

Middle Power Agency Under Strategic Constraint: Pakistan's Mediation Potential in US–Iran Negotiations

Ahmed Osama Tahir ^{1*} Ayesha Mubeen ²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, Muslim Youth University, Islamabad, Pakistan/Lecturer, Federal Urdu University (FUUAST), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: ahmed.osama@myu.edu.pk

² Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Federal Urdu University (FUUAST), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: ayeshacheema184@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In the contemporary international system, middle powers increasingly exert influence beyond their traditional material constraints. As great powers remain dominant in shaping international security architecture, the rising power of emerging powers is using mediation, strategic balancing, and niche diplomacy to shape regional outcomes. The case of Pakistan is very special as it has a unique geopolitical position and, at the same time, has a dual relationship with the USA and Iran. The literature on Pakistan is primarily security-based, alliance-oriented, and/or regionally oriented and insufficiently theorises the capacity of Pakistan's diplomacy to become a middle power. This article contends that Pakistan's mediation effectiveness is not only determined by its status as a 'normal' middle power but also depends on its ability to institutionalise strategic neutrality and sustain credible diplomatic autonomy amidst conflicting system pressures. The study draws on a combination of Middle Power Theory and Neoclassical Realism to analyze and explore the mediation potential of Pakistan in key diplomatic moments and processes using qualitative process tracing and policy-oriented analysis. The article shows that mediation effectiveness is not necessarily the result of strategic geography. Instead, diplomatic credibility, domestic political unity, and apparent neutrality among competing forces are the three factors that are essential for a successful mediation. Pakistan has good diplomatic opportunities in terms of communication and regional legitimacy, but weak internal stability, dependence on outside powers, and multiple geopolitical differences limit its role as an intermediary. This article contributes to middle-power scholarship by advancing an agency-centred framework for understanding how developing states transform strategic positioning into diplomatic influence.

KEYWORDS: Middle Powers, Pakistan Foreign Policy, Mediation Diplomacy, US–Iran Relations, Strategic Balancing, Neoclassical Realism, Emerging Powers

Introduction

The international system is changing significantly, with geopolitical fragmentation, strategic competition, regional conflicts, and a loss of trust in the traditional diplomatic system. The assumption of major powers being the key

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Corresponding Author

Ahmed Osama Tahir

✉ ahmed.osama@myu.edu.pk

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drivers of global order is coming into disrepute as the importance of emerging states in the mediation and regional diplomacy of conflicts becomes more evident. States with moderate capabilities and with large diplomatic networks have been becoming intermediaries with international impact across a range of regions. This shift has sparked renewed scholarly interest in the middle power agency and diplomatic entrepreneurship (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). The nature of middle powers in international relations history has always been a grey zone. One of the earlier definitions of middle powers was based on the material factors of economic size, military capability, regional influence, etc. More recent scholarship, however, has focused on behavioral traits like coalition-building, multilateral engagement, niche diplomacy, and mediation activities. In this view, the importance of the middle power is not determined by material strength but by diplomatic action (Jha & Jomy, 2026).

In the case of Pakistan, it's an interesting case for studying middle power diplomacy. Pakistan lies at the crossroads of four continents: South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean region, and hence it is a strategic location. It has maintained its historical ties with Washington and still has cultural, economic, and geopolitical links with Tehran. This can allow Pakistan to play a middleman role during periods of heightened tension between the United States and Iran (Roy et al., 2023). But the ability of Pakistan to mediate is still being disputed. However, through optimistic evaluation, it is believed that Pakistan has diplomatic leverage with competing actors owing to strategic gains in this context. Economic dependency, domestic instability, and strategic considerations limit Islamabad's neutrality, critics say. Other recent studies also suggest that mediation is facilitated and hindered in Pakistan by structural constraints and perceptions of credibility (Henrikson, 1997).

Teo (2022) takes it for granted that geopolitical significance goes hand in hand with diplomatic agency. But geographically significant states often do not translate into political influence. The current research contends that the effectiveness of mediation is not just a function of structural position but of the dynamics between systemic opportunities and domestic political capacity. The main thesis of this analysis is that the effectiveness of Pakistan's mediation depends more on the perceived strategic neutrality and institutionalized diplomatic capacities of Pakistan than on its material middle-power capacities. Geography provides opportunity; domestic understanding and external credibility provide outcomes. This research makes an important contribution on three fronts.

