

Pakistan's West Asia Calculus

# BROKER OR BYSTANDER?

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

In the volatile theatre of West Asia, diplomacy often travels through unexpected corridors. When formal channels collapse under the weight of mistrust, informal intermediaries step in—sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of opportunity. The latest confrontation, triggered by coordinated strikes involving the United States and Israel on Iran, has once again revealed this enduring pattern. As tensions stretch into a second month and fears of a wider regional conflict intensify, Pakistan has surfaced as an unlikely but significant diplomatic conduit between Washington and Tehran.

At first glance, Pakistan's emergence in this role may appear surprising. Yet, on closer examination, it reflects a familiar interplay of geography, strategic compulsion, and political ambition that has long defined Islamabad's external posture. In moments of crisis, states that occupy geopolitical fault lines often find themselves thrust into roles they neither fully seek nor can easily refuse. Pakistan's current diplomatic activism fits squarely within this tradition.

Reports suggest that Islamabad has been quietly facilitating communication between the United States and Iran, transmitting messages and relaying proposals aimed at de-escalation. This back-channel diplomacy has been complemented by calibrated high-level engagement. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Asim Munir have reportedly maintained parallel lines of contact with both Donald Trump and Masoud Pezeshkian. The public acknowledgment of this role by Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar marks a notable departure from the traditional opacity that surrounds such engagements. It signals not just participation, but a deliberate attempt to position Pakistan at the centre of ongoing diplomatic manoeuvres.

Geography, as ever, lies at the heart of this development. Pakistan shares a long and porous border with Iran, stretching across the restive region of Balochistan. This proximity grants Islamabad a vantage point that few others possess. While states such as Oman and Qatar have historically played the role of intermediaries in regional conflicts, their own exposure to the current crisis limits their ability to operate freely. Pakistan, by contrast, combines physical proximity with a degree of strategic insulation, enabling it to sustain discreet channels of communication.

Yet geography alone does not confer diplomatic relevance. Pakistan's ability to maintain working relationships with mutually antagonistic actors is equally critical. Its ties with Washington, though often fraught, have experienced a modest revival in recent years, shaped by shared security concerns and economic cooperation. At the same time, Islamabad's engagement with Tehran has remained steady, anchored in pragmatic considerations of border management and regional stability. Equally significant is Pakistan's



deep strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies. These relationships, built over decades through defence cooperation and economic interdependence, enhance Islamabad's credibility within the broader regional framework. Importantly, Pakistan's lack of diplomatic relations with Israel—stemming from its longstanding position on the Palestinian question—renders it a more acceptable interlocutor from Tehran's perspective. This delicate balancing act, while inherently precarious, affords Pakistan a degree of diplomatic flexibility that few states can currently match.

However, the impulse to mediate is driven as much by necessity as by ambition. Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities make it acutely sensitive to instability in the Gulf. Its energy imports, heavily dependent on routes passing through the Strait of Hormuz, are directly exposed to any disruption in maritime security. The recent surge in global oil prices has already begun to ripple through its domestic economy, exacerbating inflationary pressures and straining public finances.

Beyond energy, remittances from millions of Pakistani workers in the Gulf constitute a vital pillar of the national economy. A prolonged conflict threatens not only employment prospects for these workers but also the steady flow of for-

eign exchange that sustains Pakistan's financial stability. In this context, Islamabad's diplomatic activism is less an exercise in altruism than a pragmatic effort to shield its domestic economy from external shocks.

The domestic dimension extends further. Pakistan's internal social fabric is intricately linked to developments in Iran. A significant segment of its population shares cultural and religious affinities with Iran, making events across the border resonate deeply within its own society. Periodic reports of unrest linked to regional developments underscore the potential for external conflicts to inflame internal tensions. For a state already grappling with political polarisation and security challenges, the prospect of sectarian escalation represents a risk that cannot be ignored.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan's mediation efforts can be understood as a form of strategic self-preservation. By keeping communication channels open, it seeks not only to contribute to regional stability but also to insulate itself from the cascading effects of conflict. This dual objective—external engagement coupled with internal risk management—defines much of Islamabad's current approach. Yet the constraints on Pakistan's role are profound. The deep-seated mistrust be-

tween the United States and Iran remains the single greatest obstacle to meaningful progress. Decades of hostility, punctuated by intermittent attempts at engagement, have created a diplomatic landscape where even minor misunderstandings can escalate rapidly. Public denials from Tehran regarding the scope of ongoing contacts, coupled with shifting signals from Washington, highlight the fragility of the current process.

