The Ineffective Diplomacy of the Middle East War

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This article explores the systemic failures of current diplomacy of the Middle East War, arguing that the opportunistic use of mediation as a tool of war rather than genuine peace negotiations and the erosion of trust between adversaries have complicated any progress towards de-escalation substantially. It examines a string of diplomatic failures and reasons behind them, covering the two remaining flash points of contention: Lebanon and the Strait of Hormuz, while examining the roles of Iran, the US, Pakistan and China. As long as diplomacy is exploited to reorganise for the conflict's next phase, any framework of peace, conflict resolution and regional stabilization will not be possible.

On February 28 2026, a massive joint US-Israeli strike targeted Iran. The main aim was to induce regime change in the country and target Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programme. In the attacks, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who had led the country since 1989, was killed.

Iran retaliated to US-Israel strikes by launching attacks on Israel and US-ally states in the Gulf and appointed Khamenei's son as his successor of the state.

The US and Iran have since agreed to a conditional two-week ceasefire starting on 7 April.

Since the US–Israeli attack on Iran on 28 February, on 16th of April, a 10-Day Ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel took effect, mediated personally by US President Donald Trump. This is a historic first direct diplomatic engagement between Israel and Lebanon in decades, mainly focusing on disarming Hezbollah and asserting Lebanese Armed Forces in control.

However despite the extension of ceasefires and mediation efforts the region remains unstable. Ceasefires are always fragile and it is crucial to understand why ceasefires often fail. Firstly, there is no authority to enforce compliance to both sides, especially without a third party ''referee'' to monitor the compliance, attacks and strikes quickly escalate without a stop sign. Secondly, with the involvement of non-state actors like Hezbollah introduces another operating mechanism inside the government, meaning

a ceasefire agreed between Beirut and Washington does not necessarily translate to discontinue in the Southern part of Lebanon. Lastly, the absence of trust from both sides due to previous failures like June 2025 Truce has created a security dilemma, both parties prioritising ''upper-hand'' in the conflict.

Even though the talks are ongoing, the direct contradictions between states' requests creates huge gaps in the establishment of a sustainable, long-term peace negotiations. The United States' demands regarding Iran's nuclear programme remain the same, including the requirement that Iran ceases its support for Hamas and Hezbollah in the region.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Khatibzadeh "We are not accepting any temporary ceasefire," he said, adding that the cycle of conflict "should end here once and for all".

The Lebanon Truce

The Trump-mediated ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon reflects the limitations of short-term conflict management. While both sides formally accepted the truce, key disagreements such as Prime Minister Netanyahu's insistence on maintaining Israeli troops in a 10 km ''security zone'' inside Southern Lebanon is directly contradicting Hezbollah's demand for full withdrawal. The primary obstacle is Hezbollah's agreement on the truce. Moreover the agreement gives the responsibility to Lebanon to restrain Hezbollah, despite its capacity to fully control the group. The agreement remains a bilateral officiality with no actual accountability.

The Hormuz Double Blockade

The diplomatic progress in the Lebanon truce has not extended to maritime security. The Strait of Hormuz – the corridor through which 20% of global oil passes – is being used as a weapon of economic warfare and a leverage tool by both sides, plunging the world economy into an unprecedented crisis.

Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, preventing ships from sailing through it by the threat of application of force alone, has led to the oil prices skyrocketing beyond $100 per barrel. Simultaneously, the US blockade of Iranian ports and access to them through the Indian Ocean, intended to bring Iran to the negotiating table, doesn't appear to be successful. Ships under Iranian flag and linked to Iran largely continue to operate, despite cases of seizures and disruption. Both sides accuse each other of breaches of trust.

Iran's chief negotiator, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, has stated in his talks with the US that ''It is not possible to reopen the Strait of Hormuz considering all the blatant violations of the ceasefire". One alleged violation includes US mine-sweeping operations, which signals the importance of the Strait's effective closure to Iran's war strategy.

Thus, the Strait of Hormuz has become a main theatre of war, both sides aiming to achieve their goals by making their respective blockades' lifting an ultimate card to be used in exchange for the adversary's total acceptance of maximalist peace demands.

The US Credibility

The failure of March 2026 negotiations can be attributed to the deficit of diplomatic trust. By conducting military operations such as Operation Epic Fury (launched February 28, 2026) and Operation Midnight Hammer (June 2025) during active negotiations, the United States has seriously decreased its credibility in the international arena as a negotiating partner.

The failure of negotiations stems from the deficit of trust. This contradiction has led Iran to perceive that diplomacy is only a tactical instrument rather than a genuine pathway to peace. Consequently, the new leadership under Mojtaba Khamenei, hardened its stance. Tehran refused the US 15-points plan proposal, as well as raised demands for war reparations and shutting down the US bases in the Persian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz itself became Iran's leverage in the conflict.

The US has achieved tactical superiority by destroying significant missile infrastructure, but it has not achieved the regime change required to end the war. Despite the killing of the Supreme Leader, the Iranian regime has demonstrated resilience.

Pakistan Channel

Since the official diplomacy is being undermined by the US, the negotiations are being held in Pakistan, which acted as an intermediary between Iran and the US over the last few weeks, a venue that lacks the enforcement mechanisms and is not sufficient for durable peace.

In a display of modern diplomacy both US and Iran delegations arrived in Islamabad, but refused to engage in direct dialogue. Instead, Pakistan is being a ''carrier of messages'' and facilitating the indirect talks which is born from a place of deficit of trust. Specifically Tehran's refusal to treat the Trump administration as a credible partner in the negotiation table.

This shift of negotiations to Pakistan highlights a broader crisis: the marginalisation of the United Nations in this process. Because of the perceived violations of international norms by the US, Iran's diminished trust in multilateral institutions, further weakens institutional diplomacy.

As a result, the current diplomatic landscape is being characterised by ad hoc diplomacy — fragmented, actor-dependent negotiations that lack transparency, legal authority and continuity. While this mechanism may provide short-term communication, it is structurally difficult to produce long term and enforceable agreements. Consequently, diplomacy reaches a functional deadlock, where no genuine peace deal can be found in this uncertain era and negotiations persist without one.

Behind the Scenes: China

Beijing's involvement in the war and efforts toward its resolution is characteristically ambiguous and discreet, yet a major factor behind strategic choices made by both Iran and Pakistan. Amid allegations of intelligence and material assistance to Iran, China's activities leave a substantial footprint in diplomacy.

By the end of March, together with Pakistan, China announced a five-point proposal including a call for ceasefire and resumption of unmolested navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

However, it is unlikely that the Trump administration will approve China's involvement in the peace process as an official mediator. Such a development – a competing superpower mediating the end of a conflict between the world's supposedly most powerful state and a regional player – would have greatly undermined US position and prestige.

Conclusion

Trump's decision to cancel further diplomatic engagement indicates that a milestone to peace remains unlikely in the short term. Moreover, the absence of a clear timeline for negotiations, ceasefires or military strikes, suggests a strategy aimed at maintaining flexibility while sustaining economic and strategic pressure on Iran.

Beyond material victories, competing narratives of victory further complicates the diplomatic landscape. While the US emphasises its upper hand on military success, Iran frames its country's survival as a form of victory.