



Pakistan's Middle Power Moment and the Re-Internationalization of Kashmir in the 2025 Polycrisis

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Abstract

In August 2019, India revoked Article 370, bifurcated Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories, and reframed what had been a bilateral dispute under the Shimla Agreement (1972) as a settled internal constitutional matter, a shift from enforced bilateralism to enforced unilateralism that effectively removed Pakistan as a relevant diplomatic party. Six years later, a convergence of five geopolitical crises across 2025-26 appears to have partially disrupted this framing in ways that no amount of Pakistani diplomatic advocacy had managed in the intervening period.

This paper examines whether those developments produced a structurally significant re-internationalization of the Kashmir

dispute. Its central argument is that Pakistan temporarily performed middle-power functions, mediation, agenda-setting, and coalition facilitation, during the 2025-26 regional polycrisis, enabling limited re-entry of Kashmir into international crisis-management discourse. However, a 'convertibility paradox' appears to constrain the exploitation of these gains: the neutrality that generated Pakistan's mediatory credibility is incompatible with the partisan posture that sustained Kashmir advocacy demands. Applying the behavioural variant of middle power theory alongside the polycrisis concept and the paper's original concept of 'structural vacancy,' the analysis uses qualitative process-tracing and frame analysis of diplomatic communiques and multilateral forum outcomes from April 2025 to April 2026 to assess this tension. Five policy implications are developed. The paper's original contributions are the structural vacancy concept and the convertibility paradox.

Keywords: *Kashmir, Middle Power Diplomacy, Polycrisis, Pakistan Foreign Policy, Operation Sindoor, Structural Vacancy, Re-internationalization, India-Pakistan Relations, Trump Administration, Multipolar Order.*

Theoretical Framework

Three complementary frameworks structure this paper's argument: middle power theory, the polycrisis concept, and the concept of 'structural vacancy' proposed here as an original contribution to IR

theory. Middle power theory helps explain why Pakistan's specific behavioural choices in 2025-26 appear to have generated credibility disproportionate to its material standing. The polycrisis concept helps explain why those choices were structurally available. And structural vacancy illuminates both the origin and the fragility of the leverage they may have produced. Used alone, each framework captures only a partial picture.

Middle Power Theory: Applied Functionally

Conventional middle power scholarship defines states positionally, as those ranking between great and small powers in material capabilities. The behavioural turn, most rigorously associated with Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal's 1993 work *Relocating Middle Powers*, reoriented the field around conduct: catalyst behaviour (agenda-setting), facilitator behaviour (coalition-building), and managerial behaviour (norm development).¹ These behaviours are expressed through niche diplomacy, the selective concentration of limited state resources in specific issue areas where returns are disproportionate.²

Jordaan's influential 2003 typology distinguishes traditional middle powers (stable, wealthy, liberal-democratic states sustaining the

¹ Richard H. Cooper, Kim Richard Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 19–24.

² Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers*, 24.

existing international order) from emerging ones (semi-peripheral, recently democratized, often ambivalent toward that order).³ Pakistan fits neither category. Its institutional fragility disqualifies it from the first; its lack of a coherent regional-hegemonic trajectory disqualifies it from the second. Ungerer's behavioural formulation is therefore more useful for this paper's purposes: middle power status can be earned through conduct , persuading, mediating, norm-building , rather than through material attributes alone.⁴ This paper applies that lens functionally, asking not whether Pakistan *is* a middle power in any settled classificatory sense, but whether it *performed* middle-power functions during the 2025 polycrisis and whether those functions appear to have generated measurable returns for the Kashmir question.

The Polycrisis Concept

Adam Tooze popularised the term 'polycrisis' in his 2022 *Financial Times* essay, arguing that when multiple disparate shocks interact, the aggregate harm tends to exceed the sum of what each crisis would produce in isolation.⁵ The Cascade Institute's formulation is more

³Eduard Jordaan, "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers," *Politikon* 30, no. 2 (2003): 165-70.

⁴Carl Ungerer, "The Middle Power Concept in Australian Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53, no. 4 (2007): 540.

⁵Adam Tooze, "Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis," *Financial Times*, 28 October 2022. For a critical response, see also Alex de Waal, "Defining the Crisis

precise: 'the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects.' De Waal (2025) cautions that the term risks substituting empirical profusion for structural explanation.⁶ That caution is acknowledged here: the polycrisis framework is used not to claim equivalence across all crises, but to foreground their causal interaction, the mechanism by which each of Pakistan's diplomatic engagements in 2025-26 may have produced assets that made the next one possible.⁷

Applied at the regional scale, the paper identifies a 'South Asian-Middle Eastern polycrisis corridor' in 2025-26, comprising the Pahalgam attack, Operation Sindoor, the unresolved Gaza conflict, the US-Iran war, and the erosion of US-India trust under Trump 2.0. An additional dimension warrants noting: Pakistan's minerals diplomacy, centred on the Reko Diq copper-gold project and reinforced by US interest in critical supply chain diversification, appears to have given Islamabad economic leverage in Washington

in Polycrisis: Between Structural Force and Perception," *Conflict Research Programme Blog, London School of Economics*, September 11 2025, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2025/09/11/defining-the-crisis-in-polycrisis-between-structural-force-and-perception/>.

