

PROSPECTS OF SOFT CBMs
TO JUMP-START PAKISTAN-INDIA ENGAGEMENT

AMBASSADOR MUHAMMAD HAROON SHAUKAT (RETD)
CENTRE FOR AEROSPACE & SECURITY STUDIES, LAHORE
AUGUST 2025

ABSTRACT

The research paper examines the role of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), including the soft ones, in lessening tensions between India and Pakistan. The paper reviews the historical context of India-Pakistan CBMs under different categories. It observes that whereas the CBMs improved the climate of trust and confidence, their success was short-lived. The lasting peace between the two nations could not be achieved because of the persistent challenges posed by deep-seated mistrust, political inflexibility, domestic opposition, institutional mistrust, and, above all, because of the unresolved dispute of Jammu and Kashmir. The May 2025 four-day conflict has put the bilateral relations in a deep freeze. Under the present circumstances, the study evaluates the potential of soft CBMs, starting with Track II dialogue to prepare favourable conditions for the resumption of bilateral engagement, which may eventually lead to the comprehensive dialogue process. As a first step, the paper identifies potential low-risk soft CBMs that may serve as a starting point for the resumption of substantive dialogue. The lasting results, however, hinge on mutual willingness to address all outstanding issues, especially the Kashmir dispute, and to institutionalise crisis-management mechanisms. In the end, the paper makes recommendations.

Keywords: India-Pakistan tensions, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), soft CBMs, Track II diplomacy, comprehensive dialogue process, Kashmir dispute.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES	4
3. BRIEF HISTORY OF PAKISTAN-INDIA CBMs	5
4. PAKISTAN-INDIA CBM MILESTONES	9
5. REVIEW OF PAKISTAN-INDIA SOFT CBMS	12
6. TRACK II DIPLOMACY	14
7. NEED FOR ENGAGEMENT	15
8. TRADITIONAL HURDLES IMPEDING PROGRESS.....	16
9. POTENTIAL OF SOFT CBMs TO JUMP-START INDIA-PAKISTAN DIALOGUE..	18
10. SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES	19
11. SUGGESTED SOFT CBMs	20
12. RECOMMENDATIONS	21
13. CONCLUSION	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY	23

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and Pakistan has been marked by long-standing tensions, frequent conflicts, and a deep-seated mistrust. The Jammu and Kashmir dispute has always been at the core of this troubled relationship. During different periods of heightened tensions, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) have been an effective tool for reducing tensions and creating an atmosphere conducive to peaceful cooperation. Despite improving atmospherics for relatively short durations and many times mitigating the chances of full-scale direct military confrontation, lasting peace has remained elusive.

India and Pakistan have concluded important risk-reduction CBMs. These include a hotline between the DGMOs, the prohibition of attacks on each other's nuclear installations (1988), an agreement on a ceasefire along the LOC in 2003, an agreement on 'advance notification' on military exercises and troop movements (1991), missile-test notifications (2005), and an agreement on reducing nuclear accident risk (2007). The agreement on a ceasefire along the LOC was reaffirmed in 2021.

The two countries also agreed in the past on various non-military soft CBMs focused on people-to-people contacts and addressing humanitarian concerns. These included initiatives undertaken between 2005 to 2008, to facilitate contacts between the divided Kashmiri families, the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service, and cross-LOC trade, etc. These measures provided temporary relief but were suspended by India. Similarly, Delhi-Lahore bus and Khokhrapar-Munabao train services, which once became symbols of goodwill, are no longer operational. Sports links, especially cricket

diplomacy and cultural exchanges, were instrumental in enhancing bilateral contacts and easing tensions.

The military CBMs or the hard CBMs are crucial for reducing escalation risks and conflict prevention, but are entirely reliant on state-level commitments and can be derailed by unexpected actions or incidents, causing high tensions. On the other hand, soft CBMs operate at the people-to-people level and are less susceptible to abrupt policy reversals. They are also a good first step to break an impasse in bilateral ties.

