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PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC HEDGING IN THE POST-WAR MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Muhammad Waqas[1], Zain ul Abideen[2], Momina Fayyaz[3], Fiza Ishfaq[4], Majid Idrees[5]

[1]Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sialkot
[2]Senior Researcher, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sialkot
[3,4,5]Research Scholar, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sialkot

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East entered a new phase of regional order after the 2026 US–Iran war, which reshaped the strategic environment for regional states, including Pakistan. The war weakened Iran's military and economic capacity but did not eliminate Tehran's regional influence, creating new challenges and openings for Pakistan as it works to protect its national interests amid shifting regional security arrangements. The new defence agreement among Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan shows Pakistan's growing role in this changing regional security order. Pakistan's geographical proximity to Iran, combined with its longstanding relations with Saudi Arabia and its expanding ties to Turkey, China and the United States, places Islamabad in a difficult strategic position. This study examines Pakistan's strategic hedging in the post-war Middle East and asks how Islamabad can balance its relations with Iran against emerging regional counter-alignments. Drawing on a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, the study argues that strategic hedging allows Pakistan to maintain constructive engagement with Iran while strengthening relations with other regional actors, and it examines the constraints and prospects this strategy carries for Pakistan's regional role and national interests.

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Corresponding Author Muhammad Waqas
Email: muhammad.waqas@uskt.edu.pk

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Introduction

The Middle East has long been marked by intense competition among regional and outside powers. The United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and, increasingly, China and Russia have all competed for influence over the region's political, economic and strategic order. Iran

occupies a particularly important position in this competition because of its location, military capabilities, energy resources and ties to various non-state actors, and the rivalry between Iran and the United States has remained one of the defining features of Middle Eastern geopolitics (Keohane, 1984). Earlier literature on Iran shows that US-Iran tensions have also affected regional economic cooperation, transport corridors and energy projects involving Pakistan and other regional states. The 2026 United States-Iran war marks a major turning point in this regional competition. The conflict did more than cause military destruction; it forced a wider reassessment of the regional security architecture. Six months in, Iran had suffered substantial military and economic damage but retained the capabilities to keep disrupting regional stability and threatening US interests and regional partners (Associated Press, 2026). The conflict also strained US military deployments and exposed the vulnerability of Gulf security arrangements (Reuters, 2026). The Strait of Hormuz became one of the most consequential flashpoints, since disruption of the waterway hit energy markets and international shipping directly. The post-war environment cannot simply be read as an Iranian Defeat or an American victory. Instead, the war has accelerated a shift away from a largely US-dominated regional security framework toward a more complicated, decentralized order. Iran remains a significant power, though its regional position has weakened. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other regional actors have become more important diplomatic and security players, and China has grown more central to regional economic and energy affairs. The result is an environment of overlapping partnerships rather than a clean split into two opposing blocs. This shift creates both openings and difficulties for Pakistan (MOFA, 2026). Pakistan is connected to the Middle East through the Arabian Sea and shares a long border with Iran. It also maintains deep historical, economic, religious and defence ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and it has built increasingly important strategic relations with Turkey and China while keeping its diplomatic and economic links to the United States intact. Pakistan therefore cannot afford a rigid position in the emerging competition between Iran and its regional rivals. Its challenge is significant precisely because its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia rest on different foundations (Vatanka, 2015). Iran is Pakistan's immediate western neighbor, which makes bilateral stability essential for border security, trade, energy cooperation and regional connectivity. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, is a major strategic and economic partner, and the two states have longstanding defence cooperation and extensive political relations (ECO, 2017).

In August 2026, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey signed a joint defence agreement, an important example of this emerging regional security cooperation. Pakistan's diplomacy during the 2026 crisis further demonstrates its balancing potential: Islamabad has kept communication open with Tehran while strengthening its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly stressed dialogue, de-escalation and diplomatic settlement while maintaining contacts with both Iranian and Saudi officials (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026), and Pakistani officials have more recently travelled to Tehran to push de-escalation and support diplomatic engagement. The central argument of this study is that Pakistan should avoid treating the emerging Middle Eastern order as a binary choice between Iran and an anti-Iranian coalition. Instead, it should pursue strategic hedging, maintaining functional relations with competing

regional actors while maximizing its own diplomatic and economic interests. Pakistan can cooperate with Saudi Arabia and Turkey on regional security without turning that cooperation into an explicitly anti-Iranian alliance, and it can maintain relations with Tehran without compromising its longstanding ties to Saudi Arabia, Turkey or the United States. The study therefore examines Pakistan's role in the emerging post-war Middle East order, the changing position of Iran, the rise of regional counter-alignments, and the strategic choices open to Pakistan.

