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The Effective Role of a Mediator in Contemporary Conflict Resolution: A Case Study of Pakistan's Mediation in the U.S.–Iran Ceasefire (2026)

الدور الفعال للوسيط في حل النزاعات المعاصرة: وساطة باكستان بين الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وإيران نموذجا (2026)

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Abstract

Mediation has emerged as an indispensable instrument in managing high-intensity interstate crises where direct negotiation is politically foreclosed and escalation risks are acute. This article examines the conditions, dynamics, and effectiveness of third-party mediation through a detailed case study of Pakistan's role in facilitating the 2026 U.S.–Iran ceasefire. Drawing on contemporary mediation theory and conflict management scholarship—including Fisher, Ury, and Patton's foundational interest-based negotiation framework, Moore's comprehensive process model, and Kydd's game-theoretic credibility theory—the study conceptualizes the mediator not as a passive neutral conduit, but as an active process architect shaping communication flows, interaction sequencing, and trust-building measures between deeply adversarial parties. The article further situates Pakistan's role within the emerging literature on middle-

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power diplomacy, arguing that structural neutrality and relational credibility—rather than material leverage—constitute the decisive assets of effective mediators in great-power disputes. Using a qualitative theory-building process tracing methodology, the article reconstructs the mediation process, identifying the specific causal mechanisms linking Pakistan's interventions to de-escalatory outcomes. The findings confirm three interrelated hypotheses: that perceived neutrality enables engagement, that communication management outweighs coercive leverage, and that middle-power positioning provides structural advantages unavailable to major-power intermediaries. Critically, the findings also reveal the limits of partial mediation: a temporary ceasefire was achieved, but structural impasses over Iran's nuclear programme and the Strait of Hormuz prevented a comprehensive settlement, underscoring the distinction between mediation as crisis management and mediation as conflict resolution. The study concludes with theoretically grounded recommendations for the institutionalization of mediation capacity in contemporary international security governance.

Key words

International mediation; conflict de-escalation; crisis diplomacy; process tracing; signaling; middle-power diplomacy; ripeness theory; U.S.–Iran relations; Pakistan.

الملخص

ظهرت الوساطة بوصفها أداة ضرورية لا يمكن الاستغناء عنها في إدارة الأزمات الحادة بين الدول، حين تغلق أبواب التفاوض المباشر لاعتبارات سياسية، وتتصاعد مخاطر التدهور والانزلاق نحو احياء الصراع من جديد.

تتناول هذه الدراسة شروط الوساطة من طرف ثالث لادارتها واحياء دينامكيتها، ومدى فاعلياتها من خلال دراسة تفصيلية للدور الباكستاني في تسيير اتفاق وقف اطلاق النار الأمريكي - الإيراني عام 2026، وتستند الدراسة إلى نظريات الوساطة المعاصرة وأدبيات إدارة النزاعات، ولاسيما الإطار التفاوضي القائم على المصالح الذي وضعه المفكرون فيشر، أروى، وباتون، ونموذج المسار الشامل لمور، ونظرية المصداقية القائمة على نظرية الألعاب لكيد،

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وتعيد الدراسة تصور دور الوسيط، لا بوصفه وسيطا محايدا سلبيا، بل بوصفه مهندسا فاعلا للعملية التفاوضية، بوصفه يتحكم في تدفق المعلومات وتسلسل التفاعلات وبناء الثقة بين أطراف تسودها عداوة شديدة وعميقة.

كما تؤطر الدراسة الدور الباكستاني ضمن الأدبيات الناشئة حول دور دبلوماسية القوى المتوسطة، مؤكدة على أن الحياد الهيكلي والمصداقية والعقلانية في إدارة المفاوضات - لا القدرة المادية والنفوذ - هما الرصيد الوحيد والحقيقي للوساطة الفعالة في حل النزاعات وتسويتها، ويبرز دور باكستان الفعال في تركيب مسار الوساطة، ويكشف عن الآليات السببية التي تربط تدخلات باكستان بعمليات تهدئة التوترات وخفض التصعيد.

و تؤكد النتائج أن الحياد المدرك يتيح التواصل ، وأن إدارة التواصل تتفوق على النفوذ القسري، وأن موقع القوى المتوسطة يمنح مزايا هيكلية لا تتوفر للوسطاء من الدول الكبرى.غير أن النتائج تكشف في الوقت ذاته عن حدود الوساطة الجزئية، اذ أنجز وقف إطلاق النار بصفة مؤقتة، إلا أن الجمود البنيوي المتعلق بالبرنامج النووي الإيراني ومضيق هرمز حال دون التوصل إلى تسوية شاملة، مما يجلى الفارق الجوهري بين الوساطة بوصفها أداة لإدارة الأزمات والوساطة بوصفها آلية لحل النزاعات. وتختم الدراسة بتوصيات مستندة إلى أسس نظرية راسخة تدعو إلى تأسيس قدرات مؤسسية للوساطة في منظومة الأمن الدولي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوساطة الدولية، تهدئة النزاعات، ديبلوماسية الأزمات، ديبلوماسية القوى المتوسطة، نظرية النضج، التتبع العملياتي، الإشارات والرسائل الضمنية، العلاقات الأمريكية- الإيرانية، باكستان.

