

WHY THE IRAN-ISRAEL-US WAR will not stop with ceasefires



▲ Demonstrators protest against US military action in Iran near the White House in Washington D.C. on April 7, 2026.

PHOTO: AFP

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After US President Trump abruptly announced an extension of the ceasefire between Iran and the US, indirect negotiations through Pakistan seemed to be on the table. Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, and Special Envoy Steve Witkoff — both of whom were part of the group of advisors for Trump to take action against Iran — were said to be heading for Pakistan, then Trump canceled the trip. In a post on Truth Social, Trump wrote about the decision to cancel and stated, "we have all the cards, they have none! If they [Iran] want to talk, all they have to do is call!!!" Shortly after, an active shooting took place at the White House Correspondents dinner. Trump has since told reporters, the shooting is not going to deter him from winning the war in Iran. He also added, "I don't know if that has anything to do with it, I really don't think so, based on what we know," after saying, "you never know," earlier. The domestic political climate in the US is still grappling with shock from the incident, at the time of writing.

Iran has, till now, said that direct talks will not take place. The mediator of indirect talks, Pakistan, does not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel,

which is an active party involved in the war. Israel's larger aims seem to have disappeared from news analyses but it is Israel's clash with Iran that caused the conflict in the first place. It would be pre-emptive to view the developments, especially the extension of the ceasefire, as a breakthrough for "peace." The state of the war is bleak.

The US naval blockade continues while Iran maintains its hold on the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has argued that the US naval blockade is a violation of the ceasefire, so the meaning of the word "ceasefire," is fluid in modern warfare, beyond conventional fighting. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, an Iranian top negotiator, characterised the ceasefire as a "plot to buy time for a surprise strike." And Israel has quite the track record of indifference to ceasefires and diplomatic arrangements.

The speculation of US boots on the ground is still not off the table. Republican Senator Roger Marshall agreed in an interview on April 22, with Newsmax, that the US would have to go into Iran to "finish the job" if a "peace agreement" wasn't reached in the coming weeks. While Trump claims to have achieved "regime change," the Iranian leadership's ability to down a US fighter jet, and wage asymmetric warfare

to hit where it hurts, is still intact. The possible collapse of a ceasefire has given rise to speculation about Iran potentially disrupting the undersea internet cables that run along the seabed of the Strait of Hormuz — which is also a chokepoint for international data traffic. Reports from Iran International, an exiled media outlet, suggest that cyber units affiliated with the IRGC may already be preparing for such operations. So, there's a flip side to Ghalibaf's statement of the US "buying time." It can also mean more preparation being taken from the Iranian side. Both parties are coming to the table with seemingly uncompromising stances but for a ceasefire to last, someone or the other has to compromise.

Ceasefires often have a perverse effect and the fact that it can act as a prelude to further disruptions has become a "playbook" of sorts, in wars. The Russia-Ukraine war, Israel's offensive in Gaza, in Lebanon, continue. Wars don't end with ceasefires. In fact, do wars really even end now? When was the last time a ceasefire led two nations to stop fighting for good? Data analysis by the research initiative, Ceasefire Project, showed that ceasefires typically last 65 to 193 days and that humanitarian ceasefires have historically been "the most likely to be followed quickly by renewed violence."

Ceasefires — a liberal "international" approach to peace — now encompass buffer time to strategise during a war, rather than an actionable effort to end military conflicts. It should be viewed through that lens today, for every player with stakes in the Iran-Israel-US war. The war has hit oil, water, economics and diplomacy. An end to such a major conflict won't be achieved from a short-term ceasefire, or an extension of it, when the meaning of "peaceful agreements" has three differing outcomes for the US, Israel and Iran.

Markets move with the news of ceasefires and news of "talks," and activists feel reassured with a cessation of outright violence. But the problem is the collective lack of understanding that the concept of a ceasefire to chart a path for peace, is outdated. When chanting "ceasefire now," peacemakers around the world short-sightedly miss that a temporary, mediated pause in fighting, fails to tackle the root of the conflict itself. In Gaza, ceasefires helped save lives for a period of time, only for lives to be destroyed anyway. Talks were held, and what has been the result? Trump warped the meaning of peace completely, while the Gaza Strip is effectively under Israeli control, further away from Palestinian self-determination.