The Indian government's decision to repeal Article 370 of its constitution, in August 2019, which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir, downgraded bilateral ties to a new low. Earlier, in February of the same year, India, falsely accusing Pakistan of having a hand in the suicide bombing near Pulwama, carried out an air strike across the border in gross violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. The following day, the Pakistani Air Force (PAF) launched a retaliatory strike, in Indian held Kashmir from within Pakistan's airspace. In the ensuing aerial battle, India lost two aircraft, while one Indian pilot was captured.

The four-day conflict (May 6-10, 2025), following India's blatant aggression against Pakistan, based on its false flag operation in Pahalgam, resulted in Pakistan's decisive victory, thanks mainly to the Pakistan Air Force (PAF)'s lethal blow, downing seven Indian Air Force (IAF) sophisticated jets, including four Rafales, in the early hours of the conflict. The two nuclear neighbours were perilously close to a wider conflict when US President Donald Trump intervened, on India's request, to secure a ceasefire. This conflict, unprecedented in the use of next-generation technologies, the awe-inspiring

mastery of which handed a resounding victory to Pakistan, has further frozen the bilateral ties.

The two countries do not have any agreed-upon mechanism or arrangement in place for crisis management. There is a complete breakdown of bilateral contacts mainly due to India's intransigent position and hostile posture. Pakistan, on the other hand, has been extending its willingness for dialogue and diplomacy based on sovereign equality and mutual respect.

Under the present circumstances, the potential of soft CBMs remains underexplored. Considering the inherent dangers of the existing volatile situation between the two nuclear neighbours, it is desirable, as a first step, to initiate a process of soft CBMs to ease tensions and create conditions for the eventual resumption of a comprehensive dialogue between the two nations, based on sovereign equality and mutual respect.

The study will explore the following research questions:

1. Did CBMs, including the soft ones, help in mitigating India-Pakistan tensions in the past?
2. At the present juncture, can the 'soft CBMs', as a first step, improve the political atmosphere to jump-start the resumption of engagement between the two countries?
3. Potential obstacles likely to be confronted.

This research is based on the hypothesis that "soft CBMs can incrementally rebuild an atmosphere conducive for creating a foundation for more stable bilateral engagement."

This research paper follows a qualitative approach. Existing academic literature and published research will be used, along with consulting experts on India.

2. CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

The concept of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) emerged during the Cold War period. The main objective was conflict-prevention by easing tensions and reducing mistrust between the two major blocs of adversaries, equipped heavily with nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems.

The “Office of Disarmament Affairs” of the “United Nations” defines military CBMs:

“Confidence-building measures (CBMs) are planned procedures to prevent hostilities, to avert escalation, to reduce military tension, and to build mutual trust between countries”.¹

The “Helsinki Final Act” was signed by 35 countries at the end of the “Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe” (CSCE),” held in Helsinki, Finland, in 1975. It, inter alia, “covered wide-ranging issues” having “far-reaching effects” on the “US-Soviet relations.”²

“The Helsinki Final Act contained a document on CBMs.”³

By fostering transparency and communication, CBMs serve as a crucial tool of preventive diplomacy, helping rival nations to avoid unintended escalation. CBMs have acquired a great deal of importance in international discussions of the issues of disarmament and security.⁴ CBMs are essentially voluntary in nature. These can be unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral. CBMs can only be successful if the involved States

¹ *Military Confidence-Building Measures* – UNODA, n.d., accessed May 26, 2025, <https://disarmament.unoda.org/convarms/military-cbms/>.

² “Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian,” accessed June 24, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>.

³ Richard E Darilek, “East–West Confidence-Building: Defusing the Cold War in Europe,” *Stimson Center*, n.d.

⁴ Igor' Nikolaevič Ščerbak, *Confidence-Building Measures and International Security: The Political and Military Aspects: A Soviet Approach*, with Vereinte Nationen (United Nations, 1991).

wish to avoid escalation or conflict.⁵ While CBMs seek to establish trust between the antagonistic states, the paradox remains that

“Trust is required before CBMs can be negotiated”.⁶

The need for some limited confidence or political will between the adversarial states is essential before CBMs can be negotiated. This is particularly true in the case of India-Pakistan tensions.