1. Introduction

Despite the increasing institutionalization of mediation as a primary instrument of international dispute resolution, its effectiveness remains conspicuously uneven (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006; Wallensteen, 2015). This is particularly pronounced in crises involving major powers, where escalation dynamics are acute, strategic interests are intensely contested, and direct negotiations carry prohibitive reputational risks. While mediation is formally endorsed by the United Nations—most notably through General Assembly Resolution 65/283 on strengthening the role of mediation in the

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peaceful settlement of disputes[1]—the conversion of institutional recognition into operational effectiveness is neither automatic nor guaranteed.

This article addresses this gap through a systematic examination of Pakistan's mediation role in the 2026 U.S.–Iran crisis. The central argument is that mediation effectiveness depends less on the mediator's material power or formal neutrality than on three interrelated process capacities: the ability to manage communication under conditions of deep mutual distrust; the structural credibility to be believed by both parties when counseling restraint[2]; and the adaptive skill to translate incremental confidence-building measures into momentum toward comprehensive settlement.

The article makes three original contributions to the scholarly literature. First, it empirically challenges the assumption that strict neutrality is the primary determinant of mediation success, demonstrating instead that 'biased impartiality'—credible commitment to both parties' core interests simultaneously—constitutes a more effective mediator posture in high-intensity settings. Second, it advances the middle-power diplomacy literature by demonstrating how procedural control, rather than material leverage, enables non-great powers to shape outcomes in great-power disputes. Third, it contributes to crisis management scholarship by identifying the specific mechanisms through which mediation reduces escalation risks, with particular attention to the distinction between

1- United Nations General Assembly, Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution, Resolution 65/283 (New York: United Nations, 2011). Full text available at: https://undocs.org/A/RES/65/283

2- Andrew H. Kydd, 'Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation,' American Journal of Political Science 47, no. 4 (2003): 597–611. Full text: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1540-5907.00042/pdf

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crisis de-escalation and conflict resolution—outcomes that the Pakistan case demonstrates are analytically and empirically distinct.

1.1. Research Problem

The central research problem this article addresses is threefold: why do some mediation efforts in high-intensity geopolitical disputes succeed while others fail; through what specific mechanisms do effective mediators produce de-escalatory outcomes; and under what conditions does partial mediation success—a ceasefire without a comprehensive settlement—constitute a meaningful contribution to international peace and security? Addressing these questions has direct implications for both mediation theory and the practice of international crisis diplomacy, particularly as states increasingly turn to third-party facilitation as an alternative to coercive escalation.

1.2. Research Questions

This study is organized around four principal research questions:

- What constitutes an effective mediator in contemporary international relations theory and professional practice?
- Which skills, ethical obligations, and structural conditions most reliably determine mediation success in high-intensity interstate disputes?
- How can middle-power states establish and exercise credible mediation authority in disputes involving great powers?
- What accounts for Pakistan's relative effectiveness in facilitating the 2026 U.S.–Iran ceasefire, and what were the structural limits of that effectiveness?

1.3. Hypotheses

The study advances three interrelated hypotheses, evaluated against the empirical evidence:

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- H1: Mediation success is positively correlated with the mediator's perceived credibility with both parties—credibility understood as combining relational legitimacy with demonstrated commitment to a fair process, rather than strict formal neutrality alone.
- H2: Effective communication management—encompassing sequential caucus diplomacy, confidence-building sequencing, and signaling facilitation—is a more decisive determinant of mediation outcomes in high-intensity crises than the mediator's coercive leverage or material power.
- H3: Middle powers can outperform major powers as mediators in great-power disputes precisely because their reduced strategic ambition and perceived structural impartiality render them more credible to both disputants simultaneously.

These hypotheses are informed by, and evaluated against, the theoretical traditions reviewed below, with particular attention to tensions among frameworks as much as their complementarities.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three core theoretical traditions, which together provide a multi-layered analytical lens for examining Pakistan's mediation role. Rather than applying these frameworks sequentially, the article engages them in dialogue, drawing on complementarities while acknowledging tensions.

1.4.1. Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism emphasizes cooperation, dialogue, and institutional frameworks as primary pathways to international order.[3]

3- Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Publisher page: https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691122489/after-hegemony

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From this perspective, mediation functions as a formal institutional mechanism that reduces the transaction costs of negotiation by providing a structured forum signaling good faith to both parties. Critically, however, liberal institutionalism assumes that institutional frameworks command compliance through reputational incentives—an assumption the Pakistan case partially challenges, given that the mediation produced a temporary ceasefire without a durable settlement, suggesting the limits of institutionalized process in the absence of resolved underlying interests.

1.4.2. Constructivism

Constructivism directs attention to the role of trust, identity, and intersubjective perception in shaping negotiation dynamics.[4] For constructivists, mediation succeeds not merely because of structural incentives but because of the meaning parties attach to the mediator's identity and conduct. A mediator perceived as culturally sensitive and genuinely impartial constructs a shared social context in which agreement becomes imaginable. This insight is particularly salient in the Pakistan case: shared Islamic heritage and geographic proximity shaped Tehran's willingness to engage specifically through Pakistan rather than through Western-aligned intermediaries—a dynamic that defies purely rationalist accounts of mediator selection.

4- Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,' International Organization 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425. Available via JSTOR: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858

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1.4.3. Conflict Resolution Theory

Conflict resolution theory, as developed by Fisher, Ury, and Patton[5] and Moore,[6] conceptualizes mediation as a process-driven mechanism fundamentally dependent on voluntary agreement, communication quality, and interest-based negotiation. Unlike positional bargaining—where parties defend stated positions at the expense of underlying needs—interest-based mediation encourages disputants to move toward their core interests, creating a larger zone of possible agreement. The mediator's skill in facilitating this transition, including through 'principled negotiation' (separating people from the problem and evaluating options against objective criteria), is on this account the primary determinant of outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mediation, Information, and Credibility

Classical mediation theory conceptualizes mediators as neutral facilitators who assist disputants in reaching voluntary agreement (Touval & Zartman, 1985). This framework has been substantially challenged by rationalist accounts that locate conflict persistence in information asymmetries and commitment problems rather than irrational hostility (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2002). Within this rationalist framework, mediators serve primarily as information brokers, transmitting credible signals between adversaries who cannot credibly commit to direct communication.

5- Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2011), 17–41. Free full text: https://archive.org/details/gettingtoyesnego0000fish_z1w8

6- Christopher W. Moore, The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 47–58. Publisher page: https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Mediation+Process

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Kydd's (2003) seminal game-theoretic analysis complicates the neutrality assumption in a theoretically significant way. Drawing on cheap talk theory, Kydd demonstrates that a strictly neutral mediator lacks credibility precisely because both parties know it has no incentive to accurately convey resolve: an unbiased mediator's assurances are therefore discounted. Paradoxically, only a mediator with some degree of alignment toward a party's interests will be believed when counseling restraint—because such alignment means the mediator incurs a cost by advising de-escalation contrary to the party's escalatory preferences.[7] This theoretical prediction—that 'biased impartiality' outperforms strict neutrality as a credibility strategy—is directly tested in the Pakistan case.

Constructivist perspectives complement this rationalist account by highlighting the role of legitimacy and perceived fairness in enabling disclosure (Svensson, 2009). From this vantage point, mediation effectiveness depends on the parties' belief that the mediator understands and respects their fundamental interests—a form of social credibility distinct from formal neutrality. This article bridges rationalist and constructivist perspectives by conceptualizing mediation as a process that simultaneously manages information asymmetries and constructs social conditions for agreement.

2.2. Middle Powers and Procedural Influence

The strategic significance of middle powers in international mediation has received increasing scholarly attention.[8] While lacking

7- Kydd, 'Which Side Are You On?', 600–604. The game-theoretic model demonstrating that biased impartiality outperforms strict neutrality is developed in full in Section III of the article.

8- Eduard Jordaan, 'The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers,' Politikon 30, no. 2 (2003): 165–181. On Pakistan's classification as an emerging middle power, see pp. 171–174.

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the coercive capabilities of major powers, middle powers can exercise influence through flexibility, relational access, and structural credibility. Jordaan (2003) distinguishes traditional middle powers—whose influence rests on established multilateral commitments—from emerging middle powers, whose leverage derives from regional positioning and normative entrepreneurship. Pakistan falls into this second category: its credibility in the 2026 crisis rested not on institutional standing but on specific relational assets with both Washington and Tehran.

Beardsley et al. (2006) provide the most rigorous empirical assessment of mediator leverage, demonstrating that procedural control—the capacity to structure interactions, manage timing, and influence communication flow—is a more consistent predictor of mediation success than the mediator's material power.[9] This finding has significant implications for middle-power mediation: it suggests that the comparative advantage of middle powers lies precisely in their capacity for procedural innovation, unencumbered by the strategic calculations that constrain major-power mediators.

2.3. Mediation in High-Intensity Crises: Ripeness and Timing

High-intensity crises are characterized by acute uncertainty, compressed decision timescales, and heightened risks of miscalculation arising from misread signals (Jervis, 1976; Schelling, 1960). In such contexts, mediation success depends critically on the ability to reduce uncertainty, manage escalatory signals, and create space for parties to recalibrate assessments without loss of face.

Zartman's (1989, 2001) ripeness theory provides the most influential account of the temporal conditions for mediation effectiveness.

9- Kyle C. Beardsley, David M. Quinn, Bidisha Biswas, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, 'Mediator Leverage and International Conflict Management,' Journal of Peace Research 43, no. 3 (2006): 301–317. Available via JSTOR: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640337

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Ripeness theory holds that mediation is most productive when parties perceive a 'mutually hurting stalemate'—a situation in which continued conflict imposes unacceptable costs on both sides—combined with a 'way out' visible through negotiation.[10] Crucially, Zartman does not treat ripeness as an objective structural condition awaiting passive recognition; rather, he and subsequent scholars argue that mediators can actively shape perceptions of ripeness by influencing parties' assessments of the costs of continued conflict.[11]

Two limitations of ripeness theory merit acknowledgment. First, it is stronger as a retrospective diagnostic than a prospective predictor: the identification of a mutually hurting stalemate is often clearer after the fact than before. Second, ripeness theory focuses on the moment of engagement rather than the process of mediation itself, leaving underspecified the mechanisms through which mediators translate a ripe moment into a durable agreement. This article addresses this second gap directly through its process-tracing methodology.