Strategic Hedging and Mediation Diplomacy: Pakistan's Default Posture

Strategic hedging describes a state's attempt to preserve options with rival powers rather than commit fully to one camp, and Pakistan's response to the Iran war fits that pattern closely. Islamabad condemned strikes by all sides rather than naming an aggressor, a choice that let it avoid alienating Washington while still signaling discomfort with attacks on a Muslim-majority neighbor. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif made clear early on that Pakistan would not join any military campaign against Iran, even as he reaffirmed the importance of the US relationship. This was not indecision so much as a calculated refusal to be pulled into a war whose costs would fall disproportionately on Pakistan's own western border. Analysts have described the approach as limited alignment without military entanglement, a phrase that captures how Pakistan offered sympathy to Iran on one hand and solidarity to Gulf partners on the other. Army chief Asim Munir visited Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah within two weeks of the first strikes, a visible gesture toward the Gulf even as backchannel contacts with Tehran continued. The logic behind this balancing act is straightforward: Pakistan cannot afford a hostile Iran on its border, cannot afford to lose US goodwill it has only recently rebuilt, and cannot afford to look unreliable to Gulf financiers. Hedging, in this context, is less a strategy of ambition than one of survival, driven by a state managing several vulnerabilities at once rather than pursuing a single grand design. What turned Pakistan's hedging into real leverage was its unexpected move into mediation, hosting the first direct US-Iran talks since 1979 in Islamabad that April, a remarkable reversal for a country Washington had, within the same decade, accused of duplicity over its handling of militant groups.

The shift owed much to the personal rapport between President Trump and Field Marshal Munir, whom Trump has publicly praised in terms usually reserved for close allies. Pakistan's earlier acknowledgment of Trump's claimed role in ending its own 2025 conflict with India appears to have mattered more in Washington than the facts of that ceasefire itself, since India never extended Trump the same courtesy. Islamabad capitalized on that goodwill, offering itself as a venue and a channel exactly when both Washington and Tehran needed an interlocutor neither fully distrusted. The resulting Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding and the shuttle diplomacy that followed gave Pakistan a diplomatic profile it had not held in decades, comparable to its bridging role between the US and China in the 1970s. When the ceasefire collapsed in July and fighting resumed, Pakistan's foreign ministry moved quickly to reassert its willingness to keep mediating, calling renewed conflict "in no one's interest." That mediator role

has become Pakistan's most valuable diplomatic asset from the entire war, turning geographic proximity to Iran from a liability into genuine strategic capital. The 2026 US–Israel war against Iran, which began on 28 February with the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and continued through repeated ceasefire collapses over the following months, put Pakistan in a position it had not occupied since the Cold War. Islamabad found itself sitting between two allies it could not afford to lose: a nuclear-armed neighbor with which it shares a 900-kilometer border, and a superpower whose favor it had spent the previous year cultivating through trade deals and military rapport. What follows is not a story of Pakistan picking a side. It is a story of a state trying to extract maximum benefit from a war it never wanted, while giving up as little as possible to either camp (Bukhari et al., 2026).

