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OSLO OF THE EAST

How Can Pakistan Be Relevant as a Middle Power?

By

Dr. Qamar Cheema

Mir Ahmad Murtiza

The opinions expressed in this policy paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization

About the Authors

Dr. Qamar Cheema

He is the Executive Director of the Sanober Institute. Previously, he served as a faculty member for 14 years in the Department of International Relations at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, and has also been a visiting faculty member at various institutions. He regularly appears on national and international media.



Mir Ahmad Murtiza

He is a Research Fellow at the Sanober Institute. He works primarily in the areas of law, politics, and strategy. He is also the editor of the recently published volume *Law and Morality: Perspectives on Natural Law Theory and Legal Positivism* (Routledge, 2026).



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Executive Summary

The prospect of peace in the Middle East has historically been as fleeting as it is coveted. Nevertheless, rare diplomatic inflection points can bring the dream of peace to fruition. Redolent of the Oslo Accords, Pakistan's recent mediation efforts reflect not merely an episodic success. Rather, they signal the reassertion of a state capable of opening the door to a comprehensive regional reset. Pakistan's ability to engage Washington, Tehran, and Gulf capitals without succumbing to zero-sum alignments showcases its diplomatic flexibility, depth, and bandwidth. In doing so, Pakistan has evolved from a peripheral security actor to a pivotal interlocutor in the evolving Middle Eastern order.

At the heart of Pakistan's transformative era lies the singular influence of Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir. His military diplomacy is a calibrated fusion of military credibility, diplomatic finesse, and economic outreach. Building on strategic coherence and predictability, Pakistan is now well-positioned to engage strategically with partners across domains.

Furthermore, Pakistan's military feats against India in May elevated its role in the regional

security architecture. The Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement and the emerging Muslim Quad will further cement Pakistan's role as a net security stabilizer in the Middle East. Pakistan intends to inspire trust among the partners while promoting stability for the region. Thus, the alignment of deterrence and diplomacy establishes Pakistan as a legitimate, credible, and potent middle power.

However, strategic relevance without economic ballast is inherently fragile. Now, Pakistan should translate geopolitical opportunity into long-term economic partnerships by creating an ecosystem conducive to investment from the Gulf, China, and the West. In particular, capitalizing on the current personality-driven ties, Pakistan should institutionalize engagement with the US as a durable, bipartisan strategic partnership. Concurrently, Pakistan should deepen and broaden multidimensional cooperation with the EU across climate, technology, trade, and regulatory frameworks to diversify Pakistan's external economic alignments.

Therefore, the next phase of Pakistan's foreign policy will be defined by how Pakistan leverages military diplomacy and economic statecraft to turn a rare moment of opportunity into enduring geo-economic partnerships and influence across the region.



INTRODUCTION

In world history, peace is an elusive commodity that often slips through even skilled hands. And some hostilities are so stubborn that they consume decades. When any episode inspires hope of a miraculous thaw in relations between implacable foes, history keeps a record in bold letters. The Oslo Accords¹, signed in the 1990s, were a pivotal milestone as they offered optimism that the long-standing Palestinian question that had bedeviled the entire Middle East for several decades might finally reach a resolution. Surprisingly, another hostility had already taken root by then. After the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war² that followed, animosity between the US and Iran became entrenched.

Furthermore, Iran's ardent support for a one-state solution regionalized this animosity,³ pushing lasting peace further out of reach. Islamabad Talks rekindled hopes of durable peace that had waned after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the US invasion of Iraq. Therefore, Islamabad may be dubbed the Oslo of the East⁴ because its mediation efforts may pave the path for a comprehensive reset in the region and consummate the process that began in Oslo.



For years on end, Pakistan has been a victim of malicious propaganda.⁵ Hostile media portrayed Pakistan as a country beset with terrorism and internal problems. For this reason, Pakistan's standing as a middle power has been undermined. Nevertheless, the pace of change since last May has been unusually dramatic. The myth of India's overwhelming conventional military dominance was shattered in a brief but high-intensity exchange with Pakistan.⁶ Consequently, Pakistan's relevance as a security provider skyrocketed, leading to the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

The Islamabad Talks represent a potential historic breakthrough that could reset the entire Middle East.

