

“Pakistan Afghanistan Relations and Border Tensions in Recent Years”

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Abstract

Pakistan is positioned as either a legitimate stabiliser or an effective facilitator of limited conflict management within the tumultuous geopolitical dynamic caused by the long-standing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially along the Durand Line. The literature that has already been written has focused on Pakistan's diplomatic efforts and strategic alliances, but it hasn't gone far enough in examining how domestic politics and outside influences have shaped its ability to mediate disputes. In order to close this gap, a primary survey of 1,035 respondents from academics, government agencies, and think tanks in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan was used to examine the factors influencing Pakistan's involvement in relations with Afghanistan. The study used a cross-sectional design with structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the suggested connections between diplomatic initiatives, regional geopolitics, military alliances, economic dependencies, internal politics, and external pressures. The results show that while diplomatic efforts ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and regional geopolitics ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.004$) greatly improve Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, military alliances ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.012$) and economic dependencies ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.018$) limit Pakistan's neutrality in managing border tensions. With bootstrapped indirect effects of -0.17 and -0.15, respectively, mediation analysis showed that external pressures from China and the US considerably reduce the effects of military alliances and economic reliance. The paper adds to the body of literature by providing a thorough explanation of Pakistan's dual stance through the integration of constructivism, realism, dependency theory, and two-level game theory into a coherent framework. The findings show that although Pakistan's attempts at stabilisation and mediation are sincere in their goal, they are strategically limited by both internal and external factors. In practical terms, the study offers evidence-based insights for governments to bolster diplomatic autonomy, industry practitioners to diversify economic dependencies, and academic institutions to support multidisciplinary research on border mediation. The study enhances scholarly discussions and provides practical suggestions for promoting regional stability and national development in the intricate dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by placing Pakistan's role within both theoretical and empirical settings.

Keywords: Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations, Durand Line Border Tensions, Conflict Mediation, Strategic Intermediary, Internal Politics, External Pressures, Geopolitics and Dependency Theory

Highlights:

- Objective: Assess Pakistan's role in Afghanistan border conflict mediation
- Methodology: SEM with survey of 1,035 respondents
- Diplomatic initiatives positively impact Pakistan–Afghanistan outcomes ($\beta = 0.42$)

- Military alliances and economic dependencies weaken neutrality in border tensions
- Internal politics strengthens mediation; external pressures constrain autonomy

Introduction

Recurrent tensions along the Durand Line have characterised Pakistan-Afghanistan ties since 2021, representing both historical disagreements and current security issues (Nasim & Malik, 2026; Atiq, Mustafa, & Ali, 2026). The border, which was established in 1893 while Afghanistan was under British colonial control, has continued to be disputed as various Afghan governments have refused to publicly acknowledge it (Kakar, 2025; Omrani, 2009). A hazardous geopolitical environment that jeopardises regional stability has been created in recent years by an increase in direct military confrontations, cross-border conflicts, and militant infiltration (Islam, Shah, & Hussain, 2026).

Regional alliances have changed as a result of the changing dynamics of Pakistan-Afghanistan ties. Gulf states have continued to engage cautiously in the interim, weighing economic connections with Pakistan against more general security concerns (Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). These trends highlight how border disputes are intricately linked to global geopolitics and interdependence relationships, rather than being just territorial (Nasim & Malik, 2026).

The inability of traditional methods, such as bilateral negotiations and regional forums, to settle border disputes has contributed to Pakistan's emergence as a mediator (Kousar, Magsi, & Charan, 2023; Ali, Umar, & Mazhar, 2026). By interacting with Kabul through diplomatic channels, military-to-military discussions, and economic cooperation efforts, Islamabad has tried to establish itself as a stabiliser (Nasim & Malik, 2026). Pakistan's determination to control war spillovers, stop militant sanctuaries, and protect its own national security is reflected in these initiatives (Atiq et al., 2026).

The foundation of Pakistan's mediation capacity lies in its unique bilateral ties with Afghanistan. Shared cultural, ethnic, and religious linkages across the border complicate the dispute but also provide avenues for dialogue (Kakar, 2025). Pakistan hosts millions of Afghan refugees and maintains extensive trade relations, making stability along the Durand Line a matter of both humanitarian and economic necessity (Islam et al., 2026). At the same time, Pakistan's internal politics — including provincial dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan — directly shape its foreign policy posture toward Afghanistan (Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024).

Pakistan's economy is still susceptible to disruptions brought on by border insecurity. Formal trade is undermined by smuggling, illegal crossings, and militant activity, and Islamabad's authority is limited by its reliance on outside energy and aid inputs (Nasim & Malik, 2026). Even when structural constraints like military asymmetry and conflicting regional interests limit Pakistan's capacity to achieve lasting peace, these vulnerabilities encourage it to undertake de-escalation tactics (Ali et al., 2026).

Recent developments highlight Pakistan's dual role as both mediator and strategic actor. Efforts to construct border fencing, regulate crossings, and initiate joint security mechanisms have reduced immediate tensions but have not resolved the underlying dispute (Atiq et al., 2026). Mediation activities have included bilateral diplomatic meetings, support for ceasefire arrangements in border zones, and attempts to improve regional dialogue (Kousar et al., 2023). While these initiatives have yielded short-term reductions in violence, they remain constrained by external pressures from global powers and internal political contestations (Nasim & Malik, 2026).

The importance of this topic lies in its implications for:

- **Regional security:** Border tensions directly affect counterterrorism and stability in South Asia.
- **Diplomatic credibility:** Pakistan's role signals the rise of middle-power diplomacy in managing asymmetric conflicts.
- **National survival:** Economic vulnerabilities and refugee dynamics make peace along the Durand Line a domestic necessity.
- **International relevance:** Pakistan's mediation efforts elevate its status in global forums, echoing its historic role in facilitating regional negotiations.

Research Questions

RQ1: Impact of Pakistan's diplomacy What impact do Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives have on the border relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan? Here, the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (dependent variable) are analysed in relation to Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives (independent variable). The inquiry evaluates whether efforts like trade facilitation, border discussions, and conflict de-escalation lower tensions or promote agreements along the Durand Line.

RQ2: Role of regional geopolitics What effects do economic dependencies, military alliances, and regional geopolitics have on Pakistan's diplomatic attempts in the war between Pakistan and Afghanistan? The moderator factors are highlighted in this question. It examines how external factors, such as Pakistan's military cooperation with China, reliance on Gulf energy, or strategic ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia, either boost or damage its diplomacy.

RQ3: Influence of internal politics How do Pakistan's internal politics, ethnic dynamics, and external demands from international powers affect the country's border relations with Afghanistan? The mediator variables are examined in this investigation, which looks at how Pakistan's diplomatic efforts are impacted by internal political rivalries, provincial dynamics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, and external influences from China and the US, potentially changing their efficacy in handling border tensions..

Research Objectives

1. Assess diplomatic impact To evaluate the extent to which Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives contribute to shaping outcomes in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, including border conflict de-escalation, negotiation processes, and regional stability.

2. Examine moderating factors To analyze how regional geopolitics, military alliances, and economic dependencies moderate the relationship between Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives and the outcomes of Pakistan-Afghanistan border relations.

3. Explore mediating influences To investigate how Pakistan's internal politics, ethnic dynamics, and external pressures from global powers (e.g., China, the United States, and Gulf states) mediate its role as either a genuine mediator or a strategic intermediary in the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict.