- ▶ It reframes the notion of Pakistan from what is perceived as a security issue to a diplomatic agency.
- ▶ It combines Middle Power Theory and Neoclassical Realism into a coherent theory.
- ▶ It suggests a causal mechanism to explain how emerging powers become influential mediators.

Literature Review

According to Efsthopoulos (2015), the global order that has existed since the end of World War II has undergone a series of changes typified by multipolarity, heightened geopolitical rivalry, and the spread of power away from the old great powers. These shifts have led to a renewed academic interest in states in the middle, so-called middle powers. International arrangements of the post-Cold War era, in contrast to bipolar or unipolar arrangements of earlier years, offer new opportunities for moderate states to pursue their influence through diplomatic, coalition-building, mediation, and strategic balancing efforts. In recent scholarship, international influence has come to be understood not simply with reference to military and economic power, but more and more as a result of diplomatic entrepreneurship and institutional engagement. These events have revived discussions about the agency of the middle powers and their capacity to determine regional and international outcomes within a constrained environment.

As indicated by Struye de Swielande (2018), traditional literature saw middle powers from a material perspective, in terms of population, military spending, economic activity, and geopolitical significance. These kinds of capability-

based systems hierarchically place middle powers between major powers and peripheral states. But modern scholarship is increasingly critical of this method, due to the fact that material factors often fail to account for differences in diplomatic practice among states with similar resources. Economically or militarily, states with similar capacity can adopt vastly different foreign policies. Thus, it is necessary to consider the dynamic attributes and diplomatic behavior of middle powers along with their structural position. According to Shin et al. (2026), Middle power understandings of identity are now increasingly discussed in the context of debating understandings of behaviour and constructivist approaches. Contemporary scholarship increasingly defines middle powers through behavioral and diplomatic practices rather than solely through material capabilities. Modern middle powers are fulfilling diplomatic roles with regard to specific issues that allow them to shape international developments far beyond their material resources. Similarly, there is growing scholarship that middle powers are turning to international outreach and policy specialization to gain international visibility and political salience.

Further, Jordaan (2003) distinguishes between two types of middle powers: traditional and emerging middle powers. Traditional middle powers operated in the established liberal institutional order and sometimes prioritized consensus-building and multilateralism. Strengthening middle powers, on the other hand, are more regionally oriented and more strategically autonomous under a geopolitical transition (Ali, 2022; Bano et al., 2026). Such a state more and more seeks to form flexible alignments, instead of strict structures of alliance. The rising middle powers want more space for manoeuvre in the context of more dynamic power realignment and increasing strategic competition. This has given new momentum to the studies of such countries as Türkiye, Qatar, Indonesia, South Africa, and Pakistan, which are following adaptive and pragmatic diplomatic paths. As suggested by Karim (2025), it is usually during times of global instability that middle powers emerge as more prominent actors. Middle powers can also be seen as bridge builders that can help facilitate communication between competing actors under strategic competition. Systemic change brings about a significant increase in the possibilities of middle power cooperation as environments change. Such "states" are increasingly becoming foreign policy middlemen in a world of uncertainty and strategic rivalry.

But Aydin (2021) challenges the notion of how much influence can be exerted by middle powers. The key is to have a positive attitude towards diplomatic imagination and flexibility: the international political role of moderate states is increasing, and they are increasingly taking on it through soft power means and institutional activism. Others, less enthusiastic, say that middle powers are still subject to systemically embedded major power hierarchies. There are also critics of mediators who argue that the aims of mediation are unrealistic compared to the objectives of diplomacy and that a structural dependence can be harmful to strategic autonomy. This debate brings up a very interesting theoretical issue about the ability of diplomatic actions to overcome material constraints in international politics. Moreover, Das (2021) highlighted how the world has changed middle-power practices. In today's world, middle powers seek to engage selectively and promote issue-based diplomacy instead of a wholesale alignment of national ideologies. Research (Tahir & Mujahid, 2025) shows that diplomatic practices shift as international priorities and geopolitical situations change. These changes indicate the need to look at middle power behavior in a dynamic way instead of within static theoretical frameworks.

