

The Narrow Window Before Escalation



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There are moments in regional conflict when escalation is not incremental, but structural. The current war trajectory in the Middle East, especially countries in West Asia, is approaching a threshold beyond which escalation may no longer be containable through conventional mechanisms. What appears to be discrete pressures is the early phase of a system-level shift.

Often described as “crossing the Rubicon,” this threshold reflects a transition from managed tension to self-reinforcing escalation. In this context, escalation would not remain confined to bilateral or localized dynamics. It would likely involve sustained disruption of maritime energy routes through the Strait of Hormuz, targeting critical infrastructure across Gulf states, and expanding into direct confrontation that could bring in middle and major powers like China and Russia into this war. These dynamics would not unfold in isolation. They would interact, compound, and exceed the absorptive capacity of existing diplomatic frameworks.

A narrow but consequential window for structured negotiations remains. The issue is not whether dialogue is desirable, but whether it can prevent escalation from becoming self-sustaining. Current indirect diplomatic architectures are misaligned with the urgent moment. The United States retains significant military capability but is constrained in shaping outcomes through conventional escalation pathways. Iran is not approaching collapse. With over forty years of economic and military sanctions, it has demonstrated major resilience. Iran is unlikely to engage in a framework defined solely by the U.S. safeguarding Israel's objectives of turning Iran into another Libya, Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan by causing utter disarray and chaos — ultimately eliminating nearby threats. Knowing history, the U.S. will also walk away leaving the Gulf Countries to deal on their own with Iran. This is not a ceasefire moment. It is a structural inflection point.

Present signals suggest that alternative interlocutors within the U.S. system may be under consideration, reflecting both internal recalibration and external preferences. This underscores a deeper systemic issue: the absence of a credible, sufficiently neutral, and capable negotiating channel that can engage all relevant parties. Bilateral channels are limited by alignment, perception, and political exposure. Regional actors, while critical, often lack the institutional positioning required to convene across competing power centers.

It is within this structural gap that a different form of diplomatic architecture becomes necessary — one that would offer Iran having a long-term peace treaty or a twenty year no-war pact with Israel. Vice President JD Vance showing interest in engagements with Pakistan to bring peace in the region is a welcome initiative. Pakistan maintains relationships across multiple axes that are difficult to reconcile within a single framework: security engagement with the United States, deep structural ties with China, longstanding relationships with key Gulf states, and retained channels with Iran. In the current configuration, very few actors maintain credibility across all relevant power centers.

This positioning does not make Pakistan exceptional. It makes it functional. In periods of relative stability, such positioning may appear secondary. In moments of systemic risk, it becomes central. The current environment requires an actor capable of convening without dominating, engaging without preconditioning outcomes, and sustaining dialogue across multiple power centers simultaneously. Few states meet these criteria in a credible way. Pakistan is increasingly one of them.

What is being tested extends beyond whether talks can occur. Dialogue alone does not resolve underlying tensions. Without structural follow-through, it defers them. The more consequential question is whether a framework can emerge capable of organizing dialogue into a durable process. Such a structure must operate across political, security, and economic dimensions, maintain continuity beyond individual negotiation rounds, and remain resilient to shifts among major powers, whose influence now directly shapes regional outcomes.

Moments of potential de-escalation are often treated as endpoints. In reality, they are starting points. They reveal both the limits of existing systems and the contours of what may be required to replace or augment them. If this window closes, the next phase is unlikely to be managed through conventional diplomatic means. The consequences would extend beyond immediate actors, affecting global energy systems, trade routes, and broader geopolitical stability.

If the window holds, the question will shift from whether talks can be convened to whether they can be structured into something that endures. That question is not tactical. It is structural.



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