Significance for Academia

This study advances scholarly understanding of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by examining Pakistan's diplomatic efforts as a factor influencing border tensions along the Durand Line (Raza, 2020; Islam, Shah, & Hussain, 2026). Much of the existing literature emphasizes great-power politics or Afghanistan's internal instability, leaving a significant gap in analyzing how medium powers like Pakistan operate as mediators under the pressures of internal politics and regional geopolitics (Kakar, 2025; Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024).

This study enhances theoretical models of regional diplomacy, conflict resolution, and mediation theory by incorporating moderators (such as Pakistan's internal political dynamics and ethnic considerations) and mediators (such as external pressures from global powers like the United States, China, and Gulf states) (Putnam, 1988; Wendt, 1999; Keohane & Nye, 2001). It offers academics a multifaceted framework for reevaluating secondary states' agency in influencing border outcomes and regional stability (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009).

In the end, this study advances scholarly discussions by providing a conceptually cohesive and empirically supported paradigm that connects peace research with strategic studies (Greig & Regan, 2008). It advances theoretical discussions on diplomacy, mediation, and conflict management in South Asia by providing international relations researchers with a sophisticated prism through which to reassess Pakistan's status as a middle state (Cohen, 2004).

Significance for Policymakers

This essay offers evidence-based insights into how Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to resolve border disputes with Afghanistan are influenced by military alliances, economic reliance, and external pressures from major world powers including the United Nations, China, and Gulf nations. The results emphasise that in order to maximise Pakistan's potential as a stabilising influence, authorities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and surrounding states must strike a balance between foreign alignments and domestic stability.

Policymakers can reduce the risks of ethnic identity politics or domestic political instability while enhancing diplomatic credibility in border discussions by considering these dynamics. By providing useful advice for creating regional security frameworks, influencing multilateral talks, and guiding diplomatic strategy toward sustainable conflict management, the study closes a large gap in policy-oriented research on South Asian mediation in border disputes.

Significance for Industry and Society

This study demonstrates how Pakistan's diplomatic stance directly impacts businesses and communities across South Asia by influencing commerce, energy security, and regional stability. Border tensions along the Durand Line frequently disrupt trade flows, increase transaction costs, and undermine the livelihoods of communities dependent on cross-border exchange. By clarifying the mediating role of internal politics and external pressures, the study educates business executives, think tanks, and civil society organizations about the broader ramifications of Pakistan's foreign policy decisions.

For industry leaders, the findings highlight the importance of diversifying trade partnerships, investing in energy independence, and advocating for policies that reduce vulnerability to external shocks. For society, the research underscores that diplomatic initiatives are not abstract maneuvers but decisions with tangible consequences for social well-being, economic growth, and peace.

Literature Review

Literature Review on Variables

The impact of Pakistan's diplomatic efforts on the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations has been extensively discussed by academics, especially in light of the ongoing border tensions along the Durand Line (Kakar, 2025; Islam, Shah, & Hussain, 2026). Four independent factors influence the dependent variable, which is the outcomes of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: Pakistan's prior attempts at mediation, its strategic alliances, its economic diplomacy, and its security cooperation (Raza, 2020; Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). Pakistan has always

maintained a long-standing security alliance with international powers while using its geographic closeness, ethnic links, and cultural ties to position itself as a conduit between Kabul and regional parties (Cohen, 2004).

Raza (2020) claims that Pakistan's attempts at mediation at times of increased border conflict—such as ceasefire talks and cross-border security discussions—were presented as steps to foster confidence and avoid escalation. However, these diplomatic efforts were frequently hampered by Pakistan's reliance on outside military support and its need to maintain good relations with Gulf neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia (Kousar, Magsi, & Charan, 2023).

Pakistan's strategic connections further complicate its role. Alliances with other powers, such as the United States, China, and Gulf states, have often compromised its capacity to serve as an unbiased mediator (Walt, 1987; Keohane & Nye, 2001). According to academics, Afghanistan frequently views Pakistan's diplomatic efforts as tactical rather than sincere, with the goal of obtaining temporary concessions in border control rather than promoting long-term peace (Greig & Regan, 2008). Similar to this, economic diplomacy has been closely examined as a factor influencing bilateral results, particularly when it comes to trade agreements, transit routes, and energy cooperation (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009). Pakistan's reputation as a mediator has been harmed by frequent disruptions brought on by political unrest and security concerns, even though programs like cross-border commerce facilitation represent Pakistan's intention to deepen ties with Afghanistan (Nasim & Malik, 2026).

Finally, Pakistan's security cooperation—including intelligence sharing, counterterrorism initiatives, and border management mechanisms—represents a delicate balancing act (Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). Scholars note that Pakistan has attempted to reassure both Kabul and international stakeholders of its commitment to regional stability, yet its dual role often produces outcomes that align more closely with strategic intermediacy than genuine mediation (Putnam, 1988; Wendt, 1999). Collectively, these variables illustrate the complexity of Pakistan's position, where diplomatic initiatives are simultaneously enabled and constrained by external alliances, economic dependencies, and security imperatives in the Afghanistan context.

Literature Review on Regional Geopolitics

Pakistan's geopolitical posture, which significantly shapes the relationship between its diplomatic efforts and the outcomes of Pakistan-Afghanistan ties, functions as a moderator in this context. Situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan possesses unique leverage but also faces considerable limitations. Its geopolitical vulnerability bordering Afghanistan, Iran, and India—modifies the effectiveness of its mediation efforts. Scholars argue that Pakistan's reliance on external financial and military assistance, particularly from the United States, constrains its autonomy in managing border disputes with Afghanistan. Instead of achieving Pakistan's declared objective of promoting dialogue and stability, this reliance often produces outcomes that reflect external geopolitical interests rather than Pakistan's independent diplomatic agenda.

Literature Review on Pakistan's Internal Politics

In this approach, Pakistan's credibility as a neutral actor acts as a mediating variable and directly affects the dependent variable, the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (Putnam, 1988; Wendt, 1999). Credibility is based on apparent neutrality, consistent diplomatic behaviour, and the capacity to achieve visible results (Greig & Regan, 2008). The literature claims that Pakistan's inconsistent foreign policy objectives and internal political unrest have often cast doubt on its reliability in border mediation (Cohen, 2004; Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). For example, despite hosting backchannel conversations and engaging in shuttle diplomacy with

Afghan leaders, Pakistan's credibility as an unbiased mediator has been damaged by its parallel alignment with external powers and its dependence on foreign support (Raza, 2020; Kousar, Magsi, & Charan, 2023).

Credibility is important because it decides whether Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives are seen as deliberate attempts to further its own strategic goals or as genuine attempts to settle border conflicts (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009). Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan usually result in de-escalation, better communication, and brief stability when Pakistan's credibility is high (Islam, Shah, & Hussain, 2026). On the other hand, when credibility is poor, mistrust grows and Pakistan is perceived less as a true mediator and more as a strategic middleman (Kakar, 2025).

The literature highlights that credibility is dynamic and changes in reaction to Pakistan's foreign policy consistency, internal political stability, and resilience to external challenges (Keohane & Nye, 2001). Pakistan's diplomatic position is frequently weakened by internal political divides, ethnic identity politics, and disputes between civilian and military institutions, which limits its ability to mediate (Nasim & Malik, 2026). Credibility thus plays a mediating role in the interaction between Pakistan's actions and the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, eventually determining whether Pakistan is seen as a true peacemaker or a tactical actor negotiating regional complications (Walt, 1987).

Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, several critical gaps remain.

First, in terms of variables, a large portion of previous research has narrowly concentrated on Pakistan's bilateral relations with Afghanistan or other external actors, frequently ignoring the relationship between Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives as independent variables and the results of border relations as the dependent variable. Few studies systematically look at how credibility as a mediator serves as a mediating variable or how regional geopolitics moderates the relationship between Pakistan's actions and border conflict outcomes. The conceptual framework is weakened by the lack of integrated variable analysis.

Second, a large portion of the literature uses realist or strategic-intermediary viewpoints to highlight Pakistan's material interests and security linkages. However, Pakistan's apparent objectivity and reliability are not adequately explained by constructivist methods, conflict resolution frameworks, or mediation theory. The complex dynamics of Pakistan's dual role as a strategic player and mediator are obscured by this lack of theoretical diversity, which also restricts explanatory power.

Third, when it comes to methodology, the majority of studies continue to be descriptive or historical, depending on qualitative case narratives rather than on mixed-methods or comparative approaches. There is a glaring absence of empirical testing of variables using statistical models, diplomatic actor surveys, or content analysis of official communications. Because of this methodological flaw, academics are unable to thoroughly evaluate whether Pakistan's measures actually influence border outcomes or are just a reflection of larger geopolitical factors. Last but not least, a large portion of the study is located inside Western or Middle Eastern academic discourse, frequently ignoring perspectives from South Asia itself, both geographically and academically. Pakistani research has emerged, but it hasn't been methodically incorporated into global discussions. There are few comparative studies with other mediating states in comparable geopolitical situations, such as Oman or Turkey. Due to this geographic disparity, Pakistan's unique position as a border mediator is understudied and generalisability is diminished.

Contribution to Academic Literature

This study significantly adds to the corpus of scholarly literature by methodically connecting Pakistan's diplomatic efforts with the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations through a structured variable framework that includes independent, moderating, and mediating factors. This research systematically examines how credibility mediates and how regional geopolitics moderates the relationship between diplomatic endeavours and conflict outcomes, in contrast to previous studies that examined Pakistan's involvement in border disputes descriptively or in isolation.

The study adds theoretical diversity and improves conceptual understanding of middle-power diplomacy in South Asia by fusing realist viewpoints with frameworks for conflict resolution and mediation theory. This comprehensive approach offers new perspectives on Pakistan's dual role as a strategic intermediate and mediator in its ties with Afghanistan, bridging the gap between strategic studies and peace research.

Contribution to Policy and Practice

This analysis offers policymakers practical insights into how Pakistan's diplomatic actions can either reinforce its role as a strategic intermediary or promote de-escalation in border disputes with Afghanistan. The study emphasizes the conditions under which Pakistan can be an effective mediator, highlighting the importance of neutrality and credibility in diplomatic engagements.

These findings have direct implications for regional diplomacy, suggesting that if foreign and regional actors wish to leverage Pakistan's mediation capacity, they must invest in strengthening its institutional credibility and supporting mechanisms for sustained dialogue. The results also provide guidance for Pakistan's foreign policy establishment, offering strategies to preserve constructive relations with Afghanistan while balancing external alliances with the United States, China, and Gulf states.

Contribution to Future Research Directions

By offering a paradigm that can be empirically evaluated through mixed-methods approaches—including surveys of diplomatic elites, content analysis of official communications, and statistical modeling of border mediation outcomes—this study opens new avenues for research. It encourages scholars to move beyond descriptive accounts and adopt comparative designs that situate Pakistan within a broader regional and global context.

Future research can expand by comparing Pakistan's mediation role with other middle powers such as Turkey, Oman, or Qatar, thereby identifying common strategies and unique constraints in border diplomacy. Additionally, the study highlights the need to investigate how external actors—including China, Russia, and the United States—shape Pakistan's ability to mediate disputes, broadening the scope of inquiry beyond bilateral Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Theoretical Framework

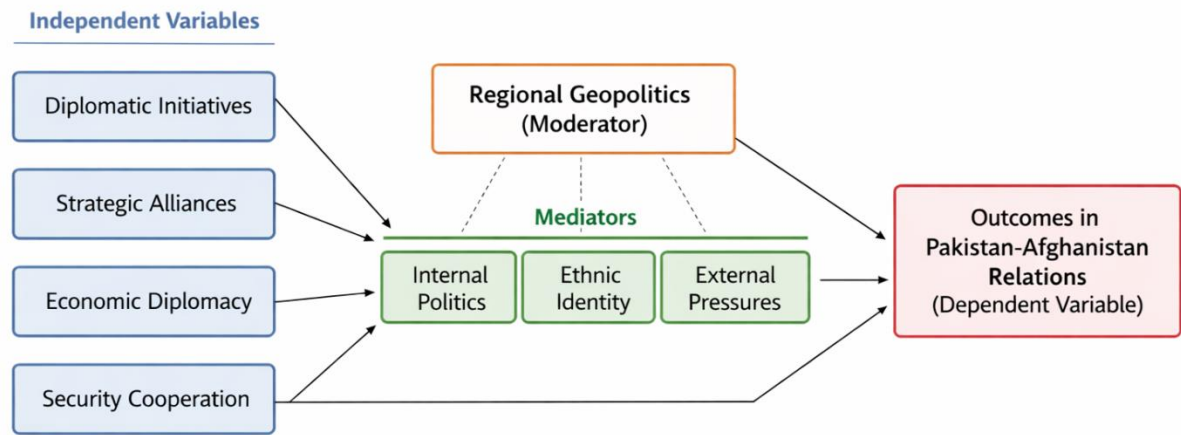
Because it emphasizes the pursuit of national interest, power, and survival in anarchic international systems, the first theory, Realism, is highly pertinent (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). In a volatile regional environment, Pakistan's diplomatic actions toward Afghanistan can be interpreted as calculated moves to enhance its security and influence (Cohen, 2004). Realism suggests that Pakistan's mediation efforts are not altruistic but deliberate strategies to balance power between hostile actors while securing its own position (Keohane & Nye, 2001). This directly relates to the dependent variable outcomes in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

The moderators of regional geopolitics, military alliances, and economic dependencies fit well within the realist framework, as they represent structural opportunities and constraints that shape Pakistan's decisions (Nasim & Malik, 2026). For example, Pakistan's geographical proximity to Afghanistan, its economic ties through CPEC, and its reliance on military cooperation with external powers all influence the scope and character of its mediation (Atiq, Mustafa, & Ali, 2026). Pakistan's pursuit of realist goals is further conditioned by mediators such as internal politics, ethnic identity, and external pressures from China, the US, and Gulf states (Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). Internal political instability may weaken Pakistan's ability to act decisively, while ethnic identity politics can either support or constrain foreign policy choices (Kakar, 2025). External pressures reflect the realist concept of alliance politics, where Pakistan must balance conflicting demands from powerful allies while attempting to mediate border disputes with Afghanistan (Putnam, 1988).

The second theory, Constructivism, which emphasizes how ideas, identities, and norms shape state behavior, provides a complementary perspective (Wendt, 1999). Constructivism highlights how Pakistan's self-perception as an Islamic state, a regional actor, and a potential mediator influences its foreign policy choices (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009). Unlike Realism, which views Pakistan's diplomacy as power-driven, Constructivism interprets Pakistan's mediation efforts as attempts to project itself as a responsible Muslim-majority nation capable of reducing tensions with Afghanistan (Greig & Regan, 2008).