According to Lee (2019), a parallel body of literature examines mediation and conflict-resolution diplomacy. The classical literature on mediation scholarship has several factors that are assumed to affect the processes of a mediator: neutrality, credibility, legitimacy, access to communication, and leverage. Crocker et al. (2018) claim that mediation is rarely effective just because of status or geographic proximity. Instead, perceptions among competing actors about trustworthiness and impartiality are key to the success of mediation. The nature of diplomatic influence, then, is defined by its legitimacy and credibility and not just its institutional standing. Recently, mediation

scholarship has begun to pose questions about the neutrality of mediation (Kazmierczak, 2007). Previous research has tended to equate neutrality with impartiality towards other players. Mediators today, on the other hand, are often seen as having strategic interests and relationships with competing parties. Effective mediation, then, depends on being able to control the competing relationships while demonstrating fairness and impartiality. Neutrality is becoming more and more of a social construct than a state of fact.

Previous research by Hill (2015) also shows that communication access is not sufficient for mediation to be effective. States often have diplomatic ties with rival actors but are unable to shape conflict dynamics. Communication access is increasingly being separated from diplomatic leverage. Although access can facilitate the process of mediation, the process of mediation has a significant impact on legitimacy and influence. Rational mediators thus need to have both strategic access and legitimacy in order to influence negotiations. Frazier et al. (2014) reveal that contemporary diplomatic contexts are characterized by overlapping strategic pressures. In many instances, however, great power competition puts limits on intermediary states and alters the incentives for mediation efforts. As a result, emerging powers are increasingly negotiating in a field of uncertainty and external pressure in the context of diplomacy. In situations of strategic division and competing alliances, mediation becomes more difficult (Süsler & Alden, 2025).

Bamidele (2025) states that literature on strategic autonomy and balancing behaviour also assists in interpreting the behaviour of emerging powers in the current geopolitical climate. In general, strategic autonomy is the capacity of a state or nation to act independently in the conduct of its foreign policy, without being too influenced by other external actors. According to the latest research, strategic autonomy has grown in significance given the escalating geopolitical rivalry. Thus, strategic autonomy becomes an objective of foreign policy and a condition for its credibility. In addition, traditional realist concepts often dictate alliance actions based on security interests and material gains. But current scholarship increasingly undermines these assumptions. The emerging powers look for such an approach in which they are able to engage multiple actors simultaneously while maintaining selective partnerships and strategies for cooperation on specific issues. Flexible balancing strategies allow states to maintain strategic flexibility without being wedded to a particular alignment.

In particular, Pakistan holds special importance because of its geopolitical position, being a crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean region, as stated by Larik et al (2023). Pakistan is also in a delicate position of balance between the US, China, Iran, and the Gulf nations, which offers opportunities and challenges. Numerous studies exist that portray the military strength of Pakistan, the country's nuclear program, and its significance to the region. In spite of all these strategic benefits, the foreign policy discourse in Pakistan continues to be centred on security; it has a security language with a strong emphasis on alliance politics, India-centric views, and military aspects. These strategies often tend to deceive the reader into viewing Pakistan as a reactionary country, where its actions are driven, for the most part, by foreign factors. More recent scholarship tends to dispute such interpretations and has been offering an alternative view that Pakistan has been more active as a diplomat than is typically credited. Research findings reveal that Islamabad is resorting to balancing diplomacy and geo-economic narratives to diversify strategic options in the changing international environment.

Karim (2023) argues that balancing Pakistan's relationship with Iran and Gulf countries is an important field of research in the present scenario. Previous research has shown that Pakistan often tries to maintain cooperation with rival regional partners. That's a strategic need and diplomatic consideration. According to Jalal et al. (2025), balancing diplomacy and strategic neutrality has been given as a reason for the parliamentary decision that they do not involve themselves directly in the Yemen conflict. According to scholars Khan and Adnan (2024), there is no consensus in academia about Pakistan's diplomatic independence. Supportive interpretations state that Pakistan's

strategic position and diplomacy offer opportunities for mediation and intermediary engagement. Hussain et al. (2023) argue that an economy that relies heavily on other nations, domestic unrest, and outside pressure seriously limits the flexibility of foreign policy. The literature often points to a financial lack of capacity and a lack of institutional cohesion to explain Pakistan's inability to demonstrate independent geopolitical influence.