Balancing Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States

Pakistan's relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia have long pulled in different directions, and the war sharpened that tension rather than resolving it. Riyadh and Islamabad share deep financial and defence ties, reinforced by a mutual defence pact signed in 2025, while Tehran remains a neighbor Pakistan cannot antagonize given shared border security concerns and sectarian sensitivities at home. During the war, Pakistan managed to keep functioning channels open with both capitals at once, something few other regional states attempted. Its diplomats framed this not as passive neutrality but as active engagement with every relevant party, a posture that required constant recalibration as battlefield and negotiating positions shifted week to week. The United States, meanwhile, needed a partner who could talk to Tehran without appearing to undermine the Gulf coalition backing Washington's campaign, and Pakistan filled that gap precisely because of its ambiguous positioning. This triangular balancing act was never fully stable, and Pakistani officials had to walk back statements or clarify positions more than once when one side read too much into a gesture meant for the other. Still, the fact that Pakistan kept working relationships with Washington, Riyadh, and Tehran through months of active warfare says something about how deliberately Islamabad managed each relationship. Few states in the region can claim the same, and that scarcity is itself a source of Pakistani influence going forward.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research methodology, treating Pakistan's role in the post-war Middle East as a case study of the transformation of regional power relations following the 2026 United States–Iran war. It draws primarily on secondary sources, including official statements from the Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents, scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, international news reports and contemporary analyses. Developments during 2026 receive particular attention because the aim is to understand the emerging post-war regional order rather than reproduce the pre-war structure. The analytical framework focuses on three interconnected variables: Iranian regional influence, emerging regional counter-alignments, and Pakistan's balancing strategy, and it

examines how changes in the first two shape Pakistan's foreign-policy choices. This approach follows the qualitative and analytical orientation of earlier work on the consequences of US-Iran rivalry for regional cooperation, which emphasized Iran's importance to regional transport, trade and energy arrangements.

The Post-War Middle Eastern Order

Changing Regional Power Structure

The 2026 war accelerated changes that were already underway in the Middle East. For decades, the regional security order rested heavily on American military presence and alliances with Israel and the Gulf monarchies. Iran had challenged this arrangement through its military capabilities, missile and drone programmes, ties to non-state actors, and strategic partnerships with Russia and China, and the war changed perceptions of the system's strengths and weaknesses. Iran suffered extensive military and economic damage, yet it retained enough capability to threaten regional stability, and the conflict also exposed vulnerabilities in US bases and Gulf infrastructure. Gulf states now have greater incentive to diversify their security relationships rather than depend on a single external power. The post-war order is therefore increasingly multipolar and uncertain, with states cooperating and hedging against different powers at the same time. Saudi Arabia can maintain relations with Washington while building closer security cooperation with Turkey and Pakistan. Qatar can remain a major US partner while keeping communication channels with Tehran open. Turkey can work with NATO while pursuing an increasingly independent regional strategy, and China can deepen economic ties with Gulf states while maintaining its relationship with Iran. This environment creates openings for middle powers such as Pakistan.

Iran's Continuing Regional Influence

A weaker Iran is not the same as an Iran with no influence. Iran remains positioned at the center of the Persian Gulf and has extensive experience in asymmetric warfare, missile capability and regional diplomacy, and its location gives it substantial strategic relevance to the security of the Strait of Hormuz. The war weakened Iran's military capabilities, but it remains capable of disrupting regional stability, and contemporary assessments indicate that Tehran, despite heavy losses, retains the ability to threaten US interests and regional allies. Iran's regional influence has also historically extended beyond conventional military strength: its relationships with non-state actors gave it strategic depth, and while those networks have been degraded, they remain part of Iran's broader regional reach. Iran therefore stays an unavoidable part of the post-war Middle Eastern order. Regional states may try to contain Iranian power, but excluding Iran entirely is difficult given its geography, population, economic resources and strategic position (Saikal, 2019).

Emerging Counter-Alignments

The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, signed by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey on 7 August 2026, built on the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement Islamabad and Riyadh had already reached in September 2025, and neither document mentions nuclear weapons directly. That silence has not stopped analysts from reading a nuclear dimension into the arrangement, since Pakistan is the only Muslim-majority nuclear power and Saudi Arabia reportedly helped fund its weapons program in earlier decades. Some arms-control commentary has framed the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement as a de facto extension of Pakistan's deterrent over Gulf soil, warning that nuclear guarantees are increasingly treated as a service one state can offer another rather than an exceptional commitment. Pakistani officials have pushed back on that framing, insisting the pact carries no nuclear umbrella, and some regional scholars describe it instead as strategic ambiguity rather than a formal doctrine. That ambiguity may be the point: it lets Pakistan cast a deterrent shadow over its Gulf partners without committing to the doctrine, basing rights, or command arrangements that an explicit nuclear guarantee would require. For Islamabad, this is hedging in its purest form, since it gains the diplomatic and financial benefits of appearing to backstop Saudi and Turkish security while keeping full control of its arsenal. Whether this ambiguity holds once a crisis forces one side to clarify what the Mecca agreement actually covers remains an open question.