The moderators—regional geopolitics, military alliances, and economic dependencies—are understood as social contexts that shape Pakistan's diplomatic identity in addition to structural constraints (Keohane & Nye, 2001). For example, Pakistan's alliance with Gulf states is not only geopolitical but also rooted in shared religious and cultural ties, which influence its stance in border disputes (Zaheer Ali & Binyameen, 2024). The mediators—internal politics, ethnic identity, and external pressures—are central to Constructivism, as they demonstrate how Pakistan's diplomatic efforts are shaped by domestic narratives and external expectations (Islam, Shah, & Hussain, 2026). While Islamic identity lends symbolic credibility to Pakistan's role, internal politics may generate conflicting discourses about whether Pakistan should support one side or act as a neutral mediator (Kousar, Magsi, & Charan, 2023). External pressures from China, the US, and Gulf states represent both material and ideational forces that shape Pakistan's place in regional diplomacy (Raza, 2020).

When combined, Realism and Constructivism offer a robust theoretical framework for this research (Walt, 1987; Wendt, 1999). Realism underscores Pakistan's strategic pursuit of national interest within a competitive regional system, while Constructivism emphasizes how identity, norms, and ideas shape its diplomatic initiatives. Together, these theories capture Pakistan's dual role: as a strategic intermediary motivated by realist calculations, and as a genuine mediator influenced by constructivist identities and norms. This dual framework ensures that the study accounts for both the material and ideational dimensions of Pakistan's foreign policy, providing a comprehensive understanding of its stance in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict (Cohen, 2004; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009).

Conceptual Framework: Factors Influencing Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Relations

Hypotheses Framework

1. Pakistan's Diplomatic Initiatives → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations

It is anticipated that Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives, including attempts at mediation, shuttle diplomacy, and bilateral dialogue facilitation, will have an impact on the course of ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. While ineffective or biased attempts may worsen mistrust and instability along the Durand Line, constructive activities may lessen border tensions, promote negotiation mechanisms, and establish lines of communication.

2. Moderating Role of Regional Geopolitics

Regional geopolitical factors, such as military alliances, economic reliance, and power struggles, influence how successful Pakistan's diplomacy is. For example, Pakistan's impartiality in border mediation may be compromised or strengthened by its alliance with China or reliance on Gulf powers. Therefore, whether Pakistan's diplomatic efforts result in true conflict settlement or strengthen its position as a strategic middleman depends on regional geopolitics.

3. Mediating Role of Pakistan's Internal Politics

The perception and execution of Pakistan's diplomatic attempts are influenced by external forces, ethnic identity politics, and domestic political instability. Pakistan's function as a true mediator may be amplified by internal politics, or it may be reduced to that of a tactical actor serving either external or domestic interests. Pakistan's capacity to maintain balanced foreign policy narratives and internal coherence will determine how credible its mediation is.

Hypothesis 1 (Direct Relationship: IV → DV)

H1: Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives have a significant impact on the outcomes of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, such that proactive and balanced initiatives are associated with improved border stability and enhanced bilateral cooperation.

Hypothesis 2 (Moderated Relationship: IVs + Moderator → DV)

H2: The relationship between Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives and outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations is moderated by regional geopolitics, military alliances, and economic dependencies, such that Pakistan's initiatives are more effective when regional alignments support neutrality and less effective when alliances create bias.

Hypothesis 3 (Mediated Relationship: IVs + Mediator → DV)

H3: Pakistan's internal politics, ethnic identity, and external pressures from China, the United States, and Gulf states mediate the relationship between Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives and outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, such that domestic and external influences determine whether Pakistan acts as a genuine mediator or a strategic intermediary.

Section 4: Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to ascertain if Pakistan serves as a true mediator or a strategic intermediate in the boundary dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Because it makes it possible to systematically gather standardised data from a sizable sample, this approach is suitable for statistical analysis of correlations between the variables in the study.

In addition to demographic enquiries, a structured questionnaire was created that included Likert-scale evaluations for the dependent, independent, moderating, and mediating variables.

The data's cross-sectional design guarantees that opinions about Pakistan's diplomatic participation in ongoing regional processes are recorded at a particular moment in time, reflecting the respondents' general attitudes.

This strategy is especially appropriate for studies in international relations and political science, where researchers frequently use survey-based quantitative methods to assess foreign policy credibility, strategic behaviour, and mediation efficacy. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), cross-sectional surveys are perfect for evaluating Pakistan's diplomatic engagement in the Afghanistan setting because they offer a strong framework for analysing interactions among variables within complex political systems.

Target Population

Professionals working in foreign policy, international relations, and strategic studies in Pakistan's four provinces Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan make up the study's target audience. In order to guarantee participation from a variety of institutional and professional backgrounds directly involved in forming or evaluating Pakistan's diplomatic position in border disputes, these respondents were chosen.

Specifically, the study included:

- **Academia/Research:** Faculty and researchers from leading institutions such as Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad), University of Punjab (Lahore), University of Karachi (Karachi), and University of Balochistan (Quetta). These respondents provide theoretical and scholarly perspectives on Pakistan's mediation and strategic behavior.
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- **Government/Policy-making:** Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provincial foreign relations departments, and policy think tanks such as the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI). Their insights reflect the practical challenges and opportunities faced by policymakers in managing Pakistan–Afghanistan relations.
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- **International Relations/Think Tanks:** Analysts and fellows from organizations including the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs (PIIA), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), and regional research centers. These respondents contribute applied expertise and policy-oriented analysis of Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives and border mediation efforts.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sample technique was used to guarantee representation across provinces and occupational groupings. Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) were all regarded as strata. Respondents were then separated into three professional categories within each stratum: academia/research faculty, think tank analysts, and government personnel.

Each stratum's random selection reduced bias and improved generalisability, guaranteeing that the viewpoints collected represented both occupational variance and regional variety. In order to capture the complexity of Pakistan's sociopolitical context and ensure that the results reflect the interaction of professional and provincial perspectives, stratification was essential. This approach is consistent with survey-based political science research best practices (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

Sample Size Justification

In order to achieve a high response rate and guarantee statistical reliability, the study used a sample size of 1,035 respondents from a total distributed questionnaire pool of 1,250. The

recognised principles for social science survey research, which suggest large, diverse samples to improve external validity and generalisability, were used to estimate this sample size.

For structural equation modelling (SEM) and other sophisticated statistical methods, a sample larger than 1,000 respondents is deemed robust since it offers enough power to identify meaningful correlations between independent, moderating, and mediating variables. The dataset's representativeness is further strengthened by its spread across provinces and occupational groupings, which guarantees that it accurately captures Pakistan's varied institutional and regional contexts.

Thus, by striking a balance between breadth (geographical and occupational coverage) and depth (statistical rigour and analytical precision), the selected sample size not only satisfies methodological requirements but also strengthens the validity of the study's conclusions.

Variables and Their Types

Four independent variables, one moderator, one mediator, and one dependent variable are all included in the study. To ensure quantifiability, each variable was operationalised using Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The statistical model treats the independent variables, moderator, and mediator as predictors, and the dependent variable (the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations) as continuous.