Ripsman et al. (2021) propose that the limitations may be understood in terms of the neoclassical realist school of thought. Unlike structural theories, Neoclassical Realism argues that systemic opportunities become modified through domestic processes such as institutional integration, perceptions of elites, sense of political security, and the state's capacity. International institutions mediate between international pressures and foreign policy outcomes, and similar environments can produce different foreign policy outcomes. This view is especially pertinent for Pakistan in the wake of its historically complex civil-military relationship and the frequent occurrence of domestic political instability in the country. Besides, Rizvi (2002) also argues that domestic coherence has a significant impact on foreign policy outcomes. Institutional fragmentation, leadership changes, and economic crises often harm diplomatic consistency and credibility. The new study results reveal that the opportunities for emerging countries to build up their diplomatic presence in the world are diminishing due to the growing domestic instability. Economic downturns and foreign financial commitments, at times, have reduced Pakistan's strategic independence and foreign policy.

Ali et al. (2024) further explain that the trend of geo-economic diplomacy and regional connectivity is also a new field of study in Pakistan. Policymakers have begun to pay more attention to this aspect in view of the growing importance of the themes of economic integration, trade cooperation, and regional connectivity within the framework of foreign policy. These are examples of a transformation to a new story of Pakistan that goes beyond the conventional security boxes. Geo-economic policies, in the longer term, could reduce external dependence, boost diplomatic flexibility, and strengthen strategic autonomy. Though there has been considerable scholarly work, there are a few gaps in the literature regarding Pakistan's foreign policy and mediation diplomacy. Previous research has largely preserved the separation between security studies and foreign policy analysis, and only a few have examined the role of structurally constrained states as mediators of international conflicts.

Furthermore, the scholarship of Khan et al. (2024) on mediation has largely neglected to explore new powers in the midst of overlapping strategic relationships. Past studies also typically assume that geopolitical significance will always be associated with diplomatic influence, which is not necessarily true. This study is relevant to these issues and aims to explore Pakistan's mediation capability in the US-Iran negotiations through the lens of Middle Power Theory and Neoclassical Realism. Beyond the geographical determinism of explanations for diplomatic agency, the research specifically examines the interplay among domestic political coherence, strategic autonomy, and perception of neutrality to account for the effectiveness of mediation.

Theoretical Framework

Middle Power Theory is insufficient to account for Pakistan's mediation action. Likewise, Neoclassical Realism does not fully account for the divergent diplomatic results of states that have the same systemic pressures (Laurence, 2023). An integrated framework is required.

Middle Power Theory suggests that diplomatic opportunities are created by:

- ▶ Strategic location
- ▶ International activism
- ▶ Mediation behavior
- ▶ Niche diplomacy

Neoclassical Realism adds domestic variables such as:

- ▶ Political stability
- ▶ Institutional coherence
- ▶ Elite perceptions
- ▶ State capacity

They put together a coherent explanatory model. According to the proposed mechanism, it works as follows:

Strategic Position

↓

Communication Access

↓

Diplomatic Leverage

↓

Perceived Neutrality

↓

Mediation Effectiveness

There are, however, intervening variables on this pathway: Domestic Political Instability, Economic Vulnerability, Strategic Dependence, and External Pressures. In this way, mediation effectiveness becomes dependent on opportunities and domestic capacities. Access through strategic geography and credibility from Political coherence. This is a comprehensive model and a more complete explanation than either theory alone.

Research Design and Methodology

The type of study used is qualitative process tracing analysis and policy-oriented analysis. Process tracing allows for the examination of the causal processes from geopolitical opportunities to mediation outcomes. Process tracing is not as descriptive as it is explanatory and asks how certain events lead to observable diplomatic behavior.

