an Indian counter-connectivity strategy intended to demonstrate that CPEC is not the only game in the region (Wani, 2024).

Pakistan's government has repeatedly voiced, in formal diplomatic communications, that Indian intelligence bodies have provided financial and logistical support to Baloch insurgent groups targeting CPEC infrastructure and Chinese personnel (Calabrese, 2024). The Foreign Minister of Pakistan raised this issue formally in 2020 and again in 2023. Whether or not such support met the threshold of direct state sponsorship, Baluchistan Liberation Army attacks on CPEC sites, including the 2022 assault on a Chinese-operated mine in Noshki and sustained targeting of road and pipeline infrastructure, have substantially slowed project completion schedules and raised insurance and security costs for Chinese contractors (Baloch, 2026; Shah et al., 2022; Shahzadi & Fazail, 2023).

These accumulated pressures culminated in a military decision. On the night of 6-7 May 2025, India launched Operation Sindoor. Whatever the proximate justification presented, the attribution of the Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025 to Pakistan-linked networks, the structural conditions for an Indian coercive strike had been developing across the preceding decade of CPEC-led regional repositioning.

The May 2025 Military Confrontation: Deterrence Restored

On 22 April 2025, gunmen opened fire on tourists in the Pahalgam area of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, killing 26 civilians. The Resistance Front, identified by India, initially posted a claim of responsibility. India's government attributed the attack to Pakistan within days, a charge Islamabad denied and offered to subject to independent international investigation. That justification was not accepted by India, even though it could not present any evidence

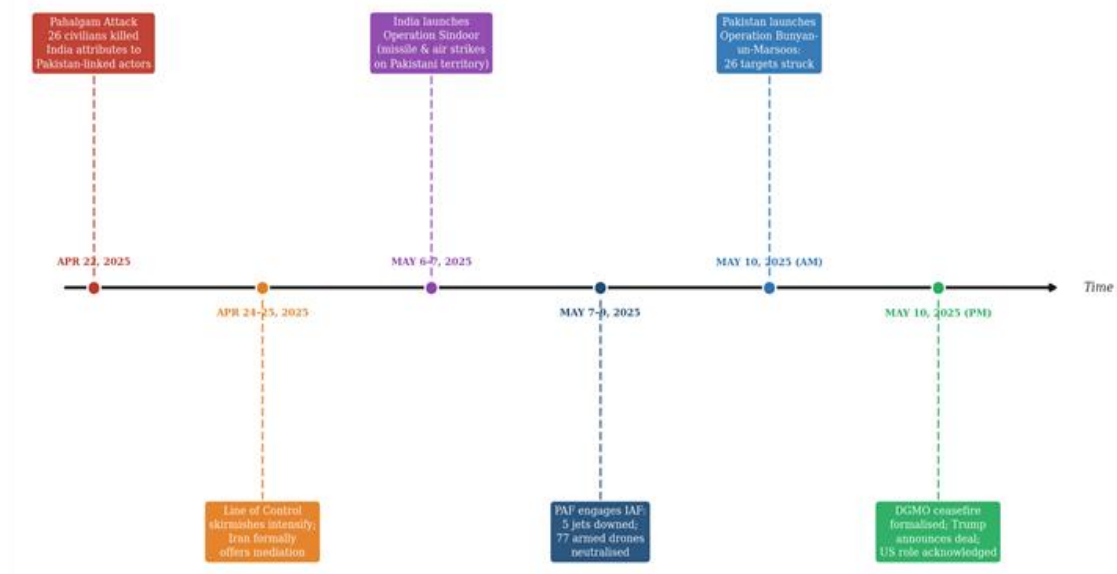
(Kronstadt, 2025). The Indian National Security Council authorized Operation Sindoor on or around 4 May 2025, the strikes were executed on the night of 6-7 May (Hussain, 2025).

The targets of Operation Sindoor included sites in Punjab and Azad Kashmir that India claimed as attacks on terrorist infrastructure. However, Pakistan's government proved these characterization wrong and Indian allegations, documenting civilian casualties at residential sites, a mosque, and areas with no visible military function. The strikes were received in Islamabad not as a coercive signal but as a strategic test, an attempt to determine whether Pakistan's military would absorb the blow or respond in kind.