Ceasefires are conflated in news headlines, with the loaded term, "peace." Sustainable peace processes have historically happened when political grievances were addressed in conflicts. Has that happened recently though? US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, show a global decline of interventionism, diplomacy and peace-building predicated on an international legal system, built on Western ideologies in the first place. Arguably, UN-brokered ceasefires or mediated ceasefires have not fairly concluded Western provoked wars but rather put a stop gap for more havoc down the road.

What does durable peace look like for Iran and the US, with Israel and Iran functioning as existential threats to each other in the region? Will Iran just stop enriching Uranium forever and accept Israel as a colonising force that has come to its own borders? These are black and-white questions but relevant to ask, as they contextualise the magnitude of political grievances at play here and the magnitude of what needs to be done to reach a peaceful ending.

Pakistan may have mediated a ceasefire but it has not changed the position of the three nations involved or addressed the root of political grievances at the heart of the conflict. And how

can any third-party nation address that? Iran functions as a resistant force against the expansionist superpower of the US. Israel, under its current leadership, functions as an increasingly charged colonising power which the US uses to retain its expansionist efforts in the Middle East. A ceasefire to really bring about peace has to be capacious enough to address the ideological clash of the nations, Israel's heightening aggressiveness towards its adversaries, and the US' superiority complex.

Iran may have survived this war of attrition so far, but the question remains: how long can they keep going? They lasted eight years against a Western-backed Saddam Hussein regime. Analysts have rightly pointed out that Iran has insofar had the upper hand in the war and the US does not have an off-ramp. US boots on the ground would be complex, as Iran's geographical advantages are plentiful. The Strait of Hormuz can now always be used as a deterrent for Iran against further attacks by Israel even in the scenario that a resolution is reached in this current war. But Iran's domestic factors are yet to emerge. If the US naval blockade on the Strait does cause damage to the people and Iranian economy, it is worth observing whether the newly empowered youth of the IRGC and the rest of the remaining regime will align in the next steps.

In conflicts, ceasefires can only initiate a "process" of peace, if all parties have the incentive to stop. All parties are far from that, at the moment. A resolution in this war from Pakistan's diplomacy would also be temporary till the decades-long animosity and the ideological tussle that caused it are addressed. Though consequences of the war are felt by the world, the materialisation of "peace," is confined to the three nations' willingness to compromise pragmatically. The main compromise lies in the US' ability to contain Israel, and to learn to function within an interconnected world. The Trump administration will not be the one to do that. There has to be a reckoning within the US: a need for a wholly new US administration that recognises that this specific compromise needs to be made, to avoid a costly, "forever war." Till then, ceasefires with Iran or any efforts synonymous to peace will mirror commercial breaks from violent episodes of war.

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The Islamabad paradox What middle powers can learn from Pakistan

▲ The Islamabad process is not just a story about Pakistan. It is an indication that the middle-power agency in the current international system has migrated toward states that Western theories of international relations consistently wrote off as too fragile, too messy, or too compromised to matter.

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When analysing the commentary around the US-Iran-Israel war, what has mostly been ignored is: why is it Pakistan that has emerged as the key mediator in the most consequential war that's impacted the world? And what does the answer tell us about how diplomacy actually works now? At the time of writing, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baqaei has said that the Foreign Minister will travel to Pakistan, while an Iranian state media report that Islamabad can act as a "bridge" to "convey Iran's consideration for ending the conflict."

Classical realism holds that mediators draw their leverage from material power: economic weight, military credibility, or the authority of an institution that both sides respect. Liberal institutionalism adds a legitimacy condition: the mediator should be embedded in the rules-based framework. Pakistan fails both tests. It has no economic leverage over Washington or Tehran. It is not neutral in any meaningful sense. Its Shia population watched their government host the negotiations that followed the assassination of a globally significant Shia leader, and protests turned violent in Karachi and Gilgit-Baltistan as a result. Pakistan had to deploy its army to suppress demonstrators while simultaneously brokering a ceasefire.