⁶ Thomas Homer-Dixon and Scott Janzwood, "Polycrisis: A New Term for a New Phenomenon?" *Working Paper 2022-4* (Victoria, BC: Cascade Institute, 2022), 5–7.

⁷ Gracelin Baskaran, "Minerals Diplomacy Meets Market Reality: The Case of Pakistan," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/minerals-diplomacy-meets-market-reality-case-pakistan>

that complemented its security-based relevance.⁸ These crises and opportunities did not unfold independently; they likely interacted, each generating diplomatic capital that Pakistan applied to the next.

Structural Vacancy

'Structural vacancy' denotes a condition in the international system in which multiple great powers are simultaneously unavailable, unwilling, or structurally disqualified from performing a specific mediatory function, leaving it unoccupied until a suitably positioned secondary state fills it. Two distinctions clarify the concept. It differs from a 'power vacuum', which implies instability arising from the absence of power itself, in being a functional condition: what is vacant is a specific diplomatic role, not an entire power position. It also differs from the political opportunity structures theorized by Tarrow, McAdam, and Bloom, which are demand-side conditions that enable actors to pursue pre-existing goals.⁹ Structural vacancy is supply-side: a functional role in the international system has no incumbent, regardless of whether any state has been seeking it.

⁸World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report 2023* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2023), 11.

⁹Jack M. Bloom, "Political Opportunity Structure, Contentious Social Movements, and State-Based Organizations," *Social Science History* 38, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2014): 359–88.

Pakistan's emergence as the primary US-Iran communication channel in early 2026 illustrates the concept. Russia was absorbed in Ukraine; China's alignment with Tehran plausibly disqualified it in Washington's eyes; Gulf states had become belligerents; and Turkey lacked the sustained rapport with the Trump administration that Pakistan had cultivated since May 2025. The vacancy existed prior to Pakistani initiative; Pakistan's contribution appears to have been recognition of the opportunity and speed of engagement.

Structural vacancy also generates what this paper calls the 'convertibility paradox.' The qualities that likely made Pakistan the preferred occupant of the vacancy, neutrality, demonstrated trustworthiness, responsible statesmanship, are antithetical to the partisan posture effective advocacy on a contested territorial claim requires. A mediator's credibility rests on being perceived as stake-free; a claimant's posture is defined by that stake. Pakistan cannot sustain both simultaneously, and the sequencing challenge between these identities is the central strategic problem the paper examines.

Synthesis

Together, the three frameworks suggest the following model: when a regional polycrisis generates multiple simultaneous structural vacancies, and a secondary state's positioning renders it the most viable occupant, the act of occupying those vacancies may produce behavioural credibility that is , under specific, demanding conditions

, partially transferable to issue-specific advocacy, including on frozen disputes like Kashmir. Whether those conditions obtained in 2025-26 is an empirical question. The convertibility paradox suggests the transfer is, at best, partial and conditional.

Literature Review

Middle Power Theory: Debates and Gaps

The behavioural middle power literature has generated productive internal debates bearing directly on the Pakistani case. One concerns the sustainability of middle-power status: behavioural scholars note that niche diplomacy may be episodic, contingent on favorable systemic conditions rather than embedded in durable material foundations. Carr (1988) and Chapnick (1999) observed that classical middle powers, Canada, Australia, Norway, could sustain their niche roles over decades partly because their domestic legitimacy and alliance positions made their conduct predictable. States now claiming equivalent status through single-crisis mediation initiatives have found their credibility erodes rapidly when alignment shifts or domestic instability intervenes. This episodic-versus-durable distinction is central to Pakistan's case.

A second debate concerns regime type. Classical middle power scholarship was developed largely with reference to liberal democracies whose international credibility rested partly on domestic

legitimacy. Whether the behavioural framework travels intact to states with contested democratic credentials remains an open question.¹⁰ Ghulam Ali's edited volume (2022) represents the most sustained attempt to apply middle power concepts to Pakistan specifically, but does not engage systematically with behavioural criteria or with whether middle-power-like conduct in a single-crisis context constitutes a durable reclassification.¹¹ The present paper attempts to address that gap.