Pakistan's leadership allowed a military response with the name Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos, a Quranic phrase translating as "an unbreakable wall." The operation was conducted across kinetic, electronic, and cyber domains. According to ISPR communiqués issued from 10 to 12 May 2025, achieved the following;

- Twenty-six Indian military installations engaged, including fifteen air bases across Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, and Jammu and Kashmir-among them Suratgarh, Sirsa, Adampur, Bhatinda, Halwara, Awantipur, Srinagar, Udhampur, and Pathankot.
- BrahMos cruise missile storage depots at Beas and Nagrota reported destroyed through Fatah-II ballistic missile strikes.
- Two S-400 Triumf advanced air-defence systems-at Adampur and Bhuj-reported neutralised by the Pakistan Air Force.
- Five Indian combat aircraft downed in aerial engagement, three Dassault Rafale fighters, one Sukhoi Su-30MKI, and one MiG-29-figures cited in part by Reuters on the basis of statements by US officials.
- Seventy-seven armed drones of Israeli manufacture, deployed by India, neutralized without the reported loss of any Pakistani aircraft.

Figure 1: Chronology of the India-Pakistan Military Confrontation April-May 2025



Source: Developed by the author based on ISPR communiqués (May 2025); Reuters (8 May 2025); BBC News (May 2025).

These Pakistani claims were corroborated in varying degrees by international reporting too. The apparent loss of Rafale aircraft is significant in terms of its symbolic and material weight. (The Economist, 2025). Indian defence stocks fell sharply following Pakistani briefings, with equity market analysts estimating an immediate market decline Indian defence-linked securities. Whether every Pakistani claim withstands exhaustive verification is less important analytically than the fact that the international strategic community-including commentary in the Financial Times, Reuters, Al Jazeera, and the Stimson Center treated the occurrence as an open recalibration of the South Asian conventional military balance (Shah & Ali, 2025; Inter-Services Public Relations, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Clary, 2025).

The ceasefire was formalised through a Directors-General of Military Operations hotline call at 17:00 Indian Standard Time on 10 May 2025 (Clary, 2025). US President Trump announced the agreement on his social media platform, publicly attributing it to American mediation. US Vice-President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio had held extended calls with Pakistani counterparts to broker the cessation (Clary, 2025). Pakistan acknowledged the American role in ceasefire but India did not (Al Jazeera, 2025). This was the indication of Pakistan's acceptance of third state's mediation role.

India's Reaction: Strategic Displeasure and Narrative Contestation

India's official response to the ceasefire was explicit in its annoyance. In an address on 12 May 2025, Indian Prime Minister Modi stated that India had halted military operations only after its objectives were fully achieved and denied that any external pressure had influenced the decision (Ellis-Petersen, 2025). Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated this position before the Lok Sabha in late July 2025, characterising the cessation as self-determined (Sebastian, 2025). Reports in the Indian press indicated that Modi had declined to take the Vice-President's call on the night of 9 May, a detail Modi himself referenced to undercut the American mediation narrative (Raman, 2025).

India's strategic frustration extended to Trump's public warmth toward Pakistani leadership. The US President's description of Pakistan's Prime Minister Mr. Sharif and Field Marshal Gen. Munir as "two fantastic people" in June 2025, and his subsequent hosting of the two men at the White House in September, directly contradicted the bilateral framing of the US-India strategic partnership that New Delhi had worked to strengthen since 2023 (Chatham House, 2026; Raman, 2026). The IMEC corridor, The iCET framework (Chaudhuri & Bhandari, 2024), and the GE engine agreement had all been preceded on India's emergence as Washington's preferred South Asian Pakistan's publicly validated restoration in American strategic calculus interrupted that framing in ways that India's diplomatic establishment found difficult to absorb (The Friday Times, 2026).

India also moved to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty, a 1960 World Bank-brokered agreement generally regarded as one of the more durable conflict-management instruments in the history of South Asian water diplomacy, in what Islamabad and independent legal analysts characterised as a legally unsustainable act of economic coercion with no basis in the treaty's own dispute-resolution provisions (Ali, 2025). Pakistan referred the matter to the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The suspension signalled India's willingness to weaponise multilateral agreements as instruments of bilateral pressure when conventional military and diplomatic options had not yielded the desired outcome (Gama, 2026).