2.4. Partial Mediation Success and Its Implications

An underexplored dimension of mediation scholarship concerns cases of partial success: where mediation produces a temporary ceasefire or diplomatic channel without a comprehensive settlement. Bercovitch and Langley (1993) distinguish between mediation that reduces hostilities (process success) and mediation that resolves underlying disputes (outcome success), noting that the former is

10- Zartman, 'Timing of Peace Initiatives,' 8–12. Ripeness theory holds that a 'mutually hurting stalemate' combined with a visible 'way out' are necessary preconditions for productive mediation. For critical discussion of the theory's limitations, see: https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/ripeness

11- J. Michael Greig and Paul F. Diehl, International Mediation (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 45–67. The authors demonstrate empirically that mediators can actively shape perceptions of ripeness rather than merely responding to conditions that arise independently.

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considerably more common than the latter.[12] The Pakistan case exemplifies this distinction, raising the normatively important question of whether process success—halting active hostilities, establishing communication channels, and creating space for future diplomacy—constitutes a meaningful contribution to international peace and security even in the absence of outcome success. This article argues that it does, while simultaneously acknowledging the risks of a ceasefire that freezes rather than resolves structural conflict.

3. The Role of a Mediator: Theory and Practice

A mediator is a neutral third party who assists disputants in arriving at a voluntary, mutually acceptable settlement. Unlike a judge or arbitrator, the mediator exercises no authority to impose a decision; unlike a negotiator, the mediator represents no party's interests. The mediator's authority is entirely process-based: it derives from the parties' confidence that proceedings will be managed fairly, confidentiality will be protected, and dialogue will be structured productively. This authority, while non-coercive, is nonetheless substantial—and its exercise constitutes the primary mechanism through which mediation generates agreement.

3.1. Defining the Mediator

Moore (2014) identifies six analytically distinct stages of professional mediation—from agreement on the mediation framework through to drafting and execution of a final settlement—each requiring discrete competencies and adaptive judgment.[13] What unifies these

12- Jacob Bercovitch and Jeffrey Langley, 'The Nature of the Dispute and the Effectiveness of International Mediation,' Journal of Conflict Resolution 37, no. 4 (1993): 670–691. The process/outcome distinction is developed at pp. 672–675.

13- Moore, The Mediation Process, 4th ed., ch. 2. Moore's six-stage model is the standard reference for professional mediation training and credentialing organizations internationally.

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stages is a consistent orientation: the mediator manages the process while the parties retain decision-making authority. This distinction is not merely procedural; it reflects a fundamental commitment to party autonomy that distinguishes mediation from arbitration and adjudication. Parties who retain ownership of the settlement are substantially more likely to comply with its terms, reducing the risk of post-agreement breakdown (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009).

The mediator's non-coercive authority also sets important constraints on strategy. A mediator who applies excessive pressure—pushing parties toward a settlement they have not genuinely embraced—risks producing a nominally successful agreement that collapses at the implementation stage. This dynamic, sometimes described as 'coerced settlement',[14] is a recurring pathology in high-stakes mediation and is directly relevant to the post-ceasefire breakdown in the Pakistan case examined below.

3.2. Core Functions and Procedural Responsibilities

The principal function of a mediator is to facilitate productive communication between conflicting parties with a view to enabling a timely, fair, and durable resolution. This encompasses several discrete procedural responsibilities:

- Establishing a formal mediation framework, including a signed agreement specifying the scope, ground rules, and confidentiality protections governing proceedings;
- Providing each party with a clear explanation of the mediator's role, party responsibilities, and applicable statutory or institutional provisions;

14- Marieke Kleiboer, 'Understanding Success and Failure of International Mediation,' Journal of Conflict Resolution 40, no. 2 (1996): 360–389. On 'coerced settlement' as a pathology of high-pressure mediation, see esp. pp. 372–376.

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- Obtaining explicit consent for the conduct of separate caucus sessions, which allow parties to disclose interests and red lines beyond what they are prepared to state in joint session;
- Inviting each party to present an uninterrupted account of the dispute from their own perspective, creating a foundational record of stated positions and underlying concerns;
- Deploying clarifying questions designed to help parties move beyond positional bargaining toward underlying interests;
- Identifying, articulating, and testing possible zones of agreement before entering substantive negotiation on specific terms.

Although the mediator manages the process and is responsible for its orderly conduct, two fundamental constraints apply: the mediator has no power to impose settlement terms, and no authority or duty to provide legal advice. Parties who feel coerced or inadequately informed are predictably less likely to implement agreements voluntarily.

3.3. Ethical Principles

Ethical principles constitute the non-negotiable foundation of professional mediation practice. Three principles merit extended discussion.

3.3.1. Impartiality

A mediator shall accept and continue a mediation only where genuine impartiality can be maintained throughout proceedings. This principle does not require the mediator to be without prior relationships or contextual knowledge—indeed, some relational familiarity with both parties is often a precondition for acceptance. What it requires is that the mediator's conduct, communications, and decision-making remain structurally unbiased: neither party should have reasonable grounds to believe the mediator is advancing the

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other's interests. Critically, impartiality in this sense is consistent with Kydd's theoretical insight that a mediator perceived as aligned with a party's core interests may be more credible—not less impartial—precisely because that alignment demonstrates genuine understanding of what is at stake.