Tehran would only do talks in Pakistan and nowhere else, because they trust Pakistan. That sentence deserves more attention than it has received. It is a statement about Pakistan's position in a web of relationships that no genuinely neutral state could occupy. Pakistan's value is not neutrality. It is the fact that it is compromised in all directions simultaneously, which turns out to be exactly what both Iran and the US needed. Islamabad holds Iran's interests' section in Washington,

a residual arrangement from 1979 that has never been replaced. Army Chief Asim Munir has cultivated a working relationship with Trump. He was the first non-head-of-state military leader invited for a White House lunch by a sitting US president. Pakistan shares a long border with Iran. It is bound to Saudi Arabia through a mutual defence agreement and tied to China through CPEC. It is pulled simultaneously by actors who are pulling in opposite directions. What reads as weakness in conventional power terms reads as credibility when both sides need someone the other cannot veto.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's argument about hegemony was not simply that powerful states impose their will, but that they get other actors to internalise the rules of the game as natural and inevitable. US conflict management for three decades ran on this logic. Washington led negotiations directly, or worked through institutions it largely shaped. The unstated assumption was that legitimate mediation happened in Western capitals or Western-designed multilateral spaces. The Islamabad talks broke that assumption. The first direct, high-level engagement between the United States and post-revolutionary Iran happened not in Geneva or New York but in a city that was triggered by the same war. It is a sign of how the old Gramscian geography of diplomacy has shifted.

American political scientist Alexander Wendt's constructivism helps explain the Iranian side of this calculation. For Wendt, the structure of international relations is partly constituted by shared identities and meanings, not just material facts. Iran's insistence on Pakistan as the venue is partly an identity claim. It refuses to negotiate where Washington can frame as its own. Pakistan sits outside the Western security architecture without



US President Donald Trump poses with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Muinr at the Oval Office of the White House in Washington on Sep 25, 2025.

PHOTO: VIA X

being anti-Western. It is Muslim-majority without being Arab. For Iran, talking in Islamabad is a way of making the talks themselves look different from a surrender. For the US, it is a way of talking to Iran at all. Pakistan is the grammar that makes the sentence possible.

The Islamabad process is not just a story about Pakistan. It is an indication that the middle-power agency in the current international system has migrated toward states that Western theories of international relations consistently wrote off as too fragile, too messy, or too compromised to matter. Bangladesh navigates its own version of structural overdetermination: between India and China, between the requirements of the garment sector's Western buyers and the infrastructure financing on offer from Beijing,

between Islamic solidarity as a political idiom and secular developmentalism as a governing project. The lesson from Islamabad is not that Pakistan has found some diplomatic secret. It is that the old assumption, that strategic clarity means picking a side and sticking to it, is increasingly obsolete.

As the war is on temporary ceasefire, Brent crude is trading at record high prices. The Strait of Hormuz has been intermittently shut. Bangladesh's fuel import costs and the remittance flows from its workers in the Gulf are both directly exposed to how this ends. NATO allies refused to join the military campaign. China and Russia declined. Japan, South Korea and Australia stayed out despite their security dependence on Washington. The Global South watched a US-Israeli strike begin in the middle of active negotiations

and drew conclusions about what diplomatic assurances are worth. As Ali Vaez, director of the Iran Project at the International Crisis Group put it, in trying to prevent Iran from building a weapon of mass destruction, the US handed it a weapon of mass disruption, which turned out to be the Strait of Hormuz.

The Pakistani foreign ministry has started calling this the "Islamabad process," which is diplomatic branding. It's an attempt to turn a crisis intervention into a standing track. The fact of the matter is that decisions of enormous consequence have been made in last-minute phone calls between Islamabad and Tehran. That is the texture of the current world. The diplomatic currency of this moment is not alignment but structured ambiguity: the capacity to be trusted by adversaries simultaneously. Pakistan, for all its dysfunctions, has that capacity right now. Whether it can translate a single mediation into durable institutional weight is a different question.

For Bangladesh, the immediate concern is economic. But the strategic question is worth sitting with. In a world where the old institutional grammar of conflict management has broken down, where the UN Security Council is deadlocked and Western-led frameworks are losing legitimacy across the Global South, which states will matter? The answer now is that it is not necessarily the most powerful or the most stable states that matter. The ones that will matter are those that have managed to remain legible to multiple competing actors at once. That is a harder thing to build than GDP or military capability. But it is increasingly what counts.

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