Complicating matters further is the position of Israel, which remains deeply sceptical of any arrangement perceived as insufficiently restrictive of Iran's strategic capabilities. Its opposition introduces an additional layer of complexity, constraining the space for compromise. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's strategic calculus—reportedly favouring sustained pressure on Tehran—creates tensions within Pakistan's balancing act. Maintaining close ties with Riyadh while engaging Tehran requires a level of diplomatic finesse that is difficult to sustain over time.

Pakistan's own limitations also come into sharp relief. Its economic fragility, marked by recurring fiscal crises and dependence on external assistance, constrains its ability to project sustained diplomatic influence. Political contestation at home further complicates decision-

making, while ongoing security challenges along its western frontier demand constant attention. In such circumstances, the capacity to engage in prolonged and resource-intensive diplomacy is inevitably limited.

Moreover, Pakistan's leverage in this context is inherently constrained. Unlike major powers, it lacks the economic incentives or coercive tools necessary to shape outcomes. Its role is largely confined to facilitating communication rather than influencing intent. The indirect nature of the current talks, conducted through intermediaries rather than direct negotiations, further diminishes the prospects for substantive breakthroughs.

It is therefore important to draw a distinction between mediation and brokerage. A true mediator commands the trust of all parties, possesses the capacity to nudge compromise, and plays an active role in shaping the contours of a settlement. A broker, by contrast, functions primarily as a conduit—transmitting messages, clarifying positions, and preventing miscommunication. Pakistan, for all its access, operates closer to the latter category.

Neither Washington nor Tehran appears inclined to invest Islamabad with the political capital required for deeper mediation. The United States continues to pursue its strategic objectives through a combination of pressure and selective engagement, while Iran remains wary of legitimising external intermediaries. The absence of alignment among key regional actors further limits Pakistan's ability to act as a consensus-builder.

In such a fractured diplomatic environment, access does not translate into authority. Pakistan can help keep lines of communication open, reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation, and perhaps create space for dialogue. But it lacks the capacity to bridge the fundamental ideological and strategic divide that underpins the conflict.

Ultimately, Pakistan's involvement reflects the realities of a region in flux. It is a role shaped less by choice than by circumstance, driven by the imperatives of geography and the pressures of domestic vulnerability. While its efforts may contribute to short-term stabilisation, they are unlikely to yield lasting strategic dividends.

In the end, Islamabad's diplomacy in this crisis is best understood not as an exercise in conflict resolution, but as a cautious attempt to navigate a turbulent landscape while safeguarding its own interests. In a region where certainty is scarce and alliances are fluid, such pragmatism may be the only viable course.

OF TRUMP'S TAUNT AND BRITAIN'S TRUTH

# Is Britain's Defence Strategy Fit for a New Age of Warfare?

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

The latest broadside from Donald Trump—deriding Britain's aircraft carriers as "toys" and floating the possibility of withdrawing the United States from NATO—may be characteristically theatrical. Yet, beneath the bluster lies an uncomfortable question that Britain can no longer afford to brush aside: how credible are its defences in an age where warfare is being reshaped at dizzying speed?

For a country that once commanded the seas with unmatched authority, the present reality is sobering. The British Army has shrunk to a size not seen since the early 19th century. The Royal Navy, long a symbol of national strength, often appears stretched thin, with vessels cycling through maintenance or otherwise unavailable at crucial moments. While headline figures—just under 182,000 personnel including reserves—suggest a respectable force, numbers alone conceal a deeper vulnerability: a widening gap between legacy capabilities and emerging threats. That gap has been laid bare by recent conflicts. The war in Ukraine and escalating tensions involving Iran have demonstrated how profoundly warfare has changed. Cheap, expendable drones now challenge billion-pound platforms. Cyberattacks can paralyse infrastructure without a single shot being fired. Long-range missiles, including hypersonic variants reportedly deployed by Russia, blur the line between battlefield and civilian life,

targeting cities and energy grids with alarming precision.

In such a world, traditional measures of military strength—tanks, fighter jets, and even large naval vessels—risk becoming symbols of prestige rather than instruments of decisive power. The uncomfortable truth is that modern conflict increasingly rewards agility, adaptability and technological innovation over sheer scale or historical legacy. Britain is not oblivious to these changes. The Strategic Defence Review and various parliamentary inquiries have acknowledged the evolving nature of threats. There is, at least on paper, a recognition that future wars will be fought across multiple domains simultaneously—air, land, sea, cyber and space. The general public, too, has witnessed how even heavily armed nations can be unsettled by asymmetric tactics. Repeated attacks on Israel, for instance, have underscored the importance of robust air defence systems like the Iron Dome, which can intercept incoming projectiles with remarkable efficiency.

