Timothy Winans

May 4, 2026

Dr. Starkey

Pakistan Mediation Case Study

Drawing on Zartman, ripeness centers on the perception of a mutually hurting stalemate, in which both parties believe they cannot prevail through further escalation and that the costs of the status quo are unacceptable (Zartman). Ripeness is a subjective perception produced by objective indicators combined with persuasion. Casualties, sanctions, or military attrition do not automatically generate it, because parties may interpret pain as proof of resolve and stalemate as a test of endurance. A third-party mediator therefore plays a persuasive role, helping each side recognize that escalation is unprofitable, that the other is willing to bargain, and that some workable agreement exists in principle. When ripeness is only partial, mediators can ripen a conflict through manipulation, expanding the stakes with carrots such as aid or constraining the parties with sticks such as restricted weapons supplies. A credible mediator should be trusted by both sides, free of disqualifying conflicts of interest, and willing to absorb the political risk of involvement.

Pakistan's attempt to mediate between the United States and Iran takes place in a stalemate that is objectively present but not yet perceived as mutually hurting by either capital. As discussed in class, the central question is whether Washington will ease coercive pressure enough to make diplomacy credible, and whether Tehran will curb its leverage enough to keep talks alive. Each side is betting that internal weakness will fracture the other first. The Trump administration calculates that sanctions and military pressure will erode the new Iranian

leadership, while Tehran calculates that time, threats to the Strait of Hormuz, and regional entanglements will exhaust American resolve (Kurlantzick). What is presented as negotiation may in fact be two parties managing the optics of diplomacy while waiting for internal collapse on the other side. The incentives currently make compromise feel more dangerous than continued conflict, suggesting the parties are in a stalemate without yet perceiving it as ripe (Siddiqa).

This is where a mediator's persuasion role becomes critical. According to Zartman, the mediator encourages each party to consider possible solutions, serves as a go-between carrying each side's view of an acceptable outcome, prevents talks from becoming bogged down in detail, establishes basic principles as building blocks of a settlement, and over time becomes an indispensable channel for negotiation. Embedded in this work is the Zone of Agreement, the range within which both parties' minimum acceptable terms overlap. Neither Tehran nor Washington needs a final deal at the outset; they need only believe such a range exists and that the other side is genuinely willing to search for it. A mediator who can communicate that mutual willingness, even before substantive proposals are exchanged, helps shift the parties from posturing toward bargaining.

Pakistan is politically and economically vulnerable on both sides of the conflict, sharply limiting its ability to apply either carrots or sticks (International Cooperation Center). It hosts the largest Shi'ite Muslim population outside Iran and experienced violent protests after United States actions targeting senior Iranian leadership in the current war. Strategically, Pakistan signed a mutual defense agreement with Saudi Arabia in 2026, on which it remains heavily economically dependent and which Iran has actively confronted (Gause). At the same time, Pakistan has cultivated unusual access to the Trump administration following the four-day India-

Pakistan conflict in May 2025, including a Nobel Peace Prize nomination, participation on the Board of Peace, expanded cryptocurrency and minerals dealmaking, and the first White House visit by a Pakistani armed forces chief without an accompanying civilian official (Karim; Kurlantzick). Pakistan therefore has greater incentive for a durable resolution than perhaps any external party, while possessing very little leverage to force ripeness on either capital.

What Pakistan does have, within these constraints, is what may be called an opportunity crisis. Two patterns are useful here. In the first, a state harnesses a developing crisis for leverage against adversaries, as Saddam Hussein attempted, and miscalculated, with the 1990 advance on Kuwait. In the second, a state exploits a crisis to advance a separate goal or reframe an existing problem, as Turkey did when it conditioned its NATO accession votes for Sweden and Finland on reduced state support for Kurdish separatist movements. Pakistan's positioning belongs primarily to the second category. The Iran crisis has given Islamabad political cover to deepen economic and diplomatic engagement with Washington that would have been difficult to justify otherwise, while also offering a platform to manage its exposure to Iranian retaliation and Saudi expectations. That, however, is value Pakistan extracts for itself. Whether it can move the United States and Iran toward settlement is a separate and harder question.

On that question, the assessment must be skeptical. Pakistan satisfies almost none of Zartman's conditions for effective ripening. It cannot enlarge the stakes, because it has no aid package, security guarantee, or economic concession that Washington or Tehran would meaningfully value. It cannot constrain the parties either, lacking the military weight, sanctions authority, or alliance leverage to limit their options. Its trust profile is uneven and arguably deteriorating, given the new Saudi defense agreement, the transactional courtship of the Trump administration, and the domestic costs of appearing too close to either capital. None of this

positions Pakistan to persuade either side that it is in a mutually hurting stalemate, that a Zone of Agreement exists, or that the other side will bargain in good faith. At best, Pakistan can carry messages and host meetings, but that is not mediation in the sense Zartman describes. Any serious movement toward settlement will reflect bargaining between parties with real leverage. Until that is acknowledged, the diplomacy will remain largely performative, and the war's final chapter will be written on the battlefield rather than at the negotiating table.

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