Pakistan in International Relations Scholarship

Pakistan occupies an awkward position in IR theory. The dominant 'weak state' literature, articulated through the work of Hasan Askari Rizvi and applied to Pakistan by a range of Western security analysts, treats institutional fragility as a structural constraint precluding coherent long-term foreign policy. Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy's 'pivotal state' framework offers a more generous reading, but it explains Pakistan's significance primarily through geography and the potential costs of its failure for regional stability, not through independent diplomatic agency.¹²

¹¹Ghulam Ali, ed., *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies, 2022), 3–17.

¹² Adeela Ahmed, "The Contours of Pakistan's Relations with Russia," in *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics*, ed. Ghulam Ali (London: Routledge, 2022), 181–192.

Neither framework accounts well for the pattern this paper examines. The weak state thesis struggles to explain how a state with severe internal divisions managed to sustain diplomatic engagement across five simultaneous great-power processes. The pivotal state framework lacks the vocabulary for a state that moves from geopolitical object to diplomatic subject. Hussain's concept of the 'convulsive environment', sudden systemic changes compelling rapid foreign policy adaptation, comes closest to capturing the conditions of 2025,¹³ and Yusuf's work on US crisis mediation dynamics provides the most empirically rigorous foundation for understanding what occurred in May 2025.¹⁴

Kashmir Diplomacy: From Multilateral to Unilateral

The international status of Kashmir has passed through three distinct phases. From 1947 to 1972, the dispute was genuinely multilateral: UN Security Council resolutions of 1948 and 1949 called for a UN-supervised plebiscite, and Pakistan successfully maintained Kashmir on the international agenda as an unresolved decolonization question. The Simla Agreement of 1972 closed this chapter by committing both parties to resolving all disputes, including Kashmir, through bilateral

¹³Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Convulsive Environment and Choices," *Strategic Studies* 30, nos. 1–2 (2010): 1–5.

¹⁴Moeed Yusuf, *Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: U.S. Crisis Management in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), chaps. 3–4.

negotiations, giving India a legal instrument to deflect international engagement, which it deployed consistently for the next five decades.

The third phase began in August 2019. India's revocation of Article 370 was not a reaffirmation of the bilateral Simla framework; it was a unilateral act that removed the dispute from even bilateral discourse, reframing Kashmir as a settled internal constitutional matter. Pakistan ceased to be a relevant party in India's framing altogether. Yusuf's account of the Pahalgam crisis is the most authoritative empirical source on what this phase looked like in diplomatic practice.¹⁵ Chatham House's concurrent analysis identified the resulting duality: Pakistan's 'enduring credibility problem' alongside India's 'backfiring isolation strategy'.¹⁶ The gap this paper addresses is the absence of systematic examination of whether the events of 2025 disrupted this third phase structurally or merely temporarily.

The Polycrisis Literature: Application and Sources

The polycrisis concept has been applied primarily to global-scale phenomena, climate disruption, financial contagion, pandemic

¹⁵Moeed W. Yusuf, "Brokered Bargaining in Nuclear South Asia: U.S. Mediation in the India-Pakistan Pahalgam Crisis," *Arms Control Today* 55, no. 6 (July/August 2025): 6-12.

¹⁶ Farzana Shaikh, "Rising Tensions Resurface Pakistan's Credibility Problem—and India's Backfiring Policy on Kashmir," *Chatham House*, 9 May 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/rising-tensions-resurface-pakistans-credibility-problem-and-indias-backfiring-policy>.

spillover. Its application to regional diplomatic dynamics, and specifically to how simultaneous crises in South Asia and the Middle East may have interacted to redistribute diplomatic relevance among secondary states, has not previously been attempted in the peer-reviewed literature.¹⁷ The present paper makes that application, while accepting de Waal's (2025) caution against substituting empirical profusion for structural explanation.¹⁸

A note on sources is necessary. Because the empirical subject includes events from 2025-26, no peer-reviewed literature on Operation Sindoor, the Gaza Summit, or the US-Iran war yet exists. News sources, policy commentary, and official communiques are treated throughout as *primary data* for frame analysis, a standard approach in real-time conflict studies, rather than as secondary academic authority. Entman's (1993) framing theory governs the coding procedure detailed in Section 3.¹⁹ All theoretical claims draw on established peer-reviewed scholarship.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative single-case process-tracing design situated within an interpretive IR framework. Process tracing

¹⁹Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.

reconstructs the causal chain between Pakistan's diplomatic engagements in 2025-26 and observable outcomes bearing on Kashmir's international status, tracing a sequence from the Pahalgam attack (22 April 2025) through Operation Sindoor (7-10 May), the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Defence Agreement (September 2025), the Gaza Summit (October 2025), and the US-Iran facilitation (March-April 2026). At each node, the analysis asks: did this event plausibly generate the diplomatic conditions for the next? This tests the polycrisis entanglement hypothesis rather than asserting it.

