

## PAKISTAN AND UNITED STATES DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS SINCE THE MAY 2025 INDO-PAK WAR: ROLE OF SOFT POWER AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AS TOOLS OF NATION BRANDING

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### Abstract

*The May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict transformed the geopolitics of South Asia, creating a seismic shift in Pakistan-US relations, and heralding a new wave of digital diplomacy in nation branding. This research article examines the dynamics that enabled Pakistan to leverage its soft power and digital diplomacy to counter India's isolation, and to enhance economic and strategic partnership with the US. After qualitative analysis of media and official statements, and recent literature, the paper concludes: first, Pakistan's media diplomacy, based on facts, countered India's disinformation campaign; second, the country's proactive lobbying and military-to-military engagement has transformed it into a regional peace broker; and third, the aftermath of the war has led to a new wave of US-Pakistan economic and trade partnerships, focusing on critical minerals, energy technologies and information technology. Policy recommendations for sustainability are made at the end of the paper.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan-US, soft power, digital diplomacy, nation branding, India-Pakistan war, disinformation, geo-economics*

### 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, a shift in the nature of international relations has occurred, in which soft power and digital diplomacy have become valuable diplomatic tools that complement the traditional hard power. Joseph Nye's characterisation of soft power as the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce has gained new relevance in the information age, where ideas compete for influence in the global public realm through digital media [Nye, 20028]. Nations with poor global images can overcome the barriers to international acceptance through effective soft power strategies.

Pakistan's geopolitical struggles since the May 2025 war with India is one example. The conflict, which lasted four days, was triggered by a terrorist attack in Pahalgam in Indian-occupied Kashmir and involved not only weaponry but also a social media and media war on YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and the media (Abad, O 2022). India's superior media machinery, utilising the victimhood narrative, tried to paint Pakistan as an incubator of terrorism and isolate it. But the outcome was unexpected: Pakistan's diplomatic standing grew, it was elected to chair influential UN committees, and enjoyed a record-breaking boost in economic ties with the United States (Ahsan, M., & Khan, 2018). This research article will address the following questions:

**Q1.** How did Pakistan use soft power and digital diplomacy to counter Indian disinformation and isolation before and in the aftermath of the May 2025 conflict?

**Q2.** How did Pakistan transition from a policy of strategic ambiguity to robust economic and security co-operation with the US after the confrontation?

**Q3.** What can we learn from Pakistan's experience for middle powers that want to take advantage of nation branding in the current era of information warfare?

The study adopts a qualitative method, examining media and official statements, diplomatic emails and recent academic work. It draws on 50 sources which include international media reports, academic journals, think tank reports and official documents, with emphasis on recent dissertations on soft power practices in South Asia.

## 2. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study, which is appropriate for researching the intricacies of diplomatic relationships, narrative development and soft power. Qualitative research offers contextual understanding of the perceptions, meaning construction and communication strategies of the actors (Lindlof & Taylor 2017)

### 2.1 Research Design

This research uses a case study design to explore the Pakistan-US diplomatic relations during and after the May 2025 Indo-Pak war. This is an apt approach to study recent events where the boundaries between phenomenon and context may be blurred (Yin, R. K. 1982). The period extends from May 2025 to April 2026 and includes the war and its aftermath.

### 2.2 Data Sources

**Data was collected from four sources:**

**Primary Sources:** Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) media release, the US State Department, and White House media release.

**Secondary Sources:** International news media like BBC, Reuters, Arab News and Pakistan news media like The Nation, Pakistan Today, Radio Pakistan

**Academic and Think Tank Reports:** Recent academic publications, dissertations and think tank reports on soft power, digital diplomacy and geopolitics in South Asia.

**Digital and Social Media:** Digital media narratives on X, YouTube and TikTok.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to determine themes, narrative and diplomatic approaches. The analysis followed the model put forward by Braun and Clarke (Byrne, D. 2022), which has six stages: familiarizing with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and analysing your data. In total, three main themes emerged: digital counter-narratives, economic diplomacy as soft power and the mediation dividend.

## 3. Conceptual Framework: Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy and Nation Branding

### 3.1 Soft Power in the Digital Environment

In his highly influential book on soft power, Joseph Nye (2008) identified the sources of attraction as culture (where it is attractive to others), political values (where they are upheld at home and abroad), and foreign policies (where they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). In the digital age, these are communicated via digital channels which change how attraction is created.

The medicalization of diplomacy. Manor and Crilley (2019) consider foreign ministries to be "mediatized" and they produce media content and employ media logics in their operations. This medicalization provides the potential to engage directly with a global audience but also risks states being exposed to real-time public contestability and competing narratives.