Today, India-Pakistan relations are deeply strained. There is no communication between the two nuclear rivals. In the aftermath of the four-day war, tensions are running high. It appears an appropriate moment to introduce some soft CBMs to gradually lessen tensions and create conditions for the resumption of substantive and comprehensive dialogue to address all outstanding issues. The process could begin with backchannel contacts by non-officials or positive messaging through third countries, friendly to both sides.

3. BRIEF HISTORY OF PAKISTAN-INDIA CBMs

CBMs have played a considerable role in reducing mutual suspicions and promoting stability between India and Pakistan. The bilateral CBMs cover different domains, including nuclear, conventional military dimensions, political, economic, as well as soft CBMs like people-to-people contacts, including sports and cultural links. As Haider and Azad rightly contend in their well-researched article published in the *World Affairs*:

⁵ *Military Confidence-Building Measures – UNODA.*

⁶ Asma Khalid, “Confidence Building Measures Between India-Pakistan: Hope for Bilateral Peace,” *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, May 14, 2021, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/confidence-building-measures-between-india-pakistan-hope-for-bilateral-peace/>.

“...India and Pakistan could not achieve any concrete results except for a few brief periods of relative peaceful coexistence.”⁷

The book “Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building, and Reconciliation in South Asia,” edited by Michael Krepon, focuses on pragmatic CBMs between India and Pakistan such as a hotline between the DGs of the Military Operations Branches in both countries, pre-notification of military exercises and troop movements, and constitution of joint working groups, and other agreed efforts:

“To build trust and reduce the risk of misunderstanding that could trigger war.”⁸

The state of conflict and perennial tensions between India and Pakistan make it “one of the most protracted conflicts of contemporary times.”⁹ As mentioned earlier, at the heart of the “India-Pakistan conflict” is the “deep-rooted Kashmir dispute”, a consequence of the “complex dynamics of partition by the British.”¹⁰

A prominent Pakistani writer Nasim Zehra argues that the “nationalist narrative” has been programmed into the DNA of the people of India and Pakistan to perceive each other as enemies.¹¹ The populist narrative in Pakistan is that India is a hegemonic and expansionist state that has never accepted the existence of Pakistan. The Indians, on the other hand, tend to see Pakistan as an “extremist state” that allegedly “exports terrorism.”

⁷ Muhammad W. Haider and Tahir M. Azad, “THE ROLE OF CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND INDIA,” *World Affairs* 184, no. 3 (2021): 294–317, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200211030222>.

⁸ Michael Krepon, ed., *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building, and Reconciliation in South Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

⁹ Arndt Michael, “Realist-Constructivism and the India-Pakistan Conflict: A New Theoretical Approach for an Old Rivalry,” *Asian Politics and Policy* Volume 10, Number 1—Pages 100–114, no. Number 1 (2021): 100–114.

¹⁰ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “The Kashmir Dispute: Key to South Asian Peace,” *IPRI Journal* XIV, no. No 1 (2014).

¹¹ Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup: Events That Shook Pakistan* (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018).

In recent years, the BJP government's ultra-nationalist agenda, "Hindutva," and its hegemonic and hostile stance towards Pakistan and its relentless repression in the Indian illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) have become a major cause of tensions and conflict. A former Ambassador of Pakistan to India, Mr. Abdul Basit, in his book entitled "Hostility: A Diplomat's Diary on Pakistan India Relations", provides an unambiguous assessment that India, under BJP leadership, is drifting away from its democratic foundations towards a Hindutva-driven identity.¹²

"The Kashmir dispute has become the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint for the world."¹³

Alongside the history of strains and conflict, there have been repeated attempts to improve the atmosphere of mistrust by mutually agreed CBMs in different realms. These include military, nuclear, political and diplomatic, economic, people-to-people, and cultural domains. The objective of wide-ranging CBMs was always to reduce tensions and obviate the possibility of conflict between the two countries. However, such efforts could not achieve lasting results, except for a few brief periods of relatively peaceful coexistence.