The paper looks at three analytical episodes:

- ▶ Case 1: Pakistan's Balancing Diplomacy in the Period of Tensions between the Gulf and Iran.
- ▶ Case 2: Pakistan's role in the escalation after Soleimani.
- ▶ Case 3: Modern diplomacy related to dialogue between the USA and Iran.

Primary material includes: Foreign ministry statements, think tank reports, Policy analyses, Academic literature, and Diplomatic records. Thematic coding is used throughout the analysis of the following categories: strategic balancing, neutrality, mediation credibility, institutional constraints, and regional pressures. Process tracing enables the identification of causal sequences, not just events.

Empirical Analysis: Pakistan's Mediation Agency Under Strategic Constraint by Mohammad Tayyebnia

Case 1: Balancing Diplomacy in the Gulf-Iran Strategic Environment in Pakistan

Considering Pakistan's role in the Gulf strategic balance is essential to its potential mediation. Islamabad has attempted to maintain all its relations with Iran, the Gulf countries, China, and the West during the last few decades. Foreign policy doctrine is a matter of style, and in some instances, a choice of necessity. The historical relationship of Pakistan with the Gulf countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is also linked to security and economic implications. These relationships have been strengthened by financial aid, labour mobility, remittance

transfers, and military aid. Meanwhile, Pakistan shares long borders with Iran and has numerous interests in its relations with Tehran. Cooperation has high benefits in energy security, border management, and Afghanistan development. These relationships exist concurrently and are in conflict.

According to traditional realist viewpoints, alignment behaviour should be caused by material incentives and security interests. The targeted strike only worsened fears of regional escalation and raised huge diplomatic questions in the Middle East and in India and Pakistan. The crisis posed immediate strategic challenges to Pakistan. The potential for a military conflict between Washington and Tehran for Pakistan's security environment was serious. The potential for escalation that could threaten peace in the border area, economic projects, and regional connectivity loomed. There were also difficult foreign policy decisions for Islamabad. Furthermore, the U.S. was a major strategically important force in Afghanistan and in international financial institutions. Iran was Pakistan's immediate neighbor, and they had several crucial security and economic interests. This neutrality served a variety of purposes. It minimized the risk of sectarian polarization in the domestic context of Pakistan. It maintained two-way ties with Tehran, keeping Islamabad's future diplomatic credibility (Rose, 1998).

The decision, from a middle-power vantage point, was based on the logic of mediation. Potential mediators aren't able to take a clear partisan stance. However, by not being directly involved, Pakistan maintained communications between opposing camps. However, neutrality came under criticism. Some local watchers saw Pakistan's stance of strategic ambiguity as a strategic choice rather than a principled neutrality. This is an important distinction. The effectiveness of mediation is not only dependent on the mediator's self-perception of neutrality, but also on what others perceive as neutral. Political and official credibility becomes socially built. The case illustrates an important mechanism in the proposed scheme. The opportunity was provided by the strategic location. Political decision-making strove to remain neutral. But alternative external explanations hindered mediation effectiveness. Therefore, a balance of behavior alone was not enough. Trust in institutions was also a concern.

Case 2: Pakistan and the Post-Soleimani Crisis

The killing of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 was one of the most perilous moments in the recent history of US-Iran relations. The targeted strike added to concerns of wider regional escalation and created significant diplomatic uncertainty in the Middle East and in India and Pakistan. The crisis posed immediate strategic challenges to Pakistan. The potential for a military conflict between Washington and Tehran for Pakistan's security environment was serious. Escalation threatened peace in the border area, as well as economic projects and regional connectivity. Islamabad was also dealing with tough foreign policy choices. Moreover, the U.S. was a key strategic player in Afghanistan and international financial institutions. Iran was Pakistan's immediate neighbor, and they had several crucial security and economic interests. Typically, under the alliance logic of conventional policy-making, the policymaker is faced with a choice between two alternatives. Both official statements called for caution, mediation, and de-escalation. Islamabad had requested a political discussion, not any forced action.