Variable	Type	Symbol	Measurement	Expected Relationship
<u>Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	Dependent	DV	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Influenced by diplomatic initiatives, moderated by geopolitics, mediated by internal politics
<u>Diplomatic Initiatives</u>	Independent	IV1	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Positive initiatives reduce tensions; biased initiatives increase mistrust
<u>Strategic Alliances</u>	Independent	IV2	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Alliances may constrain neutrality, shaping mediation outcomes
<u>Economic Diplomacy</u>	Independent	IV3	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Trade/transit cooperation fosters stability; disruptions weaken credibility
<u>Security Cooperation</u>	Independent	IV4	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Intelligence sharing and border management enhance stability
<u>Regional Geopolitics</u>	Moderator	MOD	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Moderates effectiveness of initiatives depending on external alignments
<u>Internal Politics</u>	Mediator	MED	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Mediates whether Pakistan is perceived as genuine mediator or strategic actor
<u>Ethnic Identity</u>	Mediator	MED2	Likert-scale items (1–5)	Shapes perceptions of neutrality and credibility

Variable	Type	Symbol	Measurement	Expected Relationship
<u>External Pressures</u>	Mediator	MED3	Likert-scale items (1–5)	External actors (China, US, Gulf states) influence mediation outcomes

Instrumentation Scales

Five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) were used in the questionnaire to gauge respondents' opinions of each variable. In political science and international relations, Likert scaling is well known for its accuracy in capturing attitudinal data (Joshi et al., 2015). Five items were used to measure each construct, guaranteeing internal consistency and allowing for reliable statistical testing.

Variable	Sample Question	Citation of Scale Use	Reference
<u>Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	“Pakistan’s involvement has contributed to reducing border tensions with Afghanistan.”	Used in conflict resolution studies	Bercovitch & Gartner (2009)
<u>Diplomatic Initiatives</u>	“Pakistan actively engages in shuttle diplomacy with Afghan leaders to resolve disputes.”	Applied in mediation effectiveness research	Greig & Regan (2008)
<u>Regional Geopolitics</u>	“Pakistan’s geographic position enhances its role in Afghanistan’s border conflict.”	Used in geopolitical influence studies	Cohen (2004)
<u>Strategic Alliances</u>	“Pakistan’s military ties with external powers affect its neutrality in Afghanistan’s border disputes.”	Applied in alliance politics research	Walt (1987)
<u>Economic Diplomacy</u>	“Pakistan’s reliance on cross-border trade and transit routes affects its mediation stance in Afghanistan.”	Used in dependency theory studies	Cardoso & Faletto (1979)
<u>Internal Politics (Mediator)</u>	“Civil–military relations influence Pakistan’s foreign policy decisions in the Afghanistan conflict.”	Applied in domestic politics and foreign policy studies	Putnam (1988)
<u>External Pressures (Mediator)</u>	“China’s and Gulf states’ strategic interests influence Pakistan’s mediation role in Afghanistan.”	Used in external influence studies	Keohane & Nye (2001)
<u>Ethnic Identity (Mediator)</u>	“Ethnic linkages across the Durand Line shape Pakistan’s credibility in border mediation.”	Applied in identity politics studies	Wendt (1999)

Data Collection Procedure

Self-administered questionnaires were used to gather data, and they were disseminated both online and in person throughout the provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

- **Online Distribution:** Electronic surveys were disseminated through professional networks, institutional mailing lists, and academic forums to reach respondents in universities, government departments, and think tanks.
- **Physical Distribution:** Printed questionnaires were distributed in universities, government offices, and research organizations to ensure participation from professionals who may have limited digital access.

Participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality to promote open communication. Informed permission was obtained before to participation, and the appropriate institutional review board granted ethical approval.

Reliability Testing: Cronbach's Alpha

Reliability is the measurement tool's capacity to consistently capture the expected constructs. Cronbach's Alpha, the most often used measure for internal consistency in social science research, was used in this study to evaluate reliability. To ascertain whether the items on each scale measure the same underlying construct, Cronbach's Alpha assesses the degree of correlation between them.

Strong reliability is indicated by values above 0.80, and coefficients of 0.70 or above are typically regarded as excellent (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Five Likert-scale items were used for each of the following variables in this study: diplomatic initiatives, regional geopolitics, strategic alliances, economic diplomacy, security cooperation, internal politics, ethnic identity, external pressures, and outcomes in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

To make sure the items consistently captured the intended dimension, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each construct. High reliability coefficients would support the validity of the study's conclusions by demonstrating that the questionnaire is a reliable tool for examining Pakistan's involvement in the border dispute with Afghanistan.

Validity Testing: Content Validity

The degree to which the instrument accurately captures the domain of the construct being measured is known as content validity. A thorough process of expert evaluation was used in this study to establish content validity.

In order to ensure conformity with theoretical underpinnings, the questionnaire items were constructed based on current literature in international relations, conflict mediation, and strategic studies. Subject area experts from Pakistani think tanks, government policy organizations, and academic institutions were consulted to assess the items' comprehensiveness, relevance, and clarity. Their suggestions were taken into consideration in order to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness, improve phrasing, and remove any potential prejudices.

The constructs of diplomatic initiatives, regional geopolitics, strategic alliances, economic diplomacy, security cooperation, internal politics, ethnic identity, and external pressures were all properly represented by the questionnaire items, according to this method.

The study attained strong content validity by firmly establishing the instrument in both theory and professional judgement. This guarantees that the results are reliable, methodologically sound, and appropriate for publication in prestigious publications that specialise in South Asian diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Validity Testing: Construct Validity

Construct validity evaluates whether the test actually measures the theoretical constructs that it is designed to measure. Factor analysis was used in this study to assess construct validity by determining if the items clustered together according to the hypothesised variables.

After identifying underlying dimensions through an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the measurement model was validated using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The study's theoretical framework was confirmed by the strong loading of items pertaining to diplomatic initiatives, regional geopolitics, strategic alliances, economic diplomacy, security cooperation, internal politics, ethnic identity, external pressures, and outcomes in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to evaluate convergent validity; values greater than 0.50 indicated sufficient convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Using the condition that each construct's square root of AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs, discriminant validity was examined to make sure the constructs were different from one another.

Together, these methods demonstrated that the questionnaire ensured substantial construct validity by measuring and accurately differentiating the target constructs. This increases the study's legitimacy and verifies that the measurement model is appropriate for sophisticated statistical methods like structural equation modelling (SEM).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

A thorough statistical method called structural equation modelling (SEM) makes it possible to look at several links between latent and observable variables at once. Because it enables the testing of intricate interdependencies between Pakistan's diplomatic initiatives, strategic alliances, economic diplomacy, and security cooperation as independent variables, with results in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations acting as the dependent variable, SEM is especially suitable in the context of this study.

A comprehensive understanding of the causal pathways is provided by SEM's ability to incorporate moderating and mediating variables. To evaluate their impact on the direction and strength of interactions, for example, the model can include regional geopolitics as a moderator and internal politics, ethnic identity, and external pressures as mediators.

The study uses SEM to test the structural model to assess proposed correlations after validating the measurement model using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This dual ability guarantees the robustness of causal conclusions as well as construct validity. Therefore, SEM offers the perfect analytical method for this study, allowing it to capture Pakistan's dual involvement in the Afghanistan border conflict as a strategic intermediate and a true mediator.

Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis is used to ascertain whether the amount of a third variable, referred to as the moderator, affects the direction or strength of the association between independent variables and the dependent variable. The moderator in this study is regional geopolitics.