3.3.2. Conflict of Interest

A mediator bears an affirmative duty to disclose to all parties any actual or perceived conflict of interest as soon as it becomes known. Where a conflict exists, appointment or continuation of the process requires the explicit written consent of all parties; absent such consent, the mediator must decline regardless of other considerations. The appearance of conflict can be as damaging to the process as actual bias, since parties who suspect undisclosed interests will withhold information and resist compromise.

3.3.3. Confidentiality

Confidentiality constitutes the institutional cornerstone of mediation and its primary structural advantage over litigation and public diplomacy. All communications between parties and the mediator during proceedings—oral and written—are protected from disclosure, and no evidence produced during mediation is admissible in subsequent litigation. This protection is essential to the function of private caucus: parties will only disclose genuine interests and acceptable compromise positions if they are confident that such disclosures cannot be weaponized against them in public forums. Permissible exceptions are narrowly defined: disclosure is permitted where required to prevent harm to a person, where all parties provide written consent, or where necessary to implement an agreed settlement.

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4. The Mediator's Professional Skill Set

Becoming an effective mediator requires the sustained development of an integrated and mutually reinforcing repertoire of competencies. The thirteen competencies identified in Table 1 below do not operate as isolated capacities; they form a coherent professional toolkit through which the mediator manages process dynamics, builds relational trust, and facilitates voluntary agreement.[15] No single competency is independently sufficient: active listening without patience produces premature closure; creativity without objectivity risks generating solutions that serve the mediator's preferences; persuasion without ethical self-control risks coercion. Effective mediation demands not the isolated mastery of individual competencies but their integrated and situationally adaptive deployment.

Competency	Description and Application
Active Listening	Ensures accurate reception, retention, and synthesis of each party's communications, enabling fair and precise representation of stated and unstated interests.
Adaptability	Permits dynamic adjustment of approach in response to shifting personalities, cultural contexts, and situational pressures, ensuring equitable engagement throughout.
Alertness	Enables simultaneous attention to verbal content, tone, non-verbal signals, and interpersonal dynamics, facilitating early detection of emerging impasses or shifts in party posture.
Communication	Encompasses accurate summarization, comprehension checking, and constructive reframing of emotionally

15- Moore, The Mediation Process, 89–130; Fisher, Ury, and Patton, Getting to Yes, 55–81. For the Harvard Negotiation Project's overview of principled negotiation, see: https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/negotiation-skills-daily/six-guidelines-for-getting-to-yes/

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Competency	Description and Application
	charged statements to redirect parties toward objective problem-solving.
Objectivity	Maintains the mediator's analytical independence, preventing alignment with either party's position and preserving the appearance and substance of neutrality throughout proceedings.
Credibility	Sustains party trust through consistent conduct, accurate explanation of complex issues, and reliable fulfillment of commitments made during the process.
Creative Thinking	Generates novel reframings of problems and options not independently envisioned by the parties, expanding the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA).
Patience	Provides parties the psychological space to feel genuinely heard before moving to substantive negotiation; impatience predictably produces defensive resistance.
Persuasion	Motivates resistant parties to reconsider entrenched positions; deployed with careful ethical judgment to ensure persuasion serves fair resolution rather than mediator preference.
Conflict Resolution	Provides the analytical toolkit for identifying and communicating the fairness rationale underpinning proposed settlement options.
Problem-Solving	Enables the mediator to manage impasse constructively by creating collaborative environments for incremental progress on discrete issues.
Self-Control	Protects analytical objectivity by preventing emotional investment in outcome, safeguarding the structural integrity of the process.
Trustworthiness	Encourages candid disclosure by parties confident their communications will be held in confidence—the foundational condition for genuine compromise.

Table 1. Core Competencies of an Effective Mediator. Adapted from Moore (2014).

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Formal training in this competency repertoire is a precondition for professional practice. Most credentialing organizations require between twenty and forty hours of structured training before independent practice, typically incorporating supervised case work under the guidance of an experienced practitioner. The interest-based approach pioneered by Fisher, Ury, and Patton—emphasizing active listening, creative option generation, and principled evaluation against objective criteria—directly informs the communication, creativity, and problem-solving competencies detailed above.

5. The Mediation Process: Stages and Agreement Development

5.1. Structured Process Stages

Professional mediation proceeds through six analytically distinct stages, which in practice often overlap and may be revisited iteratively rather than traversed linearly. This non-linearity is itself a feature of effective mediation: rigid procedural adherence in the face of shifting party dynamics represents a form of process failure.

- Stage 1 — Framework Agreement: Parties and mediator jointly execute a Mediation Agreement specifying scope, ground rules, confidentiality protections, and the role of legal counsel. This foundational document structures all subsequent proceedings and creates a shared normative framework for the process.
- Stage 2 — Presentation of Perspectives: Each party presents an uninterrupted account of the dispute in joint session or private caucus. The mediator listens actively, synthesizes key concerns, and checks comprehension—building a nuanced understanding of stated positions and underlying interests before substantive discussion begins.