The government's diplomatic messages carried many common themes:

- ▶ regional peace
- ▶ strategic restraint
- ▶ avoidance of escalation
- ▶ dialogue mechanisms

These responses are not just words, but meaningful. Diplomatic language offers tangible evidence in terms of process-tracing of policy preferences. The crisis was a reflection of Pakistan's attempt to play a stabilising role. But there were restrictions that soon came into place. Rhetorically, Pakistan was given a lot of attention for dialogue, but in reality, there was only a limited direct influence on the decision-making process between Washington and Tehran. This result demonstrates the difference between two aspects of communication: access and mediation leverage. Pakistan possessed access, but it had little power. Mediation scholarship often takes for granted that communication creates 'intermediary potential'. But no access is enough to ensure diplomatic effectiveness. Mediators need other resources such as legitimacy and bargaining power. Pakistan's reliance on foreign economic assistance and wider geopolitical restraints constrained its ability to influence the strategic thinking of competing actors. Domestic political aspects were also relevant. Institutional coordination is a part of foreign policy coherence. The civil–military dynamics in Pakistan have been historically complicated, and at times, policy actors have differing preferences. What is emphasized in Neoclassical Realism is exactly these mediating variables that lie within the individual. Domestic institutions act as a filter on systemic opportunities. This suggests that the Soleimani episode illustrates a partial mediation pathway. The people who were strategically located created access. Access is allowed for diplomatic engagement. However, influence was constrained through institutional, geopolitical, and other factors. As a result, this mediation potential was not fully developed. The changing dynamics of global geopolitics further highlight the changing diplomatic role of Pakistan. Over the last few years, significant changes have occurred in regional political systems.

There are several particularly important developments:

- ▶ The US strategic focus increasingly started to focus on China as a competitor.
- ▶ Afghanistan's political transition shifted the regional calculations.
- ▶ Some important changes took place in the relations between the Gulf and Iran.
- ▶ The region's alignments changed due to emerging multipolarity.

The developments created opportunities and uncertainties for Pakistan. In the newly evolving geopolitical scenario, Islamabad started to focus more and more on the geo-economic aspect of the matters than the geopolitical. The discussion of foreign policy adopted a new focus on themes such as:

- ▶ Connectivity
- ▶ Economic cooperation
- ▶ Regional integration
- ▶ Strategic neutrality

These developments seem to be in line with the concept of middle power diplomacy. Instead of focusing on this hard balancing, policymakers increasingly pay attention to economic diplomacy and regional engagement. This type of communication can contribute to mediation aspirations due to the economic rhetoric that diminishes ideologically based perspectives. Some significant parallels, however, exist. Pakistan's proximity to China remains a factor impacting external perceptions. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further bolstered Pakistan-China ties but did not fail to add to the concerns of some external players. Washington sees China's regional influence as having an impact on its broader strategic considerations. Tehran and China are also important economic players. This makes the intermediary position of Pakistan a part of greater power politics.

This results in a paradox: one of the reasons Pakistan is of strategic importance is its relationships. The same tie-ups limit diplomatic independence. This is a common issue for middle powers. Influence is created by dependence, and it also restricts flexibility. The mediatory potential of Pakistan is, therefore, limited and is confined to a very small strategic space. It is much more apparent when looking at the alternatives in comparison. Why rely on Pakistan,

as opposed to Oman or Qatar? Many similarities and differences can be noted. Oman's diplomatic and neutral approach to history is different. Qatar built up its mediation capacity, with financial means and institutional funding. Turkey is an activist in diplomacy and influences the region. Pakistan, on the other hand, has certain advantages over these actors, including geographic proximity, military credibility, historical ties, and communication channels. But there are some disadvantages in Pakistan also, like domestic instability, economic vulnerability, and perception problems. Mediation may not work efficiently; therefore, it needs to be institutionalised.

Findings and Discussion

The facts point to the fact that Pakistan does have the presence and capacity to mediate, albeit limited. However, three important findings emerge: Strategic Geography is an occasion-giving force but not a force of influence; the literature often takes for granted that geopolitical importance leads to diplomatic leverage; The geostrategic position undoubtedly is an asset for Pakistan due to proximity to Iran, historical US relations, regional legitimacy, and communication access, but geography was not enough. There is a need for more institutional resources for diplomatic influence, and no Strategic access led to limited results. Neutrality is not an objective fact, but rather a perceptual experience. The analysis shows that neutrality is a perception-based, not intention-based, value. Pakistan's foreign policy has often been a policy of balancing and restraint. But sometimes these actions were misconstrued by outside parties. Neutrality has been presented in mediation literature as a condition that is unchanging. Evidence suggests otherwise. Neutrality is socially produced. Actors are effective mediators when they are viewed by their rivals as being sufficiently neutral. Therefore, the diplomatic image is a tool of strategy.