### 3.2 Digital Diplomacy as Strategic Communication

Digital diplomacy uses social media, digital media and online communication to pursue foreign policy objectives (Bjola & Holmes 2015). Digital diplomacy enables two-way communication, rapid response to narratives, and communication with non-government actors such as influencers and bloggers, in contrast to public diplomacy which involves official channels and one-way communication.

The concept of "nation branding" according to Simon Anholt (2008) includes diplomacy in the management of a nation's brand across six areas: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism and immigration. Nation branding offers a way for states with negative narratives to counter this through a variety of messages.

### 3.3 Dimension of Information Warfare

Disinformation warfare has emerged in conflicts, with disinformation a prominent tactic adopted by states (Horowitz 2019). India's disinformation networks were revealed in 2020 by the EU Disinfo Lab, part of a campaign to manipulate the international narrative against Pakistan by creating fake NGOs, media and think tanks (Saud Kazim 2022). Understanding these techniques helps to defeat them.

## 4. The War of May 2025: War of Social Media

### 4.1 Origins and Escalation

The conflict started with a terrorist attack in Pakistani-administered Kashmir town of Pahalgam in late April 2025 that left some 26 dead. India accused Pakistan without any evidence and the four-day conflict ended with a US-mediated ceasefire on May 10, 2025 (Abro 2025). The war itself was brief but the disinformation campaign was fierce.

### 4.2 India's Disinformation Campaign

India had a powerful disinformation campaign to embarrass Pakistan internationally. Key elements included:

**Bogus War Claims:** Indian news outlets, such as Republic TV and Times of India, published unfounded claims that the Indian Army captured Lahore, bombarded Karachi port and encircled Islamabad. Deep faked photos of smoke at Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, and tweets purportedly from Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in which he concedes defeat were also published.

**Reusing and Manipulating Images:** A study found that 32% of images posted by Indian accounts were re-used from previous conflicts, 16% were deep fakes and 48% were part of social media campaigns. This manipulation was aimed at creating an information environment where feelings come before facts.(Janjua 2025). Further Raja Kashif (2025) explains in his research that:

*"Use of black propaganda, including doctored visuals, deepfakes, and emotionally charged rhetoric, to construct divisive narratives. A qualitative approach was used, involving content analysis, sentiment assessment, source verification, and interviews with media professionals. The findings indicate that disinformation tactics were used to vilify Pakistan, obscure civilian suffering, and stir nationalist sentiment, which in turn influenced global perspectives and heightened regional instability. Fabricated events, such as a fake explosion in Rawalpindi and manipulated videos targeting Pakistani leadership, further eroded trust."*

**Hashtag Warfare:** Hashtag campaigns, like "Justice for Pahalgam" and "Operation Sindoor" sought to frame the conflict from the point of view of India's anti-terrorism narrative. The May 2025 India–Pakistan standoff marked a rapid digital transformation of warfare. Memes created and shared on social media served as novel instruments of narrative influence and emotional resilience. Existing scholarship has largely overlooked memes as strategic weapons in South-Asian hybrid conflicts. This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design to analyse a dataset of 219 publicly-available memes sourced from X, Instagram and TikTok. (Hira 2025)

### 4.3 Pakistan's Counter-Narrative Strategy

Pakistan's response involved sophisticated digital diplomacy approaches. Rather than emotionally charge the debate, as India did, Pakistan emphasized reason.

**Geo-location to Fact-Check:** Pakistani leaders and the military fact-checked the manipulated videos and images using geolocation, time-stamps and source verification. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) held news conferences to denounce doctored images, and urged the international media to correct their reporting. (Vice Golani 2025)

**Satire as Counter-Narrative:** Social media creators in Pakistan used humour as a new counter-narrative. In response to the false narrative of the Indian media of destroying the port of Karachi, people from Karachi used ironic humour by sharing pictures of damaged roads with the caption: "India cannot destroy a city that is already destroyed by bad governance" (Nasir Ejaz 2026). This was significant as it sent a psychological morale boost to the domestic audience, captured the attention of the international audience through media sharing and implied criticisms of Indian propaganda and local incompetence.

**Internationalization of the Conflict:** Pakistan dispatched high-level officials to different states to inform international allies of India's lie. Internationalizing the conflict in terms of a systemic issue rather than bilateral rivalry, Pakistan also made the conflict open for third-party intervention (Yadev 2025)

#### 4.4 Role of US in De-escalation

The US played a vital role in de-escalation, declaring the ceasefire in a statement that was bereft of the word "terrorism", a major diplomatic misstep for India. Trump also claimed on at least 25 occasions that Pakistan had shot down between five and seven Indian jet fighters in the war, legitimating Pakistan's military assertions, and elevating its spirit and prestige (Saeed, Arif, Rehman, & Maheen 2025).

Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar thanked President Trump for his peacemaking efforts, saying "the role and efforts of the US President in recent Pakistan-India standoff are commendable" and that "the US emerged as the credible arbiter of peace and stability in South Asia". Moreover, Pakistani Prime Minister and Military leadership played a vital role to project the soft image of Pakistan in International arena.

#### 5.1 The De-Hyphenation Doctrine

India has been "de-hyphenating" its ascent and Pakistan since 2014. The principle aimed to establish India's independence and freedom from Pakistan in the international arena. A 2024 study in the International Journal of Political Science and Governance discovered that the decline in the search link between "India" and "Pakistan" meant de-hyphenation was successful (Sharma 2025).

#### 5.2 India's Diplomatic Isolation

Post-war media reports on India's diplomacy showed that it had "utterly failed". The Modi government's policy of multi-alignment had not worked, the BBC reported, with nobody openly supporting India (Das G 2025). Key findings included:

**Lack of Support from the International Community:** India was only backed by a few nations, such as Israel and Taiwan, which did not make up the international support that India's narrative demanded (Ghosh 2025).

**Regional Support for Pakistan:** China said it backed Pakistan's sovereignty, Turkey commended Pakistan's stance, and the fact that the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia were visiting Pakistan at the same time indicated the increasing urgency of Pakistan in the region (Anwer, Saqib, Mustafa 2025).

**US Neutrality:** India was said to have not been informed by the US about the announcement of the ceasefire, nor did President Trump mention terrorism in his statement, as India had alleged (Vice & Golani 2025).

#### 5.3 Pakistan's Diplomatic Gains

The India-initiated conflict resulted in Pakistan's rise in diplomacy. Pakistan was elected as the United Nations' Chair of the Taliban Sanctions Committee and Vice-Chair of the

Counter-Terrorism Committee for 2025-2026. The appointments to these positions represent recognition of Pakistan's role in regional security - a rejection of India's "de-hyphenation" strategy.

Security experts pointed out that India was not only losing the war but also losing the diplomatic front as the international community was willing to help Pakistan de-escalate the situation while dismissing India's attempts to claim that it was an "internal issue" (Singh 2025).

## **6. Pakistan-US: War to Friendship**

### **6.1 The Strategic Recalibration**

After the war, US-Pakistan engagement has never been better in multiple areas. This represents a transformation in the relationship from a security to a geo-economic alliance, and seeks to achieve mutually enhancing economic development rather than foreign assistance.

Pakistan's Army Chief, General Syed Asim Munir's over two-hour-long meeting with the US President, Donald Trump, was momentous. This was not a typical security-oriented meeting, but included trade, digital economy, artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency and counter-terrorism, showing Pakistan's transformation from geo-strategic to a geo-economic security (Gul, Naseem, Zaman 2025).

### **6.2 Critical Minerals Partnership**

A high-level US delegation from the United States Strategic Metals (USSM) and Mota-Engil companies visited Pakistan in September 2025 and announced a \$500 million worth of investment in Pakistan's critical minerals sector in the first stage. The delegation signed two Memoranda of Understanding:

An MoU between the Frontier Works Organization and USSM to develop a partnership for critical minerals for defense, aerospace and technology industries. The partnership will begin with the immediate export of the current minerals (antimony, copper, gold, tungsten and rare earth elements) and establish a USSM proprietary poly-metallic refinery in Pakistan to produce intermediate and final products for export to US (Daily Business Recorder 2025). The National Logistics Corporation signed an MoU with Mota-Engil Group, a global engineering and construction company to encourage infrastructure and logistics development in Pakistan.

### **6.3 Energy and Trade Agreements**

In August 2025, Pakistan's oil refinery firm Cnergyico inked a deal with the US firm Vitol to promote investment and partnership. The agreement, facilitated by the Special Investment Facilitation Council, will enable Pakistani products to enter the US at reduced tariffs [38].

In July 2025, Pakistan and the US signed a trade deal which includes tariff concessions and US investment in Pakistan's energy and mining sectors. Pakistan's Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb confirmed that Islamabad is "very focused" on enhancing trade and investment relations with the US under the Trump administration, with business opportunities on the rise in oil and gas, minerals and mining, IT and pharmaceuticals (Shah, Mahmood, Akhtar, Tarar, & Maqsood, 2025).

### **6.4 The Lobbying Network: Linden Strategies**

The trick to Pakistan gaining greater access to the US has been the continuous lobbying of the Texas-based Linden Strategies, led by Stephen Payne. They have been working on behalf of Pakistan since 2001, assisting with the negotiation for US assistance of a 5-year, \$3 billion package, and securing Pakistan's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) in 2004 (Gul, Naseem, Zaman 2025).