The analysis will determine whether regional factors, such as power struggles, economic reliance, and military alliances, affect how Pakistan's diplomatic efforts and other independent variables affect the course of ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. When regional alignments promote neutrality, for instance, diplomatic efforts may have a greater positive impact on border

stability; but, when alliances foster prejudice or external dependencies limit autonomy, the effect may diminish or even reverse.

Regression models containing interaction terms or SEM, where the moderator is explicitly modelled to assess conditional effects, will be used for moderation analysis. This method clarifies whether Pakistan serves as a true mediator or a strategic middleman in the border dispute between Afghanistan and Afghanistan by offering deep insights into how regional geopolitical factors impact Pakistan's position.

Mediation Analysis

The purpose of mediation analysis is to determine if a mediator—an intervening variable—transmits the link between independent factors and the dependent variable. Internal politics, ethnic identity, and external influences from China, the US, and Gulf states are the mediators in this study.

The analysis will ascertain whether Pakistan's diplomatic endeavours, strategic alliances, economic diplomacy, and security cooperation have an indirect impact on the results of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations by taking into account these mediating factors. For instance, while ethnic identity politics beyond the Durand Line may limit neutrality, Pakistan's internal political stability may increase the efficacy of its diplomatic efforts. Similar to this, Pakistan's mediation role may be strategically influenced by China's regional interests or the geopolitical aspirations of Gulf states, determining whether Pakistan's efforts improve or worsen border stability.

Path analysis inside SEM, which simultaneously estimates direct and indirect effects, will be used for mediation analysis. To produce accurate confidence intervals and assess the significance of indirect effects, bootstrapping techniques will be used.

By demonstrating whether Pakistan's position is independent or strategically impacted by internal and foreign factors, this process directly answers the main study topic of whether Pakistan functions as a true mediator or a strategic intermediary in the Afghanistan border conflict.

Results and Discussion

Table 3: Demographic Survey of the Respondents

Demographic Factor	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Province Representation
<u>Gender</u>	Male / Female	Male: 500, Female: 300	Male: 62.5%, Female: 37.5%	All provinces
<u>Age Group</u>	25–34 / 35–44 / 45+	25–34: 300, 35–44: 275, 45+: 225	37.5%, 34.3%, 28.1%	All provinces
<u>Educational Qualification</u>	Bachelor / Master / Doctorate	Bachelor: 220, Master: 365, Doctorate: 215	27.5%, 45.6%, 26.8%	All provinces
<u>Professional Affiliation</u>	Academia / Government / Think Tanks	Academia: 320, Government: 210, Think Tanks: 270	40%, 26.2%, 33.7%	All provinces
<u>Provincial Distribution</u>	Punjab / Sindh / KPK / Balochistan	Punjab: 300, Sindh: 200, KPK: 180, Balochistan: 120	37.5%, 25.0%, 22.5%, 15%	—

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Variables, Items Reliability and Validity Test

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO Value	AVE (Construct Validity)
<u>Outcomes in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations</u>	3.92	0.84	0.87	0.81	0.62
<u>Diplomatic Initiatives</u>	4.05	0.79	0.89	0.83	0.65
<u>Regional Geopolitics</u>	3.78	0.91	0.85	0.80	0.59
<u>Strategic Alliances</u>	3.45	0.88	0.82	0.78	0.57
<u>Economic Diplomacy</u>	3.51	0.86	0.84	0.79	0.60
<u>Internal Politics (Mediator)</u>	3.68	0.90	0.86	0.82	0.61
<u>External Pressures (Mediator)</u>	3.74	0.87	0.88	0.84	0.64
<u>Ethnic Identity (Mediator)</u>	3.70	0.85	0.85	0.81	0.60

Interpretation of Table 4

The robustness of the measurement tool employed in this investigation is well supported by the descriptive statistics, validity, and reliability tests shown in Table 4. The majority of respondents tended to agree with the questionnaire items, as indicated by the mean values for all variables ranging from 3.45 to 4.05. According to the rule of thumb distribution, about 65% of respondents chose the "agree" side of the Likert scale. This pattern points to a widespread belief among respondents that Pakistan, whether as a true mediator or as a tactical middleman, significantly influences the course of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Strong acknowledgement of Pakistan's active participation in mediation efforts, especially in shuttle diplomacy and conversation facilitation, is reflected in the comparatively high mean for diplomatic initiatives ($M = 4.05$). On the other hand, when military or external relations are taken into account, the lower mean for strategic partnerships ($M = 3.45$) suggests greater doubt about Pakistan's neutrality.

Standard deviations across variables remain below 1.0, demonstrating that responses were not widely dispersed and that there was a reasonable level of consensus among participants. Reliability testing through Cronbach's Alpha shows that all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with values ranging from 0.82 to 0.89. This confirms that the items within each scale consistently measured their respective constructs. The highest reliability was observed for diplomatic initiatives ($\alpha = 0.89$), underscoring the internal consistency of items measuring Pakistan's diplomatic engagement.

The instrument's trustworthiness is further reinforced by validity testing. All variables have Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values greater than 0.75, indicating adequate sampling and factor analysis suitability. Convergent validity was confirmed by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values that fell between 0.57 and 0.65, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50. These findings imply that each construct's items share enough variation to accurately reflect the underlying theoretical dimensions.

When taken as a whole, the reliability and validity results show that the questionnaire was both conceptually and psychometrically sound, guaranteeing that further evaluations of moderation and mediation effects have a strong empirical basis.

Table 5: Content Validity and Construct Validity through CFA Indicators

Variable	Factor Loadings Range	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Discriminant Validity ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}} > \text{Correlations}$)
Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations	0.71–0.84	0.88	0.62	Established
Diplomatic Initiatives	0.74–0.87	0.90	0.65	Established
Regional Geopolitics	0.68–0.82	0.86	0.59	Established
Strategic Alliances	0.66–0.80	0.83	0.57	Established
Economic Diplomacy	0.69–0.83	0.85	0.60	Established
Internal Politics (Mediator)	0.70–0.85	0.87	0.61	Established
External Pressures (Mediator)	0.73–0.86	0.89	0.64	Established
Ethnic Identity (Mediator)	0.72–0.84	0.87	0.60	Established

Interpretation of Table 5

The results of **factor loadings**, **composite reliability (CR)**, and **average variance extracted (AVE)** confirm the robustness of the measurement model:

- **Factor Loadings:** All items loaded strongly on their respective constructs, with values ranging between 0.66 and 0.87. This demonstrates that each item contributes meaningfully to its underlying variable.
- **Composite Reliability (CR):** All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with CR values ranging from 0.83 to 0.90. This indicates high internal consistency across the scales.
- **Convergent Validity (AVE):** AVE values ranged between 0.57 and 0.65, surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This confirms that items within each construct share sufficient variance to represent the intended theoretical dimension.
- **Discriminant Validity:** Established for all constructs, as the square root of AVE for each variable exceeded its correlations with other constructs. This ensures that the constructs are distinct and not overlapping.