The Foreign Policy Agency is a domestic coherence-conditions agency. The framework of theory is integrated and is well supported. Foreign policy decision-making was repeatedly affected by domestic factors. Mediation capacity was limited by political instability, economic dependence, and fragmented institutions. In this sense, Neoclassical Realism is a suitable supplement to the Middle Power Theory. International opportunities alone cannot account for diplomatic outcomes. Systemic pressures are interwoven with the processes of domestic institutions. This discovery adds to the theoretical basis, as a lot of scholarship has tended to isolate structural and domestic explanations. In the present study, interaction effects are shown.

Theoretical Contribution

This research makes a contribution to middle-power scholarship in a number of ways. First, it challenges middle powers' capability-centred conceptions. The Diplomatic agency starts not only from material resources but also from strategic credibility. Second, the study suggests an integrated explanatory model that integrates Middle Power Theory with Neoclassical Realism. Third, the article pinpoints a causal mechanism that explains the emergence of strategic positioning in the mediation capacity of emerging states. But agency is not a product of strategic geography. Neutrality and political unity must not be abandoned. The framework could be used outside of Pakistan. Other countries such as Indonesia, Qatar, and Türkiye face similar issues. So, the argument has a more general comparative significance.

Policy Implications

The empirical results show that Pakistan has significant potential for playing the role of a diplomatic middleman between the USA and Iran, but this potential is hampered due to institutional weakness, domestic instability, and strategic pressures. Mediation diplomacy should be a continuous process and not an isolated one if Pakistan is to turn geopolitical importance into a lasting influence in diplomatic affairs. Based on this analysis, several policy implications are suggested.

Institutionalizing Mediation Diplomacy

The leadership initiative and ad hoc crisis management have been the conventional approach of Pakistan's diplomacy. This has the effect of creating disunity and lessening the continuity of diplomacy. Stability of institutions is a prerequisite to effective mediation, and stability of the political climate is important to maintaining communication between parties.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should have special mediation and conflict resolution teams that are equipped with skills in backchannel diplomacy, regional negotiations, strategic dialogue management, etc. There are a number of effective middle powers that have formalized their mediation capacity with dedicated diplomatic capacities. Mediation capabilities were successfully leveraged as a diplomatic asset in the long term in two notable instances in Qatar and Norway. The institutionalization would provide three benefits. Firstly, it would do away with the need for a strong personality to lead people. Second, it would make the transition of political leadership smoother. Thirdly, it would enhance the credibility of Pakistan as a mediator in the international community. Diplomatic efforts are at risk from domestic political swings in the absence of institutional support.

Strengthening Strategic Neutrality

The results indicate neutrality to be one of the most significant factors affecting mediation effectiveness. But neutrality shouldn't be interpreted as apolitical or as serving an equal distance from all parties. On the contrary, neutrality should be based on diplomatic autonomy. The history of Pakistan has been one of balancing between China, the United States, the Gulf countries, and Iran. However, now and then, doubts about Islamabad's neutrality have been raised. A more uniform Pakistani policy on strategic neutrality is thus needed.

Such a system should focus on engagement instead of bloc politics, through issue-based approaches, including diplomatic flexibility, regional de-escalation, and non-involvement in proxy warfare. Perception of Pakistan as a credible intermediary would further be enhanced through strategic neutrality. This suggestion is not intended to replace strategic partnerships. Instead, it calls for avoiding the appearance of diplomatic liabilities among partnerships.