POST-CONFLICT DIPLOMATIC RECONFIGURATION***Pakistan-US***

Pakistan's post-ceasefire diplomatic relations with Washington were carefully handles. The formal nomination of President Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize in June 2025 was widely read as a strategic gesture, one that simultaneously rewarded the US role in the ceasefire, elevated Pakistan's visibility in Washington's political landscape, and associated Islamabad with a smart administration with public recognition. Pakistan's political and military leadership

received an invitation to a private White House lunch within weeks. The September 2025 Oval Office visit by political and military leaders produced a US Strategic Metals memorandum of understanding worth USD 500 million, agreements on digital finance cooperation, and public expressions of US confidence in Pakistan's civil-military leadership that would have been unimaginable during the period of peak US-India strategic closeness in 2023 (Chatham House, 2026).

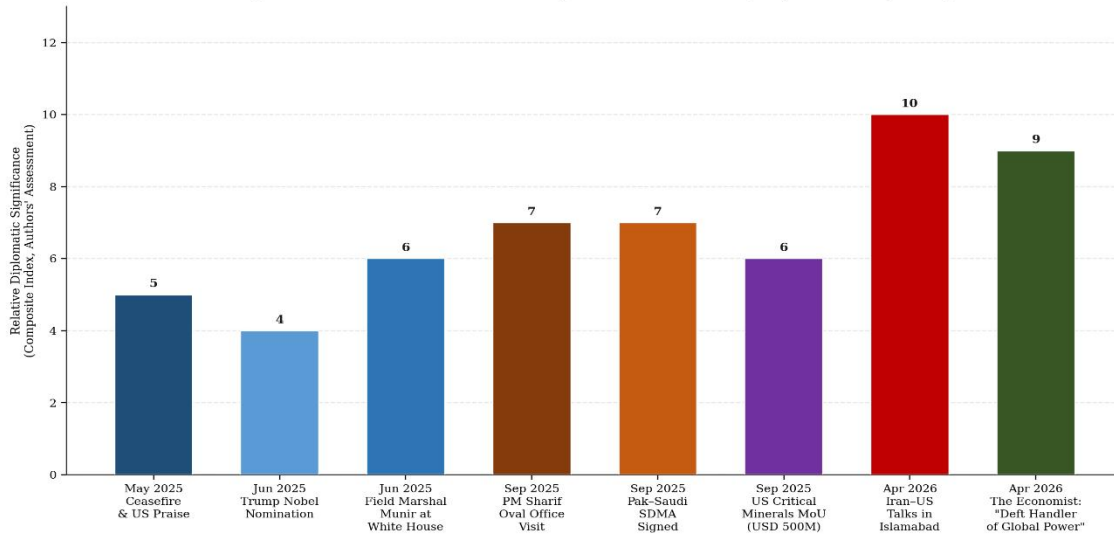
In the second half of 2025, diplomatic and economic contacts of Britain, France, Canada, and Australia with Islamabad were recalibrated. Pakistan started free trade agreement negotiations with Australia. So the country gained substantial diplomatic leverage in the aftermath of the May 2025 conflict with India (Siddiqi, 2026). The dynamics of this scenario suggest that Pakistan's regional role grew ahead of a typical security actor toward an emerging diplomatic middle power.

● *The Defence Pact with Saudi Arabia*

Pakistan's formalization of the Strategic Defence and Military Agreement (SDMA) with Saudi Arabia in September 2025 was arguably the most consequential structural development in the Gulf-South Asia security architecture since the Gulf Cooperation Council's formation (Yadav & Yadav, 2025). The agreement's mutual defence clause—treating an attack on either party as an attack on both—bears a structural resemblance to NATO's Article 5, though without a formal collective institution behind it. Riyadh's willingness to bind its security to Pakistan's reflected a convergent threat perception, Pakistan's nuclear deterrent value, and the deep personal ties between Pakistan's military leadership and the Saudi royals that have been cultivated continuously since the 1970s. New Lines Magazine's analysts characterized Pakistan as consolidating a mediator role in a US-aligned regional security triangle alongside Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Gupta, 2026).