Pakistan's warming relationship with Washington during the Iran war has unfolded against a much older and structurally more important relationship with Beijing, and the two have not always pulled in the same direction. China remains Pakistan's largest source of military hardware and the anchor investor behind the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, giving Beijing real leverage over Islamabad's long-term economic planning even as Pakistan signs new defence arrangements with Gulf partners. Beijing has so far said little in public about the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement or Pakistan's expanding security ties with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, a silence that reads more like calculation than indifference. China has its own reasons to want the Iran war contained, given its dependence on Gulf energy imports, so a Pakistan that helps stabilize the region serves Chinese interests as much as American ones. At the same time, Beijing is unlikely to welcome a scenario in which Pakistan's security architecture grows more interoperable with US-aligned Gulf militaries through the Mecca pact's emerging institutional framework. Islamabad has tried to manage this by framing its China ties as economic and its new Gulf and US ties as security and diplomacy, a distinction that works rhetorically but may not hold indefinitely. How Pakistan balances CPEC-linked obligations against a foreign policy increasingly anchored in the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement and its trilateral extension will be one of the more consequential tests of its hedging strategy ahead.

Pakistan's diplomatic gains from the Iran war cannot be separated from its financial position, since a country running an IMF-monitored program has strong reasons to convert political capital into hard currency wherever it can. Saudi Arabia and the broader Gulf bloc have long served as a financial backstop for Islamabad, through deposits and investment channeled partly through the

Special Investment Facilitation Council that Munir has chaired since 2023, and the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement reinforced exactly this kind of relationship. Pakistan's visible loyalty to Riyadh throughout the war, culminating in the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, tracks a pattern in which its security cooperation with Gulf states has consistently followed its need for external financing. The risk is that this financial dependence narrows Pakistan's room to maneuver even as its diplomatic profile expands, since a state whose economy depends on a group of allies is less able to challenge those allies' preferences on separate questions, including how to treat Iran. There is also a domestic angle: a Pakistani public broadly sympathetic to Iran may not fully register how much of the country's Gulf-oriented alignment during this war was driven by financial necessity rather than genuine strategic preference. Islamabad has managed this tension by keeping its rhetoric focused on regional stability and mediation rather than explicit alignment with any single bloc, even as the underlying financial logic points toward the Gulf. Whether the Mecca agreement produces durable investment, or simply layers a security arrangement on top of existing financial dependence, will shape how much genuine independence Pakistan retains once the crisis atmosphere of the war fades.

Pakistan's Strategic Position

Pakistan and Iran

Pakistan's relationship with Iran is shaped first by geography. The two countries share a long border, and instability in Iran can directly affect Pakistan's western provinces, border security, trade and migration. Iran also matters for Pakistan's regional connectivity and energy security, and the post-war environment makes this relationship even more significant, since Pakistan cannot afford an unstable Iran on its western border. Islamabad therefore has a strong interest in supporting de-escalation and keeping diplomatic communication with Tehran open. Pakistan's recent diplomacy reflects this: in August 2026, Pakistani officials travelled to Tehran and discussed de-escalation, regional stability and the Strait of Hormuz. Pakistan has positioned itself not merely as an observer but as a potential diplomatic bridge (Tarock, 1999).

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia is another pillar of its Middle Eastern policy, built on defence cooperation, economic links, political coordination and extensive people-to-people ties. Saudi Arabia matters increasingly because Riyadh is trying to strengthen its own strategic autonomy, and the changing regional environment has pushed it to diversify partnerships rather than depend on a single external security provider. Pakistan's August 2026 defence agreement with Saudi Arabia and Turkey is a significant step in this relationship, strengthening its security connection with two influential regional powers. Even so, Pakistan needs to ensure that closer cooperation with Saudi Arabia does not unnecessarily damage its relationship with Iran.