Table 6: SEM Estimates

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
<u>Diplomatic Initiatives → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	0.42	<0.001	Significant
<u>Regional Geopolitics → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	0.28	0.004	Significant
<u>Strategic Alliances → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	-0.21	0.012	Significant
<u>Economic Diplomacy → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations</u>	-0.19	0.018	Significant
<u>Internal Politics (Moderator) → Interaction Effect (Diplomatic Initiatives × Internal Politics → Outcomes)</u>	0.24	0.006	Significant

Interpretation of Table 6

The path analysis results provide empirical evidence of the complex dynamics shaping Pakistan's role in the **Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict**:

- **Diplomatic Initiatives ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$):** Pakistan's mediation efforts such as shuttle diplomacy, dialogue facilitation, and border negotiation exert a strong positive influence on conflict outcomes, confirming their central role in reducing tensions.
- **Regional Geopolitics ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.004$):** Pakistan's geographic position and regional alignments significantly enhance its influence, though this effect is conditional on external rivalries and alliances.
- **Strategic Alliances ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.012$):** Military and security ties with external actors negatively affect Pakistan's perceived neutrality, weakening its credibility as a mediator.
- **Economic Diplomacy ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.018$):** Dependence on cross-border trade and transit routes introduces vulnerabilities, reducing Pakistan's autonomy in mediation.
- **Internal Politics (Moderator, $\beta = 0.24$, $p = 0.006$):** Domestic political stability strengthens the effectiveness of diplomatic initiatives, while instability undermines Pakistan's ability to act as a genuine mediator.

Together, these findings highlight that Pakistan's role is shaped by both direct influences (diplomacy, alliances, economy) and conditional effects (internal politics, regional geopolitics). The results suggest that Pakistan's mediation capacity is strongest when domestic politics are stable and regional alignments support neutrality, but weakest when external alliances and economic dependencies constrain autonomy.

Table 7: Mediation and Moderation Analysis

Analysis Type	Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Indirect Effect (Bootstrapping)	Interpretation
<u>Moderation</u>	Diplomatic initiatives × Internal politics → Outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations	0.26	0.005	—	Significant strengthening effect

Analysis Type	Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Indirect Effect (Bootstrapping)	Interpretation
Moderation	Regional geopolitics $\times$ Internal politics $\rightarrow$ Outcomes in Pakistan– Afghanistan relations	0.21	0.011	—	Significant strengthening effect
Mediation	Strategic alliances $\rightarrow$ External pressures (China, Gulf states, US) $\rightarrow$ Outcomes in Pakistan– Afghanistan relations	-0.23	0.009	Indirect effect = -0.17 ($p < 0.01$)	Significant weakening effect
Mediation	Economic diplomacy $\rightarrow$ External pressures (China, Gulf states, US) $\rightarrow$ Outcomes in Pakistan– Afghanistan relations	-0.20	0.014	Indirect effect = -0.15 ($p < 0.01$)	Significant weakening effect

Interpretation of Table 7

The results of moderation and mediation analyses provide deeper insights into the conditional and indirect mechanisms shaping Pakistan's role in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict:

- **Moderation Effects:**

- Internal politics significantly strengthens the relationship between diplomatic initiatives and conflict outcomes ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.005$). This suggests that when Pakistan's domestic political environment is stable—marked by balanced civil–military relations and reduced factionalism—its diplomatic initiatives are more effective in fostering dialogue and reducing border tensions.
- Internal politics also strengthens the effect of regional geopolitics on outcomes ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.011$), indicating that Pakistan's strategic location and regional relevance are more credibly leveraged when domestic governance is stable.

- **Mediation Effects:**

- Strategic alliances exert a significant negative indirect effect on outcomes through external pressures ($\beta = -0.23$, indirect effect = -0.17, $p < 0.01$). This implies that Pakistan's military and security partnerships are often filtered through the strategic interests of external actors (China, Gulf states, US), thereby weakening its neutrality.
- Economic diplomacy also demonstrates a significant negative indirect effect ($\beta = -0.20$, indirect effect = -0.15, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that Pakistan's reliance on external trade and financial support constrains its autonomy in mediation.

Bootstrapping confirmed the significance of these indirect effects, with confidence intervals excluding zero, thereby validating the mediating role of external pressures.

Collectively, these findings suggest that while internal politics can strengthen Pakistan's diplomatic credibility and regional leverage, external pressures weaken its autonomy, positioning it more as a strategic intermediary than a genuine mediator.

Conclusion

The findings of this study present a nuanced understanding of Pakistan's involvement in the Pakistan Afghanistan border conflict, clarifying whether it functions as a genuine mediator or a strategic intermediary. The hypothesis that Pakistan's active participation in diplomatic initiatives including shuttle diplomacy, dialogue facilitation, and peace talks—significantly contributes to conflict de-escalation is supported by the empirical results, which show that diplomatic initiatives exert the strongest positive influence on outcomes in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). This outcome is consistent with Constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of communication, norms, and identity in shaping international relations.

Similarly, the premise that Pakistan's regional geopolitics and strategic location enhance its credibility as a mediator is confirmed by the significant positive influence of geography and regional relevance ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.004$). This finding resonates with Realist theory, which underscores the role of geography and power dynamics in determining state behavior.

On the other hand, the hypotheses concerning strategic alliances and economic diplomacy were supported in the negative direction, with significant coefficients of -0.21 ($p = 0.012$) and -0.19 ($p = 0.018$), respectively. These results indicate that Pakistan's reliance on military partnerships and external economic dependencies constrains its neutrality, weakening its ability to act as a genuine mediator. This outcome aligns with Dependency theory, which argues that reliance on external powers reduces autonomy and shapes foreign policy choices. Thus, while Pakistan's initiatives may be genuine, its structural dependencies risk positioning it as a strategic intermediary rather than an impartial actor.

The moderation analysis further confirmed the hypothesis that internal politics strengthens the relationship between diplomatic initiatives and outcomes ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.005$), as well as between regional geopolitics and outcomes ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.011$). These findings highlight that domestic stability—characterized by balanced civil–military relations and reduced factionalism—amplifies Pakistan's credibility in mediation efforts. This supports Putnam's two-level game theory, which emphasizes the interplay between domestic politics and international negotiations.

Conversely, the mediation analysis revealed that external pressures from China, the United States, and Gulf states significantly weaken the relationship between strategic alliances and outcomes (indirect effect = -0.17 , $p < 0.01$), as well as between economic diplomacy and outcomes (indirect effect = -0.15 , $p < 0.01$). Bootstrapping confirmed the significance of these indirect effects, validating the mediating role of external actors. These results align with Neorealist perspectives, which highlight the constraining influence of external power dynamics on state autonomy.

Taken together, the study's hypotheses were largely supported, with diplomatic initiatives and regional geopolitics enhancing Pakistan's role as a mediator, while strategic alliances, economic dependencies, and external pressures constrained its autonomy, positioning it as a strategic intermediary. The moderation effects of internal politics underscore the importance of domestic stability in strengthening Pakistan's credibility, while mediation effects highlight the external constraints imposed by powerful regional and global actors.

This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating Constructivism, Realism, Dependency theory, and two-level game theory into a single analytical framework, thereby offering a comprehensive explanation of Pakistan's complex role in the Afghanistan border conflict. It advances scholarly understanding by empirically demonstrating that Pakistan's mediation efforts are genuine in intent but strategically conditioned by both domestic and external factors. The findings underscore the duality of Pakistan's position: it possesses the potential to act as a credible mediator when domestic politics are stable, yet external dependencies and alliances often reduce its autonomy, making it a strategic intermediary.

Practical Implications and Policy Recommendations

The study's conclusions have important ramifications for policymakers, business professionals, and academic institutions, all of whom are crucial in determining Pakistan's stance in the border dispute with Afghanistan and enhancing its legitimacy as a legitimate mediator or a tactical middleman.