It has been particularly involved in securing access to Pakistan's military leaders, such as the 2025 Oval Office visit from Pakistan's Field Marshal Munir to meet President Trump. This has come with diplomacy, with Islamabad playing a critical role in facilitating US-Iran talks to end the hostilities, given global concerns over supply chain issues (Kaura, V. 2026)

## **7. Soft Power Tools: Nation Branding**

### **7.1 Pakistan as a Peacemaker**

Pakistan's role in bringing the US and Iran together is a success story. The hashtag "Blessed are the peacemakers" was popular on social media in Pakistan during the April 2026 Iran-US talks in Islamabad, and the importance of the event was recognized. Mediation has a soft power dimension by emphasizing Pakistan's diplomatic abilities, elevating it as a statesperson and offering a positive counterbalance to the negative image. Analysts note that Pakistan's ties with the US and China, as well as its relations with China, increased Pakistan's diplomatic influence and credibility as a mediator (Farzana 2026).

### **7.2 Branding through digital diplomacy**

Pakistan has increased its digital diplomacy after conflict. Digital diplomacy provides a medium to communicate directly with the world, rather than through media intermediaries. The Indian and Pakistani approaches are instructive. India's creators have promoted nationalism, with peace ambassadors under attack. In contrast, Pakistanis have used irony and humour to transform national vulnerabilities into memetic material and also critiqued local governance and fostered national identity (diplomacy.edu, 2026).

### **7.3 Evidence-based Rhetoric for Credibility**

Fact-based rhetoric is a unique element of Pakistan's soft power. Pakistan's media diplomacy has been about "clarifying distorted images, providing geo-locations and presenting facts". This has improved Pakistan's image in the international media and among international audiences (South Asia Strategic Research Centre-2025). The several endorsements of Pakistan by US President Trump on the basis of factual statements by Pakistan's military provided the state with a third-party endorsement that is hard to come by. These validated Pakistan's stance and improved its image (Suleman, 2025).

## **8. Findings**

### **Three are key findings of the analysis:**

**Finding 1:** Evidence-Based Digital Diplomacy Countering Disinformation Pakistan's use of evidence, geo-location and reason to counter disinformation was more successful than emotional counter-narratives to reach the international audience. This stands in contrast with India's baseless claims, which were proven incorrect, and highlights that truth is a source of soft power, even in the information era.

**Finding 2:** Ongoing Engagement Enables Strategic Positioning Pakistan's lobbying (Linden Strategies since 2001) and communication with the US, military-to-military engagement, enabled its positioning as a key regional peace maker. This is evident in the US \$500 million investment in minerals and the trade agreement.

**Finding 3:** Geo-economic Framing is More Impactful on Soft Power than Geopolitical. The shift from security to economic engagement with the US has positively impacted Pakistan. Emphasis on trade, investment, technology and win-win economic engagement is more in line with the current US foreign policy discourse than the security assistance approach.

## **9. Recommendations**

### **Here are some recommendations to boost Pakistan's soft power:**

**Recommendation 1:** Institutionalize Digital Diplomacy. Pakistan should establish a Digital Diplomacy Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with trained staff, budget and performance indicators. This cell would have social media content, crisis communication and monitoring tools.

**Recommendation 2:** Maintain Fact-Based Communication. The fact-based communication edge of Pakistan should be maintained. Cyber forensic capabilities should be enhanced for swift fact-checking and debunking and partners in the fact-checking domain should be sought.

**Recommendation 3:** Develop Economic Diplomacy Skills. The recent geo-economic gains should be institutionalized through more commercial diplomacy training for diplomats, investment promotion and diaspora trade promotion.

**Recommendation 4:** Keep Diaspora and Advocacy Networks. Washington's success with professional lobbying, such as that by Linden Strategies, can be used as a model. Pakistan should keep these connections alive despite changes in government and build such networks in other capitals.

**Recommendation 5:** Be Narratively Resilient Pakistan should conduct research into the international narrative, how it is constructed, contested and how it is received. This should inform responsive communication strategies to respond to threats.

## 10. Conclusion

The May 2025 Indo-Pak conflict and peace deal demonstrate that soft power and digital diplomacy are not transient aspects of diplomacy but central to it. Pakistan's triumph in rebutting India's disinformation, securing US mediation and its transition in bilateral ties with the US from strategic ambiguity to economic co-operation is a diplomatic achievement.

Pakistan's success in resisting isolation by India, despite the latter's greater media presence and influence, demonstrates the power of disinformation. The international community's preference for de-escalation over war, reason over passion, and geo-economic over geopolitical engagement, also helped Pakistan.

This incident offers middle powers in difficult neighborhoods some lessons - that reputation is a resource that cannot be counterfeited; that it pays to play the long game in dealing with other countries; and that economic opportunity is a safer bet for building relationships than security assistance.

In South Asia as it struggles with issues of nuclear deterrence, territorial integrity and the competition between the great powers, the soft power approaches and maneuverings of Pakistan in this war will continue to be key to the success of national goals and stability.

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