Frame analysis complements process tracing in Section 5. Following Entman (1993), statements are coded as reflecting the 'India's internal matter frame' when they describe Kashmir as a settled constitutional question and treat Pakistani advocacy as interference in Indian domestic affairs. Statements are coded as reflecting the 'unresolved international dispute frame' when they describe Kashmir as an open territorial question warranting third-party engagement or multilateral resolution. The corpus comprises official diplomatic statements (Pakistani MOFA, Indian MEA, US State Department), multilateral communiques (OIC, UN General Assembly records), and policy analysis from established institutions (Chatham House, Stimson Center). The study period is April 2025 to April 2026.

The paper also applies a five-level internationalization hierarchy (developed in Section 5) to assess where exactly the observed frame shifts register on the spectrum from media attention to formal

negotiation architecture. This addresses a key methodological risk: equating short-term diplomatic visibility with structural re-internationalization, which are not the same condition.

Two scope limitations are acknowledged. First, the study covers diplomatic-level outcomes; ground-level conditions in IIOJK and AJK fall outside its empirical boundary. Second, the reliance on process tracing without elite interviews means causal mechanisms are inferred from observable outcomes rather than directly confirmed. These limitations point toward productive future research directions.

Table 1: Frame Analysis Coding Framework

Category	Source Type	Coding Criterion	Date Range
India's Internal Matter	Indian MEA statements, UNSC interventions	Describes Kashmir as settled constitutional matter; treats Pakistani advocacy as interference	April 2025, April 2026
Unresolved International Dispute	US, OIC, UN statements	Describes Kashmir as open territorial question; references third-party facilitation or UNSC resolutions	April 2025, April 2026
Crisis-Management Reference	Media commentary, policy analysis	Links Kashmir to nuclear risk or regional instability without resolving status question	April 2025, April 2026

The 2025 Inflection Points: A Chronological Mapping

Overview

Five causally entangled inflection points appear to define Pakistan's diplomatic trajectory in 2025-26: the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor (April-May 2025); Trump's re-hyphenation and ceasefire mediation (May 2025); the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Defence Agreement (September 2025); the Gaza International Peace Summit (October 2025); and Pakistan's facilitation of US-Iran talks (March-April 2026). Each is examined below in chronological order.

Pahalgam, Operation Sindoor, and the Framing Race (April-May 2025)

On 22 April 2025, gunmen attacked tourists in the Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir, killing 26 people. India attributed the attack to The Resistance Front, a proxy of Lashkar-e-Taiba, and launched Operation Sindoor on 6 May. The ceasefire came on 10 May. From the standpoint of Kashmir's international status, the confrontation cut in two directions simultaneously.

The credibility damage to Pakistan was immediate. Pakistan's Defence Minister, in widely circulated media appearances, appeared to acknowledge Pakistan's historical links to militant groups, compounding Islamabad's longstanding credibility problem with

states skeptical of its counter-terrorism commitments.²⁰ India's diplomatic apparatus framed the confrontation as a counter-terrorism operation within sovereign Indian territory, the framing most consistent with its post-2019 position that Kashmir is an internal matter.²¹

Yet Pakistan's framing response appears to have moved faster than India anticipated. Between April 22 and May 6, Islamabad reportedly facilitated dozens of engagements with US policymakers, compared to a markedly smaller number by India.²² This asymmetry in the speed at which the two states converted events into internationally legible frames shaped the ceasefire's diplomatic context.²³ By the time India had consolidated its messaging, the dominant frame in Washington had already shifted toward nuclear escalation risk, a framing that inherently requires treating India and Pakistan as co-equal parties to a dangerous confrontation, not as a sovereign state conducting a domestic operation.²⁴ The Pahalgam crisis appears to have returned

²¹Yusuf, "Brokered Bargaining in Nuclear South Asia," 7-8.

²²Abid Hussain, "Pakistan Pitches 'Responsible' Image as Diplomatic War with India Heats Up," *Al Jazeera*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/29/ceasefire-holds-as-india-pakistan-tensions-shift-to-diplomacy>

²³Chatham House, "Rising Tensions Resurface Pakistan's Credibility P.

²⁴*Kashmir Media Service*, "When Deterrence Became Diplomacy: May 2025 and the Kashmir Question," February 12, 2026, <https://kmsnews.org/kms/2026/02/12/when-deterrence-became-diplomacy-may-2025-and-the-kashmir-question.html>.

Kashmir to the international agenda at some level, though the depth and durability of that return is assessed critically in Section 5.