Furthermore, a year ago, Pakistan's diplomatic engagement on the international front was relatively muted. The US-Iran war furnished Pakistan with yet another strategic opening to muster diplomatic capital.⁷ Though the USA and Iran have fundamentally different worldviews and strategic cultures, Pakistan managed to bring both parties to the negotiating table even as they were embroiled in a fierce and devastating war that engulfed the entire region. Moreover, Pakistan successfully garnered broad-based support for its mediating role⁸, flexing its diplomatic muscles as a legitimate and potent middle power.⁹ Therefore, *Washington no longer approaches Pakistan through the Af-Pak lens. Instead, it now views Pakistan as a country capable of wielding influence from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.*

Pakistan's foreign policy posture also underwent a discernible change. Although Pakistan has always had middle-power credentials, hesitant decision-making and the absence of a strategic game plan beyond its immediate borders have compromised its middle-power status. That changed with the fusion of civil-military diplomacy under Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir. Now, Pakistan intends to leverage its untapped military and diplomatic strength to cement its position in the regional and international order.

Pakistan has rapidly evolved from a diplomatically marginalized state to a credible middle power.



THE REASSERTION OF PAKISTAN AS A MIDDLE POWER

The concept of a middle power does not admit a single, clear definition because the province of power itself has amorphous contours. Theories that view the international system as hierarchically structured typically categorize countries' power using quantifiable parameters, such as GDP, geographical size and location, military expenditure, etc. Within this framework, the very term "middle power" explicitly delineates its meaning. However, power is not limited to measurable commodities; Joseph Nye's concept of soft power encompasses intangible sources of power.¹⁰ Generally speaking, power is, as Robert Dahl defines it, the ability to change or influence others' behavior.¹¹ The behavioral approach to defining a middle power, therefore, concerns the style of foreign policy that a state adopts to effect change in other states' behavior. With this in mind, we contend that Pakistan is a middle power.¹²

In fact, in recent times, Pakistan has reasserted its status as a middle power and revealed its true standing in the world, which had been masked by hostile propaganda. Below is a brief overview of how Pakistan is a middle power.

First, a middle power must identify itself as a middle power and act accordingly; that is, a middle power must strive to advance global public goods. Pakistan has consistently taken a principled stance on global and regional issues. For instance, Pakistan recently denounced attacks on Iran¹³ and the Gulf¹⁴ under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, despite potential political repercussions. The exercise of independent political will to foster peace, stability, and compliance with international law is what bestows on Pakistan middle-power status.

Second, a middle power must have a strong geopolitical status within its periphery and among rival blocs. In this context, strength alone is not enough to qualify as a middle power. For example, India has a much larger economy and military than Pakistan, yet it has proven to be of little value in shaping US-China relations or events in the Middle East in recent times. In contrast to India¹⁵,

Pakistan has "Friends with Leverage," and Pakistan's role in both cases is of global significance.

Third, a middle power must have a “potentially” robust economy. While Pakistan’s performance on this indicator is less encouraging for now, Pakistan is strategically positioned to emerge as a critical node in evolving regional and global trade and connectivity networks, linking Asia with the Middle East, Africa, and beyond.¹⁶ For instance, Karachi Port saw more transshipment in March alone than in all of 2025 due to the war in the Middle East.¹⁷ Gwadar Port will be an addition to it.

Fourth, a middle power must have diplomatic agility to manage complex relations among rivals and adversaries. Pakistan has strong relationships with both China and the US. It is the only country that maintains cordial relations with all Muslim countries, even those that are hostile to one another.

Pakistan qualifies as a middle power not merely by material capabilities but by its ability to influence global and regional behavior through diplomatic agility and strategic positioning.

Fifth, a middle power should not only be capable of defending itself but also be able to lend some degree of protection to others. The latter point concerns not only military

capability but also strategic constraints. For instance, Saudi Arabia has a robust economy, yet it has not been able to establish deterrence vis-à-vis Iran and Israel. While Saudi Arabia can buy more military equipment, it lacks the strategic space to meaningfully contribute to the regional order on its own. On the other hand, Pakistan can become a regional net-security stabilizer, if not a net-security provider.