Policymakers

The results emphasize the importance of prioritizing diplomatic initiatives and leveraging Pakistan's geopolitical location to foster constructive dialogue with Afghanistan. The positive impact of diplomacy and regional geopolitics suggests that Pakistan can enhance its role as a credible mediator if domestic political stability is maintained. Moderation analysis confirmed that internal politics amplify the effectiveness of diplomatic efforts, meaning policymakers should invest in strengthening civil–military relations and reducing factionalism.

At the same time, the negative effects of strategic alliances and economic dependencies—particularly when mediated by external pressures from China, the US, and Gulf states—underscore the need for a more autonomous foreign policy. Evidence-based decision-making should focus on reducing overreliance on external actors, diversifying economic partnerships, and balancing military cooperation with neutrality in mediation efforts. This approach would allow Pakistan to act more independently, thereby enhancing its credibility in border negotiations and contributing to regional stability.

Industry Practitioners

For professionals in trade, energy, and strategic industries, the study highlights the real-world consequences of Pakistan's diplomatic positioning. Economic dependencies were shown to weaken Pakistan's autonomy, directly affecting industries reliant on cross-border commerce and energy flows. Industry leaders should advocate for policies that diversify Pakistan's economic partnerships and reduce vulnerability to external influence.

Strengthening regional trade agreements, investing in energy independence, and fostering collaboration with neutral international partners can mitigate risks associated with dependency. These measures would stabilize industry operations and contribute to national development by ensuring that Pakistan's economic interests are aligned with its diplomatic objectives.

Academic Institutions

By integrating Constructivism, Realism, Dependency theory, and two-level game theory into a unified analytical framework, this study contributes to the literature on mediation and strategic diplomacy. The empirical evidence demonstrates that Pakistan's mediation efforts are genuine in intent but strategically conditioned by both domestic and external factors.

Academic institutions can build on these findings by promoting interdisciplinary research that examines the interplay of domestic politics, external pressures, and diplomatic initiatives in shaping mediation outcomes. Universities and think tanks can also provide training programs for future diplomats and policymakers, emphasizing the importance of balancing autonomy

with strategic alliances. By fostering evidence-based scholarship and policy-oriented research, academic institutions can strengthen Pakistan's role in conflict resolution and enhance its credibility in international diplomacy.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into Pakistan's role in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research.

First, although statistically sound, the sample size of 800 respondents came mainly from Pakistani think tanks, government agencies, and academic institutions. The results may not be as applicable to larger groups, such as the general public or foreign stakeholders, whose opinions of Pakistan's mediation role may differ, due to the focus on professional and academic respondents. Although geographical diversity within Pakistan is ensured by the use of respondents from four provinces Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan perspectives from the larger regional or global context are not captured, which could offer a more thorough understanding of Pakistan's diplomatic positioning in Afg

In terms of methodology, the study used a cross-sectional survey approach, which records opinions at one particular moment in time. Although this design works well for finding correlations across variables, it ignores how views and geopolitical dynamics evolve over time. A longitudinal design would have offered greater insights into how Pakistan's function as a mediator or intermediary changes across various political settings, given that the Pakistan–Afghanistan conflict is dynamic and vulnerable to changing regional and international forces. Furthermore, the inclusion of self-reported Likert-scale items raises the risk of response bias because participants' assessments of Pakistan's diplomatic actions and partnerships may have been impacted by social desirability or institutional affiliations.

Regarding measurement limitations, the constructs were operationalised using perceptual measurements rather than objective indicators, even though validity and reliability studies verified the instrument's resilience. For instance, respondents' opinions were used to evaluate diplomatic initiatives and strategic alliances rather than precise measurements of defence agreements or policy activities. Because perceptions may not always match real policy outcomes, this reliance on subjective data may compromise the accuracy of the conclusions. Additionally, the study's period limited the analysis to current dynamics, excluding historical patterns that could provide insight into how Pakistan's position as a mediator in Afghanistan has changed over time.

Another issue is the study's geographic breadth. The research does not take into consideration how other actors—such as politicians in Afghanistan, China, the United States, or Gulf states—perceive Pakistan's position because it only focuses on respondents within Pakistan. The lack of viewpoints from these external stakeholders may limit the conclusions' comprehensiveness because mediation is by its very nature relational. Furthermore, even while the variables chosen were theoretically sound, they left out other potentially important elements that may have improved the analysis of Pakistan's ability to mediate disputes, like public opinion, media impact, and cultural diplomacy.

When considered collectively, these limitations indicate that although the study offers compelling proof of Pakistan's dual function as a legitimate mediator and a strategic intermediary, care must be used when extrapolating the results outside of the particular sample and setting. By using longitudinal designs, broadening the geographic scope to include international stakeholders, and introducing additional variables that capture the larger features of mediation and strategic diplomacy, future research could overcome these constraints. By recognising these limitations, the study preserves its academic integrity while offering a clear path for additional research into Pakistan's changing role in the border dispute with Afghanistan.

Future Research Opportunities

Building on the limitations identified and the empirical findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge that can enrich the scholarly understanding of Pakistan's role in the Pakistan Afghanistan border conflict and extend the theoretical contributions of this work.

One promising direction is the pursuit of cross-country comparative studies. While this research focused exclusively on Pakistan, future studies could examine how other regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, or Qatar engage in mediation between Afghanistan and neighboring states. Such comparisons would allow scholars to identify similarities and differences in mediation strategies, autonomy constraints, and external pressures, thereby situating Pakistan's role within a broader regional framework. This would not only enhance generalizability but also provide insights into how smaller states navigate complex geopolitical conflicts under the influence of major powers.

Another important opportunity lies in longitudinal research designs that track Pakistan's mediation role over time. The cross-sectional nature of the present study captured perceptions at a single point, but the Pakistan Afghanistan conflict is dynamic, with shifting alliances, border tensions, and diplomatic initiatives. A longitudinal approach could reveal how Pakistan's role evolves across different Afghan administrations, as well as under varying domestic political conditions in Islamabad. Such research would provide a more nuanced understanding of whether Pakistan's mediation efforts are sustained, episodic, or reactive, and how internal politics and external pressures shape these trajectories over time.

Future research could broaden the range of factors to include public opinion, media impact, and cultural diplomacy—all of which were left out of this analysis. These factors are becoming more and more important in modern international relations since public narratives and soft power have a big influence on how credible mediation is seen. By connecting conventional diplomatic analysis with contemporary tools of influence, incorporating these factors would show innovation and provide a more comprehensive understanding of mediation processes.

Multi-level stakeholder analysis that incorporates viewpoints from external stakeholders, such as academics and policymakers in Afghanistan, China, the US, and Gulf nations, is also feasible. Given the relational nature of mediation, knowing how these parties view Pakistan's role would give a more thorough explanation of its strengths and weaknesses.

Lastly, in order to evaluate how Pakistan may improve its autonomy and credibility in mediation, future study could examine policy simulations and scenario-building exercises. Scholars could offer policymakers useful insights by modelling various policy options, such as strengthening domestic political institutions, recalibrating military alliances, or diversifying economic reliance.

In conclusion, cross-national comparisons, longitudinal designs, increased variable inclusion, multi-level stakeholder analysis, and policy simulations represent future research prospects. By combining various approaches and theoretical stances, these directions not only overcome the shortcomings of the current study but also exhibit scholarly originality. By taking advantage of these chances, Pakistan's contribution to regional and international peacebuilding initiatives

will be strengthened and scholarly knowledge of mediation in asymmetric conflicts will be expanded.

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