Trump's Re-Hyphenation and the Ceasefire Mediation (May 2025)

The ceasefire was announced by Donald Trump , not by New Delhi or Islamabad , via a Truth Social post in which he offered to 'work with you both to see if, after a thousand years, a solution can be arrived at concerning Kashmir.'²⁵ The State Department subsequently confirmed the mediation offer in formal terms.²⁶

India's de-hyphenation strategy , which had progressively broken the diplomatic coupling of India and Pakistan in great-power discourse and reached its apex under Modi's insistence that Kashmir was a purely internal matter , was at minimum disrupted by this intervention.²⁷ For Trump to frame India and Pakistan as two parties to an open dispute suggested, at the US presidential level, that the

²⁵Donald J. Trump, Truth Social post, May 10, 2025, quoted in *South Asian Voices* (Stimson Center), "India and Pakistan Face Contrasting Challenges with the Trump White House," June 26, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-m-in-r-trump-mediation-and-kashmir-diplomacy-06-28-2025/>.

²⁶*South Asian Voices* (Stimson Center), "India and Pakistan Face Contrasting Challenges with the Trump White House," June 26, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-m-in-r-trump-mediation-and-kashmir-diplomacy-06-28-2025/>.

²⁷ Michael Kugelman, "Pakistan's Year of Diplomatic Miracles," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/10/23/pakistan-diplomacy-india-trump-united-states/>.

post-2019 unilateral reframing had not fully registered in Washington. The Modi-Trump phone call that followed, in which Modi reportedly disputed Trump's account of the ceasefire's origins, deepened a rift that Pakistan sustained through Nobel Prize nominations and continued bilateral engagement, though its durability remains contingent on US strategic priorities toward India.²⁸

The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Defence Agreement (September 2025)

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a mutual defence agreement in September 2025, formalizing a security relationship that had previously rested on financial dependency and informal understanding.²⁹ For Pakistan, the agreement served two purposes that bear on the Kashmir question. First, it gave Islamabad greater institutional standing in Gulf diplomatic forums and likely contributed to Saudi Arabia's willingness to associate itself with the strongly worded OIC Contact Group communique of September 2025, in which it co-signed language attributing the India-Pakistan standoff to the unresolved Kashmir dispute.³⁰ Second, and more consequentially, the pact positioned Pakistan with trusted

²⁹ Kashmir Media Service, "When Deterrence Became Diplomacy."

³⁰ OIC Contact Group on Jammu and Kashmir, *Joint Communiqué*, 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 23, 2025.

relationships on both sides of the Saudi-Iran axis , a distinction that no other potential mediator could plausibly claim when the US-Iran war escalated in early 2026.

The Gaza International Peace Summit (October 2025)

Pakistan's presence at the Gaza International Peace Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh alongside US President Trump in October 2025 was the product of sustained multilateral positioning. Pakistan had tabled a seven-point plan at the 21st Extraordinary OIC Session in Jeddah (August 2025), calling on Muslim states to move from declaratory solidarity to concrete action on Gaza , an unusually agenda-driven intervention for Islamabad within OIC forums.³¹ The Summit's significance for Kashmir was indirect: a state that contributes visibly to managing a high-profile humanitarian conflict acquires standing to raise its own outstanding dispute in multilateral spaces without being dismissed as a spoiler.³² Whether this standing proved transferable to Kashmir is examined in Section 5.

The US-Iran Mediation: The Structural Vacancy Filled (March-April 2026)

When the US-Iran war escalated in early 2026, Pakistan emerged as a primary channel of communication between Washington and

³¹Al Jazeera, "Pakistan Pitches 'Responsible' Image."

Tehran. The structural vacancy that this required is traceable: Russia was engaged in Ukraine; China's deep alignment with Iranian interests plausibly disqualified it in Washington's eyes; Gulf states, whose infrastructure Iranian missiles had struck, were belligerents; and Turkey lacked the sustained personal rapport with the Trump administration that Pakistan had cultivated since May 2025.³³ Pakistan's geographic proximity to Iran, its formal defence relationship with Saudi Arabia, and its working relationship with the Trump White House made it a viable interlocutor for both sides. Following initial facilitation success, Pakistan developed a joint framework with China, whose institutional weight added credibility as a potential guarantor.³⁴

The cumulative logic of the five nodes becomes clearer in retrospect. The ceasefire mediation built the US-Pakistan relationship; the Saudi defence agreement built the Gulf security architecture; the Gaza Summit built Muslim-world credibility; and the Iran facilitation was the convergent product of all three. The polycrisis entanglement hypothesis is supported by this sequence: none of these outcomes appears fully explicable without the ones that preceded it.