Pakistan’s use of all elements of power to influence events in the Middle East underscores its status as a middle power.

Pakistan is positioning itself as a regional stabilizer and a connector across key global corridors.

MIRACLE TALKS: HOW PAKISTAN BROUGHT HARDENED FOES TO THE NEGOTIATION TABLE

On the eventful night of April 8, a catastrophe was narrowly averted when a Pakistan-mediated ceasefire was announced between the US and Iran. It was nothing short of a miracle, as the whole world grappled with fear¹⁸ of what might follow President Trump's threat to erase an entire civilization.

Pakistan emerged as an unlikely mediator.¹⁹ However, Pakistan's role was not due to any situational opportunity. Rather, it was the result of decades of investment in relationships with a host of actors, as well as Pakistan's ability, as a middle power, to manage a complex web of relations. Through mediation between the US and Iran, Pakistan demonstrated that it is trusted by the US, the Gulf, and Iran.

While Pakistan's victory over India brought it into the US spotlight, Pakistan has always been a trusted partner when it comes to high-stakes diplomacy. Pakistan played a pivotal role in the rapprochement between the US and China in the 1970s. Furthermore, Pakistan has a generational struggle alongside the US against transnational terrorist organizations, resulting in strong trust between the two. In fact, President Trump thanked

Pakistan for its role in his State of the Union address.²⁰

For Iran, Pakistan was the ideal choice for mediation. Despite Iran's tortuous history, the two countries maintained generally amiable relations, rooted in religious, historical, and cultural convergence. Iran was the first country to recognize Pakistan, and Pakistan was among the first to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran. Furthermore, Iran enjoys societal-level support in Pakistan, largely due to Pakistan's sizable Shia population and people's sensitivity to the Palestinian question. Pakistan's principled stance on the Iran war also convinced the Iranian leadership of Pakistan's sincerity in resolving the issues.

Pakistan walked a tightrope between Iran and partners in the Gulf.²¹ Pakistan not only condemned Iranian attacks on Gulf countries in accordance with international law but also shaped the region's response. In particular, Pakistan succeeded in convincing Saudi Arabia that strategic patience is the best option, as retaliation against Iran would spiral out of control to the detriment of the Gulf's interests. Furthermore, by positioning itself as a mediator, Pakistan has opened the door to post-war rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf countries, ensuring long-term stability and collective prosperity.



Pakistan's mediation between the US and Iran was not accidental but the result of long-term relationship-building, strategic neutrality, and technical expertise.

Here, it is important to emphasize why other regional countries could not serve as mediators. In particular, Türkiye and Oman were involved in negotiations before the war, but this was not the case as the war began.

Oman enjoys good relations with Iran and has been a preferred partner for Iran in previous rounds of negotiations. Nonetheless, the situation was markedly different this time. Given the threat of Israeli sabotage, as evidenced by Qatar's experience, Oman could not provide a secure environment for the

Iranian negotiating team. Furthermore, Oman can bring almost no technical capability to the negotiating table, whereas Pakistan can fill a room with experts on the nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear delivery systems.

Türkiye's and Iran's geostrategic interests sometimes show signs of divergence. Both countries have been on opposing sides in Syria.²² In fact, it is Al-Sharaa's capture of Damascus, backed by Türkiye, that provided Israel with an air corridor to attack Iran. Moreover, in previous mediation attempts,

Türkiye was interested in a broader deal encompassing Iran's regional axis, while Iran focused only on the nuclear profile. In contrast to Türkiye, Pakistan has no conflict of interest with the parties involved and seeks regional peace, which is the ultimate goal of most actors.

Thus, Pakistan's advocacy for international law, long-term investment in relationships, avoidance of zero-sum geopolitics, and technical capabilities have earned it the position of the most suitable mediator in the US-Iran conflict. By acting as a mediator, Pakistan seeks to ensure that it remains on the right side of history.