Improving Economic Resiliency and Foreign Policy Autonomy

Economic vulnerability repeatedly became a significant limitation to diplomatic agency. Policy options could be limited for states that are heavily dependent on outside financial sources. During times of economic crisis, short-term alignment behavior can occur, and sensitivity to outside pressures can be increased. This constant dependency on foreign financial assistance has foreign policy ramifications for Pakistan. The parties need to have the freedom to make their choices and strategies in mediation. Economic Resilience is essential to Strategic Autonomy. Thus, economic reforms ought to be construed not simply as domestic policy goals, but foreign policy goals as well.

Policies emphasizing:

- ▶ Export diversification
- ▶ Regional connectivity
- ▶ Investment expansion
- ▶ Energy cooperation

Ramping up long-term diplomatic independence and Geo-economic approaches may therefore indirectly aid mediation aspirations.

Building Regional Multilateral Relations

Multilateral institutions are often used as instruments for influencing the region by middle powers. Pakistan's membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the United Nations is a great diplomatic opportunity for the country. Multilateral forums are spaces in which competing actors can communicate in a neutral environment. These institutions need to be increasingly used for confidence-building exercises and dialogue processes in Pakistan.

These could involve:

- ▶ Regional security conferences
- ▶ Energy cooperation platforms
- ▶ Strategic dialogue forums
- ▶ Conflict-prevention initiatives

Multilateral interaction enhances the legitimacy of a political process and minimizes the danger of bilateral mediation. Building diplomatic capacity and strategic communication skills. Increasingly, informational and reputational resources are becoming important instruments in diplomatic influence. Strategic communication is a key way for perceptions of neutrality, reliability, and legitimacy to be formed in the contemporary world of international politics. The diplomatic machinery of Pakistan thus needs to be strengthened through investment in the following:

- ▶ Policy research
- ▶ Public diplomacy
- ▶ Strategic messaging
- ▶ Crisis communication

Institutions such as think tanks, universities, and foreign policy institutions should be part of a wider strategy for diplomacy. Academic-policy partnerships can enhance the evidence-based policy process and boost the intellectual underpinnings of foreign policy processes. Narratives of credibility, not only actors, are needed for effective mediation.

Conclusion

The current article was an attempt to discuss Pakistan's mediation role in the US–Iran negotiation using an integrated theoretical approach of Middle Power Theory and Neoclassical Realism. In Pakistan, the existing scholarship tends to see the country mainly in terms of security politics, alliances, and competition in the region, or strategic reliance on others. These methods ignore the fact that Pakistan is a state with its own diplomatic capability and are inadequate in their ability to articulate how emerging states translate geopolitical positioning into influence in foreign policy. The research poses a key question: when and how do emerging middle powers become effective mediators? Nothing, the article concluded, was more important than the institutionalized diplomatic capacity and perceptions of strategic neutrality in the success of mediation. The study analyzed three analytical moments related to Pakistan's balancing policy and the positioning of diplomacy in the region, using process tracing and qualitative analysis. The study analyzed three analytical moments related to Pakistan's balancing behavior and regional diplomatic positioning through process tracing and qualitative analysis.

The results contradicted the deterministic ideas on strategic geography. The geographical position of Pakistan undeniably offers opportunities for diplomatic communication and regional relevance. However, geography was not a sufficient factor. There are other factors, beyond the capability of a specialized system, that influence diplomatic effectiveness: domestic political coherence, economic resilience, institutional capacity, and perceptions of neutrality. The evidence also shows that the effectiveness of mediation does not depend on objective neutrality but on socially constructed credibility. States are successful intermediaries when their competitors feel they can rely on them and regard them as politically independent. Theoretically, the integrated framework developed in this article makes a contribution as it brings together theories of systemic and domestic explanations of foreign policy behaviour. Strategic opportunities are mediated by domestic institutions and elite perceptions.

Thus, foreign policy agency is a product of interaction, not just structure. The findings have relevance to issues beyond Pakistan. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of many emerging powers seeking diplomatic positions in multipolar international settings. But influence does not come just because of strategic importance. Access must be turned into legitimacy and positioning into institutional capacity in emerging states. In the context of Pakistan, the future mediation efforts of Pakistan need to be pursued with a long-term diplomatic perspective rather than through sporadic efforts. The message of the wider lesson is obvious: Middle-power diplomacy is not just a function of geopolitical position, but a political skill that must be built institutionally.

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