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- Stage 3 — Clarification and Interest Identification: The mediator employs clarifying questions to help parties move beyond positional statements toward underlying needs, hearing what parties mean as much as what they say.
- Stage 4 — Option Generation: Parties, supported by the mediator's creative facilitation, generate a range of possible settlement options without immediate commitment. Fisher, Ury, and Patton's principle of 'inventing options for mutual gain'[16] is directly applicable here: expanding the option set before committing to specific terms creates substantially more productive negotiating dynamics than positional bargaining.
- Stage 5 — Negotiation of Terms: The mediator manages focused negotiation on specific terms, preventing escalatory dynamics while maintaining momentum toward agreement. Caucus sessions may be used to test compromises parties are not yet ready to propose publicly.
- Stage 6 — SMART Agreement: The mediator coordinates drafting of a settlement document satisfying the SMART criteria—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound—and ensures all parties confirm their understanding before executing the final agreement.

5.2. Developing a SMART Agreement

The quality and durability of any mediated settlement depends critically on the precision and clarity of the agreement document. An agreement that fails the SMART criteria—lacking measurable benchmarks, realistic timelines, or specific behavioral obligations—is

16- Fisher, Ury, and Patton, Getting to Yes, 101–111. The principle of 'inventing options for mutual gain' before committing to specific terms is central to the interest-based framework and directly applicable to Stage 4 of the process model.

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predictably vulnerable to post-agreement disputes and compliance failures, which can retroactively undermine the legitimacy of the entire mediation process (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011).

A professionally crafted SMART agreement requires: writing each provision in neutral, unambiguous language and reading it back to both parties to confirm mutual understanding; recording individual terms as discrete, independently verifiable obligations; clarifying general formulations by requiring parties to agree on specific behavioral changes with concrete deadlines; and ensuring all parties sign the final document before formally closing the mediation.

The failure to achieve a SMART agreement in the 2026 U.S.–Iran mediation—most acutely over Iran's nuclear programme and the status of the Strait of Hormuz—illustrates both the ambition and the limits of the process. The temporary ceasefire achieved was measurable and time-bound but did not address the underlying structural disputes that generated the crisis, creating the conditions for subsequent breakdown.

6. Case Study: Pakistan as Mediator in the U.S.–Iran Ceasefire (2026)

This section applies the theoretical and procedural framework developed above to the empirical case of Pakistan's mediation in the 2026 U.S.–Iran conflict. The case is analyzed through theory-building process tracing,[17] with particular attention to the causal mechanisms linking Pakistan's interventions to observable de-escalatory

17- Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). Theory-building process tracing identifies causal mechanisms rather than merely correlating variables, making it particularly suited to single-case studies aimed at theoretical generalization rather than statistical inference.

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outcomes—and to the structural limits that prevented a comprehensive settlement.

6.1. Background and Escalation Dynamics

In February 2026, U.S. and Israeli military strikes on Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure resulted in the death of Supreme Leader Khamenei, triggering the most acute regional security crisis since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Iran retaliated through the closure of the Strait of Hormuz—through which approximately 20% of global oil flows—precipitating an immediate global economic emergency alongside retaliatory cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure on both sides. The combination of direct military engagement, economic disruption, and cyber hostilities created a rapidly escalating crisis in which the risk of broader regional conflict was substantial and the margin for miscalculation was narrow.

The escalation dynamics of early 2026 exhibited the classic characteristics of a 'mutually hurting stalemate' that Zartman's ripeness theory identifies as a necessary condition for productive mediation: neither side could achieve its objectives through continued escalation, and both faced mounting costs from continued confrontation. Critically, however, the stalemate was not self-evident to the parties in real time; it required active framing by an external actor to be perceived as such. This is precisely where Pakistan's mediation role began.

Existing multilateral frameworks proved structurally incapable of filling the diplomatic vacuum. The EU lacked perceived leverage with Tehran following years of failed nuclear diplomacy; China's deepening strategic alignment with Iran rendered Washington skeptical of its impartiality; Russia's concurrent involvement in other regional disputes disqualified it in both parties' assessments. The absence of viable major-power intermediaries created the structural opening through which Pakistan emerged as a credible mediator.

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6.2. Pakistan's Emergence as Mediator

Pakistan's entry into the mediation process was facilitated by a distinctive combination of structural assets and relational capital. Its credibility with both parties rested on several mutually reinforcing foundations. With Washington, Pakistan maintained longstanding security partnerships, intelligence cooperation channels, and strategic alignment on regional stability; no U.S. military installations were located on Pakistani soil, reducing the perception of alignment with Western power projection. With Tehran, Pakistan shared a 1,000 km border, substantive bilateral economic and energy ties, and a common Islamic heritage. Iran's explicit insistence that talks be conducted 'in Pakistan and nowhere else'[18] underscored the unique and non-substitutable character of this dual credibility.

This dynamic resonates strongly with Kydd's theoretical prediction about 'biased impartiality': Pakistan was neither fully neutral nor fully aligned with either party, but was perceived by both as credibly committed to their respective core interests.[19] This is precisely the mediator posture that Kydd's model predicts will be believed when counseling restraint—more effective than strict neutrality because both parties had evidence that Pakistan would incur reputational costs to advance a fair agreement. Pakistan's prior institutional capacity in backchannel diplomacy—demonstrated in Afghan peace process

18- Iran's insistence that talks be held 'in Pakistan and nowhere else' was widely reported in regional press coverage of the April 2026 negotiations. This formulation encapsulates the unique and non-substitutable character of Pakistan's dual credibility with both Washington and Tehran.