In a research paper published in the "Indian Journal of Asian Affairs", Mr Mohammed Badrul Alam rightly observes:

"The India-Pakistan context, history reveals that CBMs are difficult to establish, but easy to disrupt and abandon."¹⁴

¹² Abdul Basit, *Hostility: A Diplomat's Diary on Pakistan-India Relations* (HarperCollins, 2021).

¹³ Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Kashmir & Nuclear War," *Publication of Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad*, n.d.

¹⁴ Mohammed Badrul Alam, "In Pursuit of Peace: A Micro Study of Confidence-Building Measures between India and Pakistan," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, no. Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (June-December 2010) (2010): 41-60 (20 pages).

For example, after hectic efforts, the signing of the landmark and historic Lahore Declaration on February 21, 1999, gave an agreed conceptual framework for the way forward. Unfortunately, soon thereafter, the peace process was derailed by the Kargil conflict¹⁵ from May to July 1999.

The period between 2003 and 2007 marked one of the most noteworthy phases of CBMs between India and Pakistan, leading to improved bilateral relations and sustained engagement. Following heightened military tensions in 2002, both countries initiated a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) in November 2003, which became a cornerstone for further diplomatic progress.

The following years saw a series of high-level talks, including the historic 2004 meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Pervez Musharraf, where both sides agreed to resolve disputes through a composite dialogue process. Key CBMs such as the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service (2005), cross-LoC trade, and enhanced people-to-people contacts, including cultural exchanges, fostered trust and cooperation, making it one of the most productive eras in India-Pakistan relations.

“Former Foreign Minister of Pakistan Mr Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri”, in his book “Neither a Hawk, Nor a Dove”, highlights the “intense backchannel diplomacy” between India and Pakistan “from 2004 to 2007”,

“When a momentous agreement on Kashmir was nearly finalised.”

Under “President Pervez Musharraf” and “Prime Minister Manmohan Singh”, both sides explored a “four-point framework” that included “demilitarisation, self-governance, and joint management of Kashmir” while maintaining the “territorial status

¹⁵ Sartaz Aziz, *Between Dreams and Realities: Some Milestones in Pakistan's History* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

quo.”¹⁶ Mr Kasuri claims that the deal was so advanced that draft agreements were exchanged, demonstrating unprecedented flexibility from both countries.

A research article entitled “Kashmir: ripe for resolution?” co-authored by Moeed Yusuf and Adil Najam, published in December 2009, concluded that the dispute may be more ‘ripe’ for resolution today than it has ever been in the past.¹⁷ The study argued that for the first time in the dispute's history, there was a growing convergence over a core element of the solution, i.e., granting autonomy to Kashmiris.

However, political instability in Pakistan and the 2008 Mumbai attacks derailed the progress.

4. PAKISTAN-INDIA CBM MILESTONES

Since their independence, “India and Pakistan” have mutually agreed on many agreements and arrangements aiming to generate confidence and reduce tensions.

“Major milestones” include the following:

1. “KARACHI CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT” 1949

Under the supervision of the “United Nations Commission for India” and Pakistan, the “Karachi Agreement of 1949” was signed by the military representatives of Pakistan and India, creating a “cease-fire line in Kashmir”, to be supervised by the “military observers of UNMOGIP.”¹⁸

2. “INDUS WATER TREATY” 1960

¹⁶ Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, *Neither a Hawk Nor a Dove* (2015).

¹⁷ Moeed Yusuf and Adil Najam, “Kashmir: Ripe for Resolution?,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 8 (2009): 1503–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590903321869>.

¹⁸ “UNITED NATIONS INDIA-PAKISTAN OBSERVATION MISSION (UNIPOM) - Background,” accessed July 5, 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unipombackgr.html>.

The “Indus Water Treaty” of 1960 was “brokered by the World Bank” and was designed to resolve the dispute emanating from the Indus water basin. It was “one of the oldest CBMs” between “India and Pakistan.”¹⁹

3. “HOTLINE” BETWEEN DGMOs

Since 1965, a hotline has been functional “between the DGMOs” of both countries.