Pakistan and Turkey

Turkey is an increasingly important actor in Pakistan's regional strategy. The two countries have built strong political and defence relations, and Turkey's position between Europe, the Middle East and Asia give it real geopolitical weight. The Pakistan–Saudi Arabia–Turkey arrangement gives Islamabad a chance to move from a bilateral partner into a participant in a broader regional security framework. Pakistan should nonetheless avoid letting this relationship become exclusively directed against Iran. Turkey itself maintains a complicated relationship with Tehran, which illustrates how regional states can compete and cooperate with Iran at the same time.

Pakistan and the United States

The United States remains an important outside actor in the Middle East and stays relevant to Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan cannot ignore Washington given its economic, diplomatic and security weight, but Pakistan's own experience with US–Iran tensions shows the costs of leaning too far toward one side. The earlier Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline case illustrates how geopolitical rivalry and sanctions affected Pakistan's energy interests. Pakistan therefore has an interest in maintaining constructive relations with Washington without letting the US relationship dictate its entire Iran policy.

Pakistan's Balancing Strategy

Strategic Hedging

The most suitable strategy for Pakistan in the emerging Middle Eastern order is strategic hedging, which lets a state cooperate with competing powers at once while avoiding excessive dependence on any single actor. For Pakistan, this means maintaining relations with Iran while deepening relations with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China and the United States. Pakistan's current diplomacy already shows elements of this strategy: Islamabad has kept communication with Tehran open while strengthening strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and it has stayed engaged with Washington on the regional crisis throughout. This strategy gives Pakistan diplomatic flexibility.

Pakistan as a Mediating State

Pakistan's relationship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia creates an opening for diplomatic mediation. Pakistan has historically kept relations with both countries even through periods of severe Saudi–Iranian rivalry, and the 2026 conflict has raised the value of this position. Pakistan has publicly pushed for dialogue and de-escalation and has kept in contact with both Iranian and Saudi officials. This does not mean Pakistan can resolve the US–Iran conflict on its own; rather, it can help by facilitating communication, supporting confidence-building measures and providing diplomatic space for negotiations.

Avoiding an Anti-Iranian Bloc

Pakistan's most important strategic challenge is preventing its growing security cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Turkey from being read as an anti-Iranian alignment. An explicitly anti-Iranian policy could raise tensions along Pakistan's western border, hurt bilateral trade, complicate border security and undercut Pakistan's ability to act as a mediator. Pakistan should therefore keep a clear line between regional security cooperation and anti-Iranian containment, strengthening defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Turkey while still maintaining diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran.

Energy and Economic Diplomacy

Energy security is another major part of Pakistan's balancing strategy. Iran sits close to Pakistan and holds significant energy resources, but sanctions and geopolitical competition have historically limited how much Pakistan can benefit from Iranian energy cooperation. Earlier research shows how US sanctions obstructed regional pipeline projects and hit Iran-related energy routes in particular. The post-war environment brings both risk and opportunity: Pakistan should pursue diversified energy sources rather than depend on Iran, while keeping legitimate avenues of economic cooperation open wherever international law and applicable sanctions allow. Diversification would let Pakistan maintain relations with Iran without leaving itself exposed to outside pressure (Rehman & Mushtaq, 2020).

Challenges to Pakistan's Role

Competing Regional Pressures

Pakistan may face pressure from competing regional actors. Saudi Arabia may expect greater security cooperation, while Iran will expect Pakistan to steer clear of arrangements directed against Tehran. Pakistan therefore needs to communicate clearly that its regional partnerships are meant to promote stability rather than containment (Hussain, 2016).

Economic Constraints

Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities limit its strategic autonomy. A balancing foreign policy requires economic capacity, and if Pakistan becomes heavily dependent on one external partner for financial assistance, energy or investment, its diplomatic flexibility can suffer. Economic diversification is therefore essential to successful strategic hedging.

Border Security

Iran's instability affects Pakistan directly because of geographical proximity, and any escalation involving Iran could generate cross-border security problems. Pakistan therefore has a direct national-security interest in reducing Iranian instability rather than simply joining regional containment efforts.

Sectarian and Domestic Sensitivities

Middle Eastern rivalries can also carry domestic implications for Pakistan. Islamabad must avoid letting regional conflicts spill into its domestic political and social environment, and a balanced foreign policy can help keep external geopolitical competition from feeding internal tensions.

Opportunities for Pakistan

The post-war transformation also gives Pakistan several openings.