While renewing strategic engagement with the US, Saudi Arabia, and other regional partners, Islamabad maintained positive relations with China too, representing the defining characteristic of an emerging diplomatic middle power. Usually, the middle powers' influence draws mainly from economic dimensions, however, Pakistan's case has a diplomatic middle power relevance through bridge-building, coalition-building, and strategic mediation among rival states

Figure 2: Pakistan's Post-Conflict Diplomatic Milestones (May 2025-May 2026)



Source: Developed by the author based on Chatham House (2026); Al Jazeera Centre for Studies (2026); Express Tribune-2025)

● *The Iran-US Mediation: Pakistan as an Indispensable Intermediary*

The April 2026 Islamabad talks between American and Iranian delegations, the first substantive direct engagement between the two states at senior official level since before the 1979 revolution, represented the most visible demonstration of Pakistan's transformed diplomatic stature. The context was the US-Israeli military campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities, which had commenced in late February 2026 and escalated into a sustained air conflict that threatened to draw in Gulf states and fracture already strained global energy markets. Pakistan, sharing a 909 kilometre border with Iran, close religious and cultural ties with Tehran, established influence in Riyadh, and a newly warm relationship with the Trump White House, occupied a bridging position that no other single state could replicate (Kurlantzick, 2026).

Pakistan's credibility with Tehran rested on a specific act, when the US-Israeli strikes began, Pakistan was among the first states to issue a formal condemnation, alone among its immediate neighbourhood in doing so (Bomassi et al., 2026). This was not a cost-free gesture, it momentarily complicated Pakistan's relationship with Washington and drew a sharp response from the Israeli Foreign Ministry. But it established in Tehran's assessment that Islamabad was not merely an American proxy and could therefore serve as a genuine moderator rather than an actor working for the fulfilments of American demands. Alongside Egypt and

Turkey, Pakistan worked through March and early April 2026 to construct the conditions for a face-to-face meeting.

On 11 April 2026, senior delegations from both Washington and Tehran arrived in Islamabad. White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt publicly described Pakistan as an “incredible mediating partner” and she appreciated Pakistan’s efforts (Anadolu Agency, 2026). The Council on Foreign Relations regarded the episode as evidence of a “remarkable role change for a country that for years had been viewed as a pariah state” (Kurlantzick, 2026). The Economist observed that Pakistan had demonstrated a capacity for “deft handling of global power politics” (The Economist, 2026). The Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, in an extended analysis, concluded that the Islamabad talks had cemented Pakistan's position as a responsible middle power regardless of the final negotiating outcome (Siddiqua, 2026).

Three structural conditions made this possible. First, the May 2025 conflict had validated Pakistan's deterrence capability, a state that had just demonstrated the ability to down Rafale aircraft and neutralize S-400 systems. Second, Pakistan's geographic and cultural position, a Muslim world’s representation, Gulf partner, US interlocutor, nuclear power and an Iranian neighbour, made it systematically suited to bridge the gap between two. Third, the personal level relationship between Pakistan and the US leaders were established, through the Nobel nomination, the White House lunch, and the September Oval Office visit. This interaction provided a trust channel that provided a ground for preliminary negotiations to proceed without delays.

In a Stimson center’s publication, it was noted that Pakistan's mediation capacity was constrained by its own unresolved tensions with Afghanistan and the ambiguous terms of the Saudi defence pact, which raised questions about Pakistani neutrality in Iranian eyes (Karim, 2026). The Chicago Council on Global Affairs similarly observed that the Islamabad talks did not “structurally transform” Pakistan's domestic security environment (Staniland, 2026.) Nevertheless, the mediation efforts emerged as a diplomatic achievement of Pakistan. Now this depends on the strategic choices of Islamabad to convert this temporary advantage into durable institutional capital.

● **Pakistan's Neutral Posture and International Response**

Perhaps the most striking feature of Pakistan's conduct across the 2025-26 period is what it did not do. Islamabad did not exploit New Delhi's post-conflict vulnerability to press territorial demands. It did not follow Saudi Arabia into an openly anti-Iranian posture despite the weight of the SDMA's mutual defence commitment. It did not break publicly with China when reports of Chinese engineers' presence during the May 2025 air engagements complicated its

rehabilitation with Washington. It did not convert its US critical minerals partnership into a rejection of BRI or CPEC. This calculated moderation is characteristic of states that have truly considered their position in a multipolar system, too small to dominate, too consequential to ignore and therefore influential when seen as dependable by competing powers simultaneously. So, Pakistan has started to operate, particularly in the wake of the May 2025 confrontation, with greater strategic autonomy than the early years of the CPEC partnership. Its choices in that environment were, on the evidence reviewed in this paper, more coherent and more consequential than either its admirers or its critics had anticipated.