19- Kydd, 'Which Side Are You On?', 597–600. The theoretical mechanism is as follows: a strictly neutral mediator's assurances are discounted because both parties know it has no incentive to accurately represent resolve; a mediator with some alignment toward a party's interests will be believed when it counsels restraint precisely because such counsel is contrary to what pure alignment would predict.

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facilitation—further reinforced this credibility by establishing a track record of process reliability.

6.3. Diplomatic Timeline

Pakistan's mediation unfolded in two overlapping phases: a backchannel phase (February–early April 2026) focused on establishing contact, identifying each party's non-negotiable red lines, and preparing the conditions for direct engagement; and a direct negotiation phase (April 8–12) culminating in a temporary ceasefire and structured diplomatic channel.

Throughout March and April 2026, Pakistan's diplomatic and intelligence envoys shuttled proposals between Washington and Tehran in extended sequential caucus, allowing each party to articulate positions and explore compromises without the face-saving constraints inherent in direct bilateral confrontation. On April 8—ninety minutes before President Trump's publicly announced deadline to resume military strikes—Pakistan secured a two-week ceasefire agreement. President Trump publicly credited Prime Minister Sharif and Field Marshal Munir by name, an acknowledgment that itself served as a confidence-building signal to Tehran, demonstrating U.S. recognition of Pakistan's legitimacy as an intermediary.

Direct and indirect negotiations convened in Islamabad on April 11–12 over twenty-one hours of intensive engagement. Both delegations found common ground on several secondary issues but reached a structural impasse over two core disputes: the future of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme and the conditions for reopening the Strait of Hormuz. In the aftermath, the United States imposed a naval blockade that Iran characterized as a ceasefire violation, prompting Tehran to suspend negotiations. President Trump subsequently cancelled a planned delegation visit, citing Iranian domestic 'infighting.' The mediation produced a partial outcome: a temporary cessation of active hostilities, the establishment

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of a structured diplomatic channel, and agreed maritime de-escalation protocols—but not a comprehensive settlement.

6.4. Mediation Strategy: Application of Core Principles

Pakistan's mediation strategy reflected sophisticated application of the professional competencies and procedural principles reviewed above. Three methodological features merit specific analysis.

6.4.1. Multi-Track Diplomacy

Pakistan deployed a multi-track approach combining official governmental channels with backchannel negotiations conducted through intelligence and diplomatic envoys. This structure served two critical functions: it allowed sensitive exchanges—particularly around each party's actual red lines—to occur without the reputational risks attendant on public negotiation failure; and it maintained plausible deniability during the preliminary confidence-building phase, permitting both parties to explore compromise positions without formally committing to them.

6.4.2. Sequential Communication Management

Pakistan's envoys initially engaged each party separately in extended sequential caucus—the international diplomatic equivalent of the private caucus session at the core of professional mediation practice. This approach allowed each side to articulate positions, identify red lines, and express underlying interests without the face-saving constraints inherent in direct confrontation. It also enabled Pakistan's mediators to develop a nuanced comparative understanding of each party's zone of possible agreement: where ZOPAs overlapped, agreement was feasible; where they did not, the structural impasse was identified before entering the formal negotiation phase rather than during it.

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6.4.3. Confidence-Building Sequencing

Pakistan structured the negotiation process to front-load agreement on discrete, achievable issues—temporary maritime de-escalation protocols, mutual pledges of non-interference in communications infrastructure, and humanitarian exemptions to the maritime standoff—before attempting comprehensive settlement. This staged approach reflects the professional mediation principle of building momentum through early agreement: parties who have already agreed on something are psychologically and politically better positioned to engage constructively on harder issues.

6.5. Critical Assessment: Outcomes, Limits, and Implications

The Pakistan-mediated process produced three concrete outcomes: a formal temporary ceasefire halting active military and cyber hostilities; agreed maritime de-escalation protocols governing vessel movements in contested waters; and a commitment by both parties to continued indirect diplomatic engagement through the Pakistani channel. These outcomes are significant in terms of crisis management: they prevented further military escalation, reduced the immediate risk of broader regional conflict, and established a diplomatic infrastructure that future negotiations could utilize.

However, critical assessment demands acknowledgment of what the mediation did not achieve. The structural impasses over Iran's nuclear programme and the Strait of Hormuz—the two issues most directly implicating existential security interests—were not resolved. The subsequent naval blockade and negotiation suspension indicate that the ceasefire stabilized the conflict without transforming its fundamental dynamics. This outcome is consistent with Bercovitch and Langley's distinction between process success and outcome success: Pakistan achieved the former without the latter.

Two structural limitations of Pakistan's mediation deserve acknowledgment. First, Pakistan's credibility with Tehran rested

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partly on shared Islamic identity—a resource that simultaneously limited Pakistan's perceived independence in Washington's eyes and created domestic political constraints on how far Pakistani mediation could push Iranian flexibility. Second, the absence of any institutional enforcement mechanism meant that the ceasefire's durability depended entirely on voluntary party compliance, making it vulnerable to internal political pressures—precisely the 'Iranian infighting' that contributed to the post-agreement breakdown.