Pakistan emerged as the most credible and capable mediator due to trust from all parties and the absence of conflicting interests.



MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND THE MUNIR FACTOR



The current era of Pakistan's foreign policy is driven by the Munir factor.

In the spirit of Thomas Carlyle, one may say that the trajectory of a nation is charted by its potent leaders. This is especially true of Pakistan, whose course has been shaped by influential leaders since its inception. In a similar vein, **the current era of Pakistan's foreign policy is driven by the Munir factor.**

In *The Long Game*, Rush Doshi emphasizes that a grand strategy is grand not because of the size of its objectives but because of how diverse instruments of statecraft are brought together to forge system-level design, not just isolated policies.²³ The hallmark of Pakistan's current

foreign policy era is the synergy between civil and military diplomacy, which augments Pakistan's diplomatic clout and bandwidth.²⁴ This integration enables coherent strategic thinking across the power spectrum within a country and consistent, timely action. Furthermore, predictability is a valuable asset in international affairs.²⁵ While each new civilian leadership may choose different foreign policy priorities, Pakistan's military maintains a consistent long-term strategy. Therefore,

Military diplomacy allows for strategic investment in Pakistan.

Military diplomacy is not the only hallmark of the Munir era. Pakistan's military leadership has decided to shift from a passive, reactive posture to a proactive management of the strategic environment.²⁶ Therefore, in the May conflict, Pakistan proactively established a new deterrence equation vis-à-vis India in the conventional military domain. This brief military confrontation re-hyphenated India and Pakistan. In fact, it reduced India's strategic significance to the US's Indo-Pacific strategy.

As a builder who dreams of touching the sky must first build a strong foundation, Pakistan needs a vibrant economy to sustain

its role as a middle power. Therefore, macroeconomic stability stands at the forefront of Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir's agenda. In addition to a surge in investment from the Gulf and China, Pakistan intends to attract Western investors, particularly from the USA. In this regard, Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir's meeting with President Trump at the White House was a game-changer²⁷, leading to agreements on crypto²⁸ and rare-earth minerals²⁹. Pakistan's ultimate goal is to create a business environment conducive to multilateral investment, particularly in Balochistan, which will keep Indian destabilizing activities at bay.



Pakistan's defense-related exports have never been a major contributor to its economy. Nonetheless, following the May conflict, international interest in Pakistan's indigenous defense systems, particularly the JF-17 jets, has surged. Pakistan is also showing less hesitation about exporting arms. There are reports of discussions on defense-related exports with about 13 countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.³⁰ Training and equipment-related agreements will be a boon for Pakistan's military-industrial complex and help Pakistan wean itself off reliance on the IMF.

The signing of the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement with Saudi Arabia is also a landmark of the Munir era and a watershed moment for Pakistan's foreign policy. The SMDA has placed Pakistan at the center of the Middle East's regional security

The fusion of civil and military diplomacy under Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir has produced a coherent grand strategy that strengthens Pakistan's global influence and strategic consistency.

architecture.³¹ Now, Türkiye is interested in joining³², and Egypt is also aligned through the platform of the so-called Muslim Quad.³³ Pakistan can now influence decision-making from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. If the alignment among Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt is institutionalized, Pakistan's regional deterrence and economic integration will deepen and broaden. It would mark the beginning of a new era in Pakistan's history.

Pakistan's military is a curious blend of hard and soft power.³⁴ Pakistan's military prowess, diplomatic reach, and strategic vision are aligned to establish it as a regional security stabilizer and economic hub. The Munir era features a clear grand strategy focused on restoring Pakistan's global standing and positioning it as a credible middle power.

CAN THE NEW PAKISTAN KEEP MOMENTUM?



Pakistan has missed numerous opportunities throughout its history. At the start of the 21st century, it was designated a major non-NATO ally and formed a strong security alliance with the United States, primarily focused on counterterrorism. However, Pakistan failed to transform this security partnership into an economic one. After 2014, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) presented another significant opportunity, yet even a decade later, Pakistan has not realized its full potential.

Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, Pakistan's growing stature offers a new opportunity, but it remains uncertain whether the country can fully seize it and sustain its momentum. The following considerations are pertinent in this regard.

While the world views Pakistan as a rising middle power, it remains bogged down in its political problems. Incongruence between the priorities of the civilian government and the military establishment often hinders momentum. Similarly, mudslinging among the political class keeps the streets busy and fosters instability. Given that political obstacles prevent Pakistan from engaging in long-term strategic planning and implementation, Pakistan has to build consensus across the board on matters integral to national interests and keep politics away from them.

Pakistan has all the resources to become the 6th-largest economy, as projected by Goldman Sachs.³⁵ Nonetheless, Pakistan has not been able to turn opportune moments and security relations into strategic economic partnerships. Therefore, in order to leverage the current opportunity, Pakistan should adopt long-term economic policies that are consistent across governments and create a business-friendly environment. Moreover, while the world is facing a demographic winter, Pakistan is in a demographic spring. Therefore, Pakistan should prioritize human capital,³⁶ particularly through investment in artificial intelligence,

robotics, quantum computing, semiconductors, and green technology.

Over the past 20 years, India has developed its image as a business hub. Meanwhile, terrorism in Pakistan has waxed and waned, and its enduring presence has not only slowed economic growth and damaged the country's image but also confined Pakistan to the Af-Pak region. A major reason for CPEC's failure to attract anticipated investment is the persistent incidents of terrorism. Therefore, Pakistan should, once and for all, resolve the issue of

terrorism from Afghanistan and in Balochistan to project an image of security and attract long-term investment.

For the past 50 years, Pakistan's strategic thinking has focused on Afghanistan and India, thereby missing opportunities elsewhere. In the Middle East, there are

enormous geostrategic and geoeconomic opportunities for Pakistan, driven by regional realignment, including Israel's increasing audacity, the collapse of the Iranian axis, and the US's prioritization of the China challenge. Pakistan should advance its interests without explicitly taking sides in the region's complex dynamics.

Pakistan's ability to sustain its rising status depends on overcoming internal political instability and on building long-term economic and strategic continuity.



Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir has developed an exceptional relationship with President Trump. However, the question remains whether Pakistan can secure bipartisan US support. To remain relevant to the broader US strategy, Pakistan should institutionalize the ongoing bromance. Therefore, Pakistan should seek long-term US investment in strategic sectors, such as rare-earth minerals. Moreover, Pakistan should offer to share the US's security burden in the Middle East and in the maritime domain.

Furthermore, Pakistan should sustain outreach with the US by connecting with potential presidential candidates after the midterm elections to develop working relationships. Similarly, it should foster continuous engagement with the US strategic community to ensure strategic transparency and long-term partnerships.

In the future, Europe will emerge as another major independent pole of global influence, and India already has deep access to European capitals. Pakistan cannot afford to leave India's outreach to the EU unattended. Although Pakistan cannot match India's economic strength in the short term, it can explore other avenues to deepen its

relations with the EU. In particular, Pakistan should collaborate with the EU on climate action and green energy, human rights, cybersecurity, and cyber law

frameworks. Moreover, Pakistan should invest time and effort in addressing the EU's concerns about Pakistan's GSP+ status.

To capitalize on current opportunities, Pakistan must prioritize economic reform, human capital development, counterterrorism, and balanced engagement with global power dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan stands at a historic crossroads. Through military diplomacy, Pakistan mediated between the US and Iran, attracted investment, and strengthened the regional security architecture. These achievements have reasserted Pakistan's middle-power status and earned it the moniker "Oslo of the East." Yet squandered past opportunities serve as a stark reminder that momentum without consistency yields little. To make its relevance enduring, Pakistan must transcend political infighting, eradicate terrorism, and adopt long-term economic policies that prioritize human capital and global partnerships. Only by locking in bipartisan US engagement, deepening ties with Europe, and avoiding zero-sum geopolitics can Pakistan convert this strategic opening into lasting peace and prosperity. The question is not whether Pakistan can be relevant, but whether it will sustain the discipline to remain so.

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