The international response to the May 2025 conflict was shaped by pre-existing alignments. China backed Pakistan without reservation, official statements from Beijing expressed full support for Pakistan's right to self-defence and called for restraint in language that placed the burden of de-escalation on India. The South China Morning Post's May 2026 report suggesting that Chinese engineers had provided real time technical support to the PAF during the aerial engagements, a claim denied by both Pakistan and China (Malik, 2025). The Pakistan's aerial response in any case sure has raised questions for Indian threat assessment that New Delhi has not publicly addressed (Bhuiyan & Wang, 2023).

Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE maintained formal neutrality during the conflict while signalling support for Pakistan through diplomatic channels. Iran proposed mediation on 25 April 2025, before the military exchange commenced, a move that previewed Islamabad's own mediating role in the wider US-Iran context that would develop over the following months. India provided political solidarity to Israel, Russia issued a travel advisory but did not take a public position on the military confrontation, the United Nations Security Council was unable to agree on a unified statement, reflecting the familiar veto dynamics of the P5 in South Asian crises.

Within the Western camp, the dominant public messaging was calls for restraint, but the diplomatic geography was more complex. Pakistan's Foreign Minister noted that approximately three dozen governments assisted in brokering the ceasefire (BBC News, 2025), a figure that, if even approximately accurate, reflected the breadth of international interest in preventing escalation between two nuclear weapons states. Washington's pivotal role was publicly acknowledged by Islamabad and publicly contested by New Delhi—a divergence that itself became a secondary diplomatic event, revealing the extent to which the ceasefire's framing mattered as much to the parties as its substance.

In the context of middle power conception, bridge-building is the strongest case for Pakistan as its role in ceasefire talks in the April 2026 (Islamabad talks)

between American and Iranian delegations is the accurate example. A state maintaining concurrent working relationships, with Washington, Riyadh, and Tehran, and using that position to host direct negotiation between two of them for the first time since 1979 (Kurlantzick, 2026; Siddiqi, 2026). This is bridge-building in the literal sense the theory describes, not commentary about bridging, but the mechanics of it. On institution-building, the proofs are not decisive but mixed, as Pakistan appeared as a state prefers rule-based conflict resolution when we see its referral of the Indus Waters Treaty suspension to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, a genuinely institution-building move. Normative leadership is manifested in Pakistan's public condemnation of the US-Israeli strikes on Iran. This functioned instrumentally to establish Pakistan's credibility and appears as evidence of normative authority.

RESULTS

Overall, the paper contends that Pakistan should no longer be considered only a balancing or frontline state but a diplomatic middle power. The theoretical frame of this study illustrates that middle powers are identified by what they do, not merely by GDP or military strength, Pakistan satisfies this behavioral criteria.

The analysis above supports five main findings.

First, CPEC has generated significant economic benefits for Pakistan through infrastructure development, enhanced energy capacity and increased prospects for trade and investment it has concurrently functioned as a structural accelerant of geopolitical tensions tension between Pakistan and India, rather than tying them in strong economic bond. By deepening Sino-Pakistani defence and economic ties, CPEC has intensified Indian security concerns. The geopolitical competition further shaped by counter measures from India and the US, sharpened regional polarization that CPEC has not addressed yet. Suffice to say that the economic gains, power generation and transport infrastructure are real but have not been accompanied by complete design of stability.

Second, India's continued effort to stop CPEC through diplomatic disagreement, proxy pressure, and counter-deployment of connectivity plans, did not succeed in its objective of stopping Chinese penetration into South Asia. It ended instead in a military confrontation that produced results different to India's logic, reinstated Pakistani military credibility and augmented Pakistan-US diplomatic ties.

Third, the May 2025 conflict has essentially changed the narrative of the South Asian conventional balance. Pakistan's demonstrated its capacity to engage enemy and degrade advanced Indian air assets, including Rafale fighters and S-400 systems forces, reconsideration of assumptions that India's defence budget, the

fifth biggest military spender in the world in 2024 as per SIPRI data (Liang et al., 2025), translates into operational dominance.