³³*Kashmir Media Service*, "From a Sphere of Tension to a Corridor of Conciliation: Pakistan's Diplomatic Strategy and the Recasting of Global Balance," April 20, 2026, <https://kmsnews.org/kms/2026/04/20/from-a-sphere-of-tension-to-a-corridor-of-conciliation-pakistans-diplomatic-strategy-and-the-recasting-of-global-balance.html>.

The Kashmir Question: Evidence and Limits

A Framework for Measuring Internationalization

Before assessing the evidence, a methodological clarification is necessary: international attention and structural re-internationalization are not the same condition and conflating them risks overstating what the 2025-26 events produced. Drawing on the logic of Entman's frame analysis and the process-tracing design outlined in Section 3, this paper proposes a five-level hierarchy for assessing Kashmir's internationalization trajectory:

Level 1: Media attention and crisis-related reporting, Kashmir mentioned as context for nuclear escalation risk.

Level 2: Crisis-management engagement, External powers engage with Kashmir as a factor in de-escalation.

Level 3: Diplomatic recognition of unresolved status, Official statements frame Kashmir as an open dispute requiring resolution.

Level 4: Institutionalized third-party role, A formal mediation or monitoring mechanism is established.

Level 5: Formal negotiation architecture, Structured talks between India and Pakistan, with third-party involvement, on the dispute's final status.

This paper does not claim Pakistan achieved Level 4 or Level 5. The assessment below suggests that the 2025-26 events produced movement from Level 1 toward Levels 2 and 3 , a limited but non-trivial shift from Pakistan's position in 2020-24, when the dominant international frame was firmly 'India's internal matter' (Level 0, below the hierarchy altogether). Four observable indicators are assessed against this framework.

Four Indicators

Indicator One: US Presidential Engagement (Level 2-3). Trump's ceasefire mediation and formal offer to pursue a Kashmir settlement likely represent the most significant shift in US engagement with the dispute since the late 1990s. A US president publicly treating Kashmir as an open question requiring third-party facilitation moves the issue from Level 1 (media attention) toward Level 3 (recognition of unresolved status). *Importantly, India never accepted the mediation framing, and the State Department had walked back some of Trump's more expansive language within weeks.* The evidence for Level 3 is therefore provisional rather than consolidated.

Indicator Two: OIC Institutional Strengthening (Level 2-3). The OIC Contact Group on Jammu and Kashmir, meeting on the sidelines of the 80th UN General Assembly (September 2025), produced its most substantive communique in several years, expressing concern over 'unjustified strikes' on Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir,

reaffirming the Kashmiri people's 'inalienable right to self-determination as enshrined in the relevant UN Security Council resolutions,' and framing Kashmir as a 'nuclear flashpoint.'³⁵ The 51st OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (Istanbul, June 2025) attributed the India-Pakistan standoff to the unresolved Kashmir dispute and criticized India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty as 'punitive diplomacy.'³⁶ This registers at Level 2-3 within the OIC framework, though the OIC's internal fragmentation, discussed below, limits its broader significance.

Indicator Three: India's Parallel Mobilization (Level 2). Perhaps the most analytically revealing indicator is India's response. New Delhi dispatched seven multiparty parliamentary delegations to more than thirty countries in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor , an initiative that, according to policy reporting, arose partly from a recognition that the military action had not produced the automatic international support that previous India-Pakistan crises had generated.³⁷ India's own delegation talking points explicitly addressed 'Pakistan's attempts to hyphenate itself with India and portray itself as

³⁶OIC, Final Communique, 51st Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers, Istanbul, June 2025.

³⁷Michael Kugelman, "India and Pakistan Engage in Diplomatic Blitz After Conflict," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/04/india-pakistan-delegations-diplomacy-conflict-narrative/>.

a victim in the international community.³⁸ A state managing a sealed internal matter does not require thirty-country damage-control delegations. The mobilization itself confirms that the framing contest had moved to Level 2.

Indicator Four: The Re-Hyphenation (Level 2-3). The partial reversal of India's de-hyphenation strategy , with India and Pakistan again framed as co-equal parties to an open dispute in US presidential discourse , registers at Level 2-3.³⁹ It is the most durable component of the observed shift, in that it altered the terms of subsequent diplomatic engagement rather than producing only a one-cycle media effect. Whether it survives the normalization of US-India relations over the medium term is unclear.

Three Structural Limits

Against these indicators, three structural limits qualify any strong claim of re-internationalization. The first is the personalist and transactional character of US engagement. Trump's interest in the peacemaker narrative is real but contingent on a personal rift with Modi and on Trump's attention to South Asian affairs, neither guaranteed institutionally.⁴⁰ Without formal dialogue structures, the

³⁸South Asian Voices, "India and Pakistan Face Contrasting Challenges."