Yet acknowledgement is not the same as action. The troubling reality is that Britain's pace of adaptation remains sluggish. While ministers concede the scale of the challenge, tangible progress in modernising equipment, infrastructure and doctrine has been limited. This inertia is particularly concerning given the nature of the threats outlined in official assessments: coordinated attacks involving drones, cruise missiles and ballistic weapons aimed not only at military targets but at critical national infrastruc-

ture.

Here lies one of the most glaring weaknesses. Britain's power stations, transport networks, ports, communications systems and even hospitals remain largely unprotected against such assaults. In an era where adversaries can strike deep into civilian life with relative ease, this vulnerability is not merely theoretical—it is a strategic liability. Efforts are underway, albeit tentatively. Collaborative initiatives such as the European Sky Shield Initiative, spearheaded by Germany, aim to build a more integrated air defence architecture across Europe. These partnerships, alongside NATO's existing framework, offer a pathway towards collective security. But progress is uneven, and the scale of investment required remains daunting.

Britain's current defensive posture relies on a "multilayered" system integrated within NATO. The Royal Navy's Type 45 destroyers, recently deployed near Cyprus, possess advanced missile interception capabilities. On land, the Army operates a limited number of Sky Sabre air defence systems. The Royal Air Force maintains quick-reaction Typhoon jets capable of responding to aerial threats at short notice. Individually, these assets are formidable. Collectively, however, they face a fundamental challenge: cost versus scale. Modern air defence relies heavily on expensive interceptor missiles. Against a handful of incoming threats, this model works well. But against swarms of low-cost drones or mass missile barrages, it becomes economically and operationally unsustainable.

An adversary can, in effect, overwhelm defences not through superior technology, but through sheer volume and affordability. This asymmetry is at the heart of contemporary warfare. It is also where Britain risks falling behind. Compounding the issue is the uncertainty surrounding transatlantic relations. Trump's scepticism towards NATO, while not entirely new, raises the spectre of a diminished American commitment to European security. For decades, Britain has relied on close cooperation with the United States, particularly in areas such as nuclear deterrence. The Trident system, for instance, depends heavily on US technology and collaboration. A weakening of this relationship would force Britain to reassess its strategic assumptions. In theory, a reconfigured alliance—comprising European nations alongside partners such as Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Turkey—could replicate much of NATO's existing structure. The combined economic and industrial strength of these nations would likely surpass that of Russia and potentially rival the United States. However, such an arrangement would not be without complications. Divergent political priorities and varying threat perceptions could undermine cohesion. The ambivalent stance of Hungary towards Russia, despite its membership in both NATO and the European Union, illustrates the challenges of maintaining unity within a diverse alliance.

Ultimately, the question of defence is inseparable from the question of political will—and, by extension, public



consent. Democracies, by their nature, are often reluctant to allocate substantial resources towards threats that feel distant or abstract. The pressure to prioritise healthcare, education and social welfare is both understandable and legitimate. Yet the cost of underinvestment in defence can be far higher when crises arise.

Some argue that Britain could reallocate resources by scaling back commitments beyond Europe. The AUKUS submarine agreement, involving Australia and the United States, is one such example. Similarly, maintaining overseas territories and bases—from the Falkland Islands to Diego Garcia—comes with strategic and financial burdens that merit reassessment. Yet even such measures would only address part of the problem. The deeper issue lies in how Britain conceptualises defence in the 21st century. Incremental adjustments will not suffice. What is required is a fundamental shift towards embracing new technologies, doctrines and partnerships. One intriguing, if unconventional, suggestion is to learn directly from those already engaged in modern conflict. Ukraine, through necessity, has become a laboratory for innovative warfare. Its forces have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in deploying drones, electronic warfare and decentralised tactics against a larger adversary. Collaborating more closely with Ukrainian experts—whether through joint projects, training or procure-

ment—could offer Britain valuable insights at relatively low cost. This is not to suggest outsourcing national security. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that expertise often emerges from experience, and few countries today have more relevant experience than Ukraine.

So, is Trump right? Not entirely. His rhetoric exaggerates and oversimplifies, as it often does. Britain is not defenceless, nor are its armed forces mere relics. They remain professional, capable and integrated within one of the world's most sophisticated alliance systems.

But dismissing his comments outright would be a mistake. Beneath the provocation lies a kernel of truth: Britain's defence apparatus, while still formidable in parts, is struggling to keep pace with a rapidly changing strategic environment. The challenge, therefore, is not one of rebuilding from scratch, but of adapting with urgency and clarity. This means investing in technologies that reflect the realities of modern warfare, strengthening resilience at home, and fostering alliances that can withstand political turbulence.

Above all, it requires an honest conversation with the public about the costs and consequences of security in an uncertain world. Complacency, once the luxury of a dominant power, is no longer an option.

Britain may no longer rule the waves, but it must still learn how to navigate them.