1. Pakistan can strengthen its role as a regional diplomatic bridge between Iran and the Arab Gulf states.
2. Pakistan can grow its importance as a security partner for Saudi Arabia and Turkey.
3. Pakistan can build its position as a connectivity state between South Asia, Iran, the Gulf and Central Asia.
4. Pakistan can pursue energy diversification while keeping long-term possibilities for regional energy cooperation open.
5. Pakistan can use its relations with China to support regional economic connectivity.
6. Pakistan can promote a regional security approach based on dialogue rather than permanent bloc formation.

Regional connectivity matters here in particular, since earlier literature shows that Iran's geographical position is central to the transport and energy corridors connecting Central Asia, the Gulf and South Asia.

Discussion

The emerging post-war Middle Eastern order presents Pakistan with a difficult strategic environment. Iran has been weakened but remains strategically significant. Saudi Arabia is strengthening its security partnerships, Turkey is expanding its regional role, and the United States remains powerful but faces real questions about the sustainability of its traditional regional security architecture. China's economic importance keeps growing, particularly in energy markets. Under these conditions, Pakistan's longstanding policy of maintaining relationships with competing Middle Eastern actors has become more valuable, though balancing does not mean neutrality in every situation. Pakistan may cooperate militarily with Saudi Arabia, diplomatically with Turkey, economically with China and politically with the United States while still maintaining relations with Iran (Wastnidge, 2017). This works because regional relationships are increasingly issue-specific: Pakistan can cooperate with Saudi Arabia on defence while working with Iran on border security and trade, cooperate with Turkey on regional

diplomacy while working with China on connectivity, and maintain diplomatic relations with the United States while opposing escalation against Iran. This differentiated diplomacy gives Pakistan greater strategic autonomy. The Pakistan–Saudi Arabia–Turkey defence arrangement should be read carefully in this light. It is an important development in regional security, but Pakistan should avoid presenting it as an anti-Iranian alliance. The available evidence suggests the agreement reflects a broader move toward regional security arrangements and reduced reliance on traditional US-centred security structures. Pakistan's continuing diplomatic engagement with Iran shows that Islamabad has not abandoned its relationship with Tehran

Conclusion

The 2026 United States–Iran war has fundamentally altered the strategic environment of the Middle East. The conflict weakened Iran's military and economic position but did not eliminate its regional significance, and it exposed vulnerabilities in the traditional US-centered regional security system while pushing regional powers toward more autonomous security arrangements. The emerging Middle Eastern order is marked by sharper strategic competition, overlapping partnerships and regional counter-alignments. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional states are pursuing greater strategic autonomy, while Iran continues to hold substantial geographical, military and political weight. For Pakistan, these changes bring both openings and difficulties. Pakistan's geographical proximity to Iran requires it to maintain stable relations with Tehran, while its longstanding strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia and its expanding relationship with Turkey require Islamabad to take part in emerging regional security arrangements. Pakistan's greatest strategic asset is therefore not the ability to dominate the Middle East but the ability to hold relationships with competing actors at once. This study argues that Pakistan should pursue strategic hedging rather than bloc politics: Islamabad should strengthen defence and economic relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey while maintaining constructive engagement with Iran, preserve its diplomatic relationship with the United States, and deepen economic connectivity with China. Such a strategy would let Pakistan maximize its national interests without becoming trapped in regional power rivalry. Pakistan should also strengthen its role as a diplomatic mediator, since its relations with both Iran and the Arab Gulf states give it a real opportunity to facilitate communication and support de-escalation, a role its recent diplomatic engagement during the 2026 crisis is already beginning to demonstrate. Finally, Pakistan should prioritize economic and energy diversification. The earlier experience of Iran-related pipeline projects shows how geopolitical competition can constrain Pakistan's economic interests, and future policy should avoid excessive dependence on any single regional or external power. In conclusion, Pakistan's most effective role in the post-war Middle East is not that of an ideological ally to one regional bloc against another. It can instead emerge as a balancing, mediating and connectivity-oriented middle power, combining strategic hedging, diplomatic engagement, diversified economic relations and carefully calibrated security cooperation to protect its national interests while contributing to a more stable and multipolar Middle Eastern order.

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