³⁹"BRICS Must Resolve India-Pakistan Tensions to Protect Its Credibility," *Observer Diplomat*, May 20, 2025, <https://observerdiplomat.com/brics-must-resolve-india-pakistan-tensions-to-protect-its-credibility/>.

⁴⁰South Asian Voices, "India and Pakistan Face Contrasting Challenges."

US engagement remains at Level 2 rather than consolidating toward Level 3.

The second limit is OIC fragmentation. At the OIC Parliamentary Union meeting in Jakarta, Pakistan's attempt to include strong anti-India language on Kashmir was blocked by Indonesia, Egypt, and Bahrain, reflecting those states' growing commercial and diplomatic ties with India.⁴¹ Pakistan can generate strong language in the dedicated Contact Group but struggles to translate it into the broader membership, a pattern suggesting that Level 3 recognition within the OIC is selective rather than general.

The third is Pakistan's credibility problem. India has systematically deployed doubts about Pakistan's counter-terrorism commitments as a diplomatic instrument to erode Islamabad's global standing and, by extension, to keep the Kashmir question at Level 1 or below in the eyes of states susceptible to that framing.⁴² This limit is structural rather than conjunctural: it will persist regardless of specific diplomatic successes unless Pakistan's demonstrated conduct on counter-terrorism changes materially.

In summary, the evidence suggests limited movement from Level 1 toward Levels 2-3 on the internationalization spectrum, a non-trivial shift compared to Pakistan's pre-2025 position, but considerably short

⁴¹Chatham House, "Rising Tensions Resurface Pakistan's Credibility Problem."

of the institutionalized engagement that would constitute genuine structural re-internationalization.

The Convertibility Paradox

Three Incompatible Roles

The convertibility paradox refers to the structural tension between what appears to have produced Pakistan's 2025-26 leverage and what converting that leverage into sustained Kashmir outcomes would likely require. Pakistan in this period performs three roles that generate internally conflicting behavioural demands.

As a Responsible Nuclear Actor, Pakistan demonstrated restraint, offered to participate in independent investigation of the Pahalgam attack, and framed its military response as proportionate and defensive.⁴³ This conduct was likely essential to the credibility that made subsequent mediatory roles possible. It is also structurally in tension with the widespread perception, which India actively cultivates and which Pakistan's own history has lent some credibility, that Islamabad has used non-state actors as instruments of territorial contestation. Every incident reinforcing that perception plausibly erodes the mediator credibility that the responsible-actor performance builds.

⁴³Kashmir Media Service, "When Deterrence Became Diplomacy."

As a Global Mediator, Pakistan was trusted in the Gaza process and in US-Iran talks because its neutrality on those specific issues was credible.⁴⁴ Aggressively deploying these relationships for Kashmir advocacy would risk undermining the basis of that trust. States cooperated with Pakistan as a mediator partly because they believed its interests in those specific processes were limited; discovering that the mediation served as a platform for Islamabad's own territorial agenda would likely be experienced as bad faith by the parties involved.

As a Kashmir Claimant, Pakistan is within its legal rights to press for UN Security Council resolution implementation, build coalitions against India's post-2019 constitutional changes, and sustain the dispute's international character.⁴⁵ But this posture is the behavioural antithesis of the neutral facilitator identity that generated Pakistan's elevated standing. The three roles require different and incompatible behavioural postures; they cannot be performed simultaneously with equal credibility.

How the Paradox Manifests

At the level of observable diplomatic outcomes, the convertibility paradox produces three patterns that recur across the 2025-26 record. The first might be called the sequencing problem: Pakistan's

⁴⁴Kashmir Media Service, "From a Sphere of Tension to a Corridor of Conciliation."

diplomatic credibility in Gulf and Southeast Asian forums was built through its mediator and security-partner roles, but those same states are growing commercial partners of India and resist the confrontational language that effective Kashmir advocacy at the OIC requires. The credibility that earned them as partners appears to constrain their utility as Kashmir advocates.⁴⁶

The second pattern concerns the ceiling of transactional US engagement. However warm the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship has become, Washington's structural interest in India, as its primary counterweight to China, its largest democratic trade partner, and a significant investment destination, imposes limits on how far bilateral warmth translates into Kashmir-specific policy pressure.⁴⁷ The Nobel Prize nomination strategy appears to have sustained Trump's personal investment in the peacemaker narrative, but personal interest is not institutionalized policy.

The third pattern is the credibility constraint. Pakistan cannot simultaneously project neutral-actor credibility (required by its mediator roles), partisan-claimant credibility (required by Kashmir advocacy), and counter-terrorism credibility (required by its relationships with Western capitals) without some degradation in at

⁴⁶Observer Diplomat, "BRICS Must Resolve India-Pakistan Tensions."