The analysis provides robust empirical support for all three hypotheses advanced. Pakistan's perceived credibility with both parties was the enabling condition for engagement, confirming H1. The outcome was achieved entirely through process management and communication strategy, without Pakistan deploying economic incentives or coercive threats, confirming H2. Pakistan's middle-power positioning constituted its comparative mediation advantage, confirming H3. The partial nature of the outcome suggests a fourth, implicit finding: that effective crisis mediation may be structurally incapable of resolving the structural conflicts that generate high-intensity crises, pointing to the need for complementary mechanisms of conflict transformation beyond the mediation process itself.

7. Discussion

The theoretical analysis and case study evidence generate four principal findings, each carrying implications for both the scholarship and practice of international mediation.

First, and most fundamentally, effective mediation in high-intensity geopolitical disputes depends more on the quality of process management—encompassing communication skill, procedural structure, ethical integrity, and adaptive judgment—than on the material power projection capacities of the mediator. This finding challenges realist assumptions that mediation effectiveness is a function of the mediator's coercive leverage or geopolitical weight. It

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aligns instead with Moore's process model and Fisher, Ury, and Patton's interest-based framework: the decisive variable is not what the mediator can threaten but what it can facilitate.

Second, the Pakistan case empirically substantiates Kydd's theoretical prediction that biased impartiality outperforms strict neutrality as a credibility strategy. Pakistan was not strictly neutral: it maintained deep security ties with Washington and cultural-religious ties with Tehran. But precisely because these ties were genuine and known to both parties, Pakistan's assurances when counseling restraint were believed. The implication for mediator selection is significant: the search for 'perfectly neutral' intermediaries may systematically exclude the most credible candidates.

Third, the case illustrates the strategic value of procedural innovation in middle-power diplomacy. Pakistan did not impose a solution; it architected a process through which both parties arrived at an achievable partial agreement. The multi-track approach, sequential caucus structure, and confidence-building sequencing all reflect specific professional competencies applied in a high-stakes geopolitical environment, demonstrating that the analytical frameworks of professional mediation practice have direct applicability to interstate crisis management.

Fourth, the partial outcome of the Pakistan mediation raises a normatively significant question: when is a temporary ceasefire, achieved without structural conflict resolution, a genuine contribution to international peace and security rather than merely a conflict-freezing mechanism? The answer depends partly on the counterfactual: in April 2026, the alternative to a partial ceasefire was resumed military strikes with uncertain escalation trajectories. From this perspective, Pakistan's mediation was consequentially successful even where it was structurally incomplete. This distinction—between success evaluated against a counterfactual of escalation and success evaluated against an ideal of resolution—has significant implications

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for how mediation outcomes are assessed in high-intensity crisis contexts.

8. Conclusion

The role of a mediator in contemporary conflict resolution extends far beyond passive facilitation into the domain of active strategic diplomacy. This article has argued, and the Pakistan case has demonstrated, that mediation effectiveness in high-intensity interstate crises is a function of credibility, communication expertise, and adaptive process management rather than coercive leverage or material power. A mediator who is credible to both parties, skilled in active listening and creative problem-solving, and disciplined in maintaining confidentiality and process integrity creates the institutional conditions under which voluntary agreement between deeply adversarial parties becomes achievable—even when structural conflict resolution remains beyond reach.

The theoretical framework advanced—integrating liberal institutionalist, constructivist, and conflict resolution perspectives—proved both analytically productive and empirically substantiated. All three hypotheses were confirmed by the Pakistan case, which demonstrated that relational credibility enables engagement (H1), communication management outweighs coercive leverage (H2), and middle-power structural positioning provides mediation advantages unavailable to great powers (H3). These findings converge with Kydd's credibility framework, Moore's process model, Fisher, Ury, and Patton's principled negotiation theory, and Zartman's ripeness conditions, together constituting a robust multi-theoretic account of mediation effectiveness in high-intensity settings.

The article's critical contribution lies in acknowledging the boundaries of these conclusions. The Pakistan mediation illustrates that process success and outcome success are analytically distinct and empirically separable: effective mediation can halt escalation, establish

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diplomatic channels, and create space for future negotiation without resolving the structural disputes that generated the crisis. As global conflicts grow more complex—involving asymmetric power relationships, non-state actors, contested international norms, and accelerating escalation dynamics in cyber and information domains—mediation will remain an indispensable crisis management mechanism. Two directions for future research are particularly pressing: empirical examination of how digital and cyber domains alter mediation dynamics in interstate disputes.

9. Recommendations

In resolving the matter, any viable post-conflict nuclear settlement would necessitate formal acknowledgment and endorsement by the United Nations Security Council. Within such a framework, enriched uranium stockpiles would be placed under secure, internationally guaranteed custodial arrangements, administered by established nuclear powers—namely Russia, China, or France. This arrangement would constitute an acceptable resolution in the event that Iran is compelled, albeit reluctantly, to relocate its enriched uranium stockpiles beyond its national territory.

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