4. “SHIMLA ACCORD” (1972)

Signed on July 2, 1972, “the Shimla Accord” between India and Pakistan aimed to create a framework to normalise relations, following the war of 1971. aimed at creating a framework to normalise relations following the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971.

“The two countries committed to resolving their disputes through peaceful means and promoting durable peace in the subcontinent.”²⁰

5. “AGREEMENT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT COMMISSION” (March 10, 1983)

6. “AGREEMENT ON THE PROHIBITION OF ATTACK AGAINST NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS AND FACILITIES” (December 31, 1988)

This agreement was signed on 31st December 1988 and ratified on 27th January 1991.²¹ The Agreement stipulates that both countries shall inform each other of their nuclear facilities and installations on 1st January of each calendar

¹⁹ Joaquin Matamis, “A Shared Interest: Why India and Pakistan Should Strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty • Stimson Center,” *Stimson Center*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/a-shared-interest-why-india-and-pakistan-should-strengthen-the-indus-waters-treaty/>.

²⁰ “Simla Agreement,” *Security Council Report*, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/simla-agreement.php>.

²¹ “Annual Exchange of Lists of Nuclear Installations and Facilities between Pakistan and India,” accessed September 19, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/annual-exchange-of-lists-of-nuclear-installations-and-facilities-between-pakistan-and-india>.

year. This particular exchange has continued, uninterrupted, since January 1, 1992.

7. “CULTURAL COOPERATION AGREEMENT” (December 31, 1988)

This agreement aimed at fostering cultural cooperation between the two countries.

8. “AGREEMENT ON ADVANCE NOTIFICATION ON MILITARY EXERCISES, MANEUVERS AND TROOP MOVEMENTS” (April 6, 1991)

This was a significant military CBM.

9. “CODE OF CONDUCT FOR THE TREATMENT OF DIPLOMATIC/CONSULAR PERSONNEL IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN” (August 19, 1992)

This agreement established detailed guidelines for the treatment of each other's diplomatic and consular staff.

10. “THE LAHORE DECLARATION” (February 21, 1999)

“A major milestone” in the history of CBMs between “India and Pakistan” was “the Lahore Declaration” of 1999. This agreement, signed during a period of relative thaw in bilateral relations, sought to address “nuclear risk reduction” and “conventional arms control” measures. It reiterated the commitment to “resolve all outstanding issues through dialogue” and reaffirmed the importance of CBMs in promoting “peace and stability.”

11. “AGRA SUMMIT 2001”

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf met in Agra to improve bilateral relations.

12. “COMPOSITE DIALOGUE PROCESS” (2004-2008)

The “Composite Dialogue process”, initiated in 2004, marked a significant phase in the history of CBMs between the two countries. This comprehensive

framework addressed various issues, including the “dispute over Jammu and Kashmir”, “peace and security”, terrorism, trade, and “people-to-people contacts”. It encompassed multiple engagement tracks, such as political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural, to build trust and foster cooperation

13. “AGREEMENT ON ADVANCE NOTIFICATION OF BALLISTIC MISSILE TESTS” (3 October 2005)

14. “AGREEMENT ON REDUCING THE RISK FROM ACCIDENTS RELATING TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS” (21 February 2007)

An Agreement on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons was signed on February 21, 2007. It was extended for 5-year term, at least three times.

15. “MORE RECENT CEASEFIRE AGREEMENTS”

Formal ceasefire along the “International Border” and the LOC, brought into effect at midnight of 25 November 2003, remained in effect till the Balakot incident. In 2021, a joint announcement by the DGMOs called for reverting to the 2003 cease-fire agreement along the “LOC in Jammu and Kashmir”. After the recent four-day war between “India and Pakistan”, in May 2025, the US “President Donald Trump” brokered a ceasefire between the two countries, on India’s request, which is periodically extended.

5. REVIEW OF PAKISTAN-INDIA SOFT CBMS

There is no universally accepted definition of Soft CBMs. However, Soft CBMs generally refer to mutually agreed or unilateral cooperative actions, essentially non-military measures intended to improve transparency, ease tensions, and promote trust between hostile states. Soft CBMs emphasise people-to-people, economic, cultural,

and diplomatic engagement to foster a more favourable environment for conflict resolution, in contrast to "hard" CBMs (such as arms control agreements or military transparency measures).