Fourth, Pakistan's emergence as the facilitator for US-Iran talks marks a dramatic shift in its international standing. A country that in 2022 was navigating a severe IMF crisis (International Monetary Fund, 2024; International Monetary Fund, 2025), repositioned itself as an influential actor whose strategic, geographic and religious attributes made it crucial to great-power crisis management in the Gulf and South Asian region.

Fifth, India's reaction to these developments transpired in form of suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, the rejection of US mediation credit and the contention on preconditions for bilateral dialogue, all reflects a strategic culture that had not anticipated this outcome.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing findings carry some implications for Pakistan's foreign policy formation and for the broader regional diplomatic order;

- The US-Pakistan recalibration is currently transactional and therefore rescindable with any change in administration or geopolitical priority. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan should negotiate bilateral dialogue framework with the US, parallel to but separate from the CPEC framework with China that institutionalizes counterterrorism and cooperation on Afghan stabilization.
- Pakistan should strengthen its middle-power posture through continued investment in multilateral diplomacy, including its active participation in UN peacekeeping missions, its engagement with SCO and dialogues with Central Asian states through CPEC transit partnerships that extend the corridor's political utility.
- The suspension of Indus Waters Treaty should be challenged through the Permanent Court of Arbitration as Pakistan has reportedly shown. This is only a legal maneuver but it reflects Pakistan's commitment to rules based resolution of disputes that supports its credibility as a responsible state which is respecting international law.
- Pakistan should formalize its competence as a facilitator in the US-Iran talks by establishing a permanent channel between the US State Department and the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It should be supported by a keen analytical unit on Gulf security within the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) and Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

- India's diplomatic discomfort is real but manageable if Pakistan frames engagement as a position of restored strength rather than conciliation under pressure. Bilateral talks with India should eventually resume. The third-party facilitation by China, Saudi Arabia and the United Nations will be prudent options for Pakistan. The restoration of the DGMO confidence building channels that were overturned by the May 2025 conflict, should be set as a precondition for broader dialogue.
- CPEC project requires an overhaul in its transparency in audited project accounts, disclosures of environmental impact and mechanisms of community consultation are necessary to address domestic concerns and to disprove the criticism on debt sustainability that some governments continue to propagate against the corridor in multilateral forums.

CONCLUSION

This study endeavored to examine how CPEC has affected Pakistan's relations with the US and India. It reaches at a conclusion more compounded than its original framing projected. CPEC has reshaped relations by deepening Islamabad-Beijing's alignment in ways that surprised both Washington and New Delhi, by making Gilgit-Baltistan and Gwadar flashpoints in a broader competition over South Asian architecture of connectivity and by producing economic opportunities that helped Pakistan in expanding its defence capability.

But CPEC did not regulate what transpired in May 2025 nor what lag behind. Pakistan leveraged the strategic credibility by avoiding military escalation and by expanding its diplomatic space. The military operation by India against Pakistan was the product of miscalculation on India's part, an understanding that economic problems of Pakistan had degraded its military coherence to the point where limited coercive action was possible. That understanding was tested practically and proved defective. The political consequences of that action were then augmented by a US administration ready to reward Pakistan's restraint and mediation capacity in ways that New Delhi had not estimated when it started Operation Sindoor. Pakistan increasingly functioned as a bridge across competing geopolitical camps. Its facilitation of direct US-Iran talks illustrates its capacity to provide diplomatic opportunities for larger powers.

Taken together, these developments confirm that Pakistan satisfies the criteria of an emerging middle power. Phase one and phase two of CPEC make this evident, with Pakistan demonstrating bridge building, institution building and normative leadership/. Pakistan's trajectory from an IMF supplicant to a state hosting US-Iranian negotiations in 2026 is not explicable by any single variable, it reflects the convergence of structural positioning (a state at the intersection of the Gulf, South Asia, and Central Asia), restored deterrence credibility (a conventional military

capability demonstrated under fire), and disciplined diplomacy. Now a genuinely open question is whether Pakistan can sustain that trajectory. The structural challenges, fiscal fragility, counterinsurgency demands, and a nuclear standoff with India that could re-escalate without warning, have not been resolved by the events described in this paper. They have been managed for now. The test of Pakistan's emergence as a middle power lies not in the diplomatic laurels of 2025-26 but in whether its institutions can translate this conjunctural advantage into durable national development.

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