⁴⁷South Asian Voices, "India and Pakistan Face Contrasting Challenges."

least one of them.⁴⁸ At any given moment, advancing one of these postures creates friction with the others.

Taken together, these patterns suggest a medium-term equilibrium in which US-Pakistan tactical cooperation continues on shared interests in Iran and counter-terrorism, while India consolidates its administrative position in Jammu and Kashmir on the ground and Pakistan's elevated diplomatic standing remains largely non-convertible into the territorial and political outcomes its Kashmir policy requires.⁴⁹ The critical variable is whether Pakistan can institutionalize the gains of 2025-26, converting episodic leverage into structured dialogue, before the structural vacancies close.

Policy Implications

The convertibility paradox, and the limited internationalization trajectory traced in Section 5, together suggest a strategic preference for gradualist institutionalization over maximalist advocacy. Explicitly partisan Kashmir advocacy at peak leverage risks destroying the neutrality capital that produced the leverage. Embedding Kashmir incrementally within frameworks Pakistan already occupies normalizes the dispute's international character at a lower credibility cost. Four implications follow.

⁴⁸Chatham House, "Rising Tensions Resurface Pakistan's Credibility Problem."

⁴⁹Kashmir Media Service, "When Deterrence Became Diplomacy."

Institutionalizing the US Engagement

Trump's mediation offer is likely the most significant US engagement with Kashmir since the Clinton era, but its personalist character makes it intrinsically temporary. Converting it into institutional form , a Special Envoy appointment for South Asia with a Kashmir mandate, or a trilateral dialogue structure , would embed the opening in a mechanism capable of surviving shifts in US attention or administration. The analytical point follows from the five-level hierarchy: moving from Level 2 to Level 3 requires institutional structures, not personal presidential interest.

Framework Linkage at the OIC

The OIC sequencing problem identified above suggests that direct Kashmir advocacy is currently less productive than framework linkage: embedding Kashmir within the self-determination discourse that has gained OIC traction through the Gaza crisis. States that blocked strong anti-India language on Kashmir simultaneously endorsed strong language on Palestinian self-determination. Framing Kashmir within the same normative framework, parallel occupied territories, parallel demographic change, parallel restrictions on political expression, may offer a path around the blocking dynamic that does not require confronting India-aligned OIC members directly.

The SCO as a Structural Dialogue Venue

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation appears structurally suited to generating India-Pakistan dialogue on outstanding issues. Both states are members; China holds institutional leverage over both; and the SCO's security-and-connectivity mandate provides natural agenda space for confidence-building measures along the Line of Control and for discussion of suspended bilateral agreements including the Indus Waters Treaty. A proposal for an SCO-mandated South Asia Security Dialogue would stop short of demanding Kashmir negotiations, which India would block, while creating institutional infrastructure within which Kashmir-adjacent engagement might develop. This would represent movement toward Level 3 on the internationalization hierarchy within a forum where India cannot simply opt out.

Credibility Restoration as a Precondition

The credibility constraint identified in Section 6.2 implies that Pakistan's terrorism-adjacent reputation is a structural limit on Kashmir advocacy rather than a reputational inconvenience. Credibility restoration, through demonstrable FATF compliance, unilateral normalization gestures with India, and explicit framing of Pakistan's security transformation as a strategic shift, may be a precondition for effective advocacy rather than a separate foreign policy goal. Domestic political stability belongs in the same category: the PTI-PMLN conflict has periodically disrupted the national

security consensus that credible international representation requires, and its resolution through institutional means would strengthen Pakistan's diplomatic capacity in ways bilateral summitry cannot substitute for.

Conclusion

Between April 2025 and April 2026, Pakistan's middle-power functions, mediation, agenda-setting, performance produced limited but measurable movement. Kashmir issue have shifted from Level 0 (excluded from international discourse as India's internal matter) toward Levels 2-3 (limited recognition of unresolved status in crisis-management and multilateral forums). That shift is non-trivial compared to Pakistan's position in the preceding six years. It is also considerably short of structural re-internationalization.

The polycrisis framework explains why those choices were available: five causally entangled crises generated structural vacancies that Pakistan was situationally positioned to occupy. Structural vacancy explains the fragility: leverage derived from situational positioning rather than material foundations is inherently time limited. And the convertibility paradox names the central strategic constraint: the neutrality that generated the leverage is incompatible with the partisan posture sustained Kashmir advocacy requires. Whether the institutional architecture and domestic political coherence necessary

to institutionalize that opportunity can be assembled before the structural vacancies close is a question this analysis cannot resolve.