In his book "Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in India-Pakistan Relations", author Surinder Singh explains:

"... Non-military CBMs emphasise on such steps and decisions which can strengthen civilian communications, increase trade, travel, sports, cultural and economic cooperation...among hostile countries."²²

In the case of India-Pakistan perennial tensions, Soft CBMs, quite like the Hard Military CBMs, have had mixed results of having a period of success and then encountering difficulties. In the past, while non-military CBMs have helped to facilitate some degree of interaction and people-to-people exchanges, resulting in improving the climate of trust and confidence between India and Pakistan, they have not been sufficient to overcome the deep-seated political and security challenges that continue to define their relationship.

Mr T.C.A. Raghavan, a "former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan", in his book "The People Next Door: The Curious History of India-Pakistan Relations," among others, highlights "cultural similarities", familial ties, and civil society efforts that foster goodwill, such as "cricket diplomacy" and exchanges of artists but regrets that "institutionalised hostility", especially from "military and intelligence establishments" often stifle progress.²³

²² Surender Singh, *CBMs In India-Pakistan Relations* (K.K. Publications, 2021).

²³ T.C.A. Raghavan, *The People Next Door: The Curious History of India-Pakistan Relations* (Harper Collins, 2018).

Soft CBMs like “bus and train services”, “cultural exchanges”, “sports diplomacy”, especially cricketing relations, as well as bilateral trade, have had several stops, disruptions, and then a complete halt. This is a result of deep-rooted disputes, mutual suspicions, and a hostile mindset that has permeated the political and military leadership as well as the people in the two countries.

6. TRACK II DIPLOMACY

In case of “India-Pakistan tensions”, “Track II diplomacy” has served as a valuable instrument for managing unofficial contacts and improving the “climate of suspicion”, especially when official interactions collapse. In such situations, “Track II dialogue” has been helpful. In other words, it is “informal and unofficial interactions” involving “prominent personalities” like opinion makers, “former diplomats” and “military personnel”, as well as other stakeholders who can find solutions without being bound by “officially stated positions.”²⁴ For instance, the “Neemrana Dialogue”²⁵ initiated in the 1990s, brought together prominent non-official figures (“Indian strategist K. Subrahmanyam and Pakistani journalist Najam Sethi”), who explored CBMs. Jinnah Institute has also organised Track II dialogues, in recent years, under the nomenclature of ‘the Chao Track.’²⁶

“The Track II discussions”, are essentially “informal and non-binding”. Such discussions often generated ideas that later influenced official talks, demonstrating Track II’s role as a “testing ground for innovative proposals.”

²⁴ Peter Jones, “Track Two Diplomacy and the India-Pakistan Conflict,” in *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia* (Routledge, 2022).

²⁵ “India and Pakistan: Need for Creative Solutions? | IPCS,” accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=3068.

²⁶ “Track II Dialogues,” *Jinnah Institute*, n.d., accessed September 19, 2025, <https://jinnah-institute.org/events/track-ii-dialogues/>.

Importantly, “Track II seeks to keep various lines of communication open when official channels are not available.”²⁷ A case in point is “2008 Mumbai attacks”, which resulted in a rupture of relations. At that delicate time, backchannel “Track II engagements” helped prevent further escalation. The contacts took place between “Ambassador Niaz Naik” of Pakistan and a prominent “Indian journalist R.K. Mishra”. Earlier, during the time of the “Kargil conflict”, “Ambassador Niaz Naik” had played a similar role. Indeed, these instances demonstrate how Track II can act as a safety valve.²⁸

Despite being unofficial, Track II diplomacy has, on different occasions, paved the way for breakthroughs. The 1997 “Lahore Declaration” and the Musharraf-Singh era, “near agreement” on a “four-point proposal” on Kashmir, became possible through the back channel, Track II talks.

7. NEED FOR ENGAGEMENT

Since 2019, “Pakistan-India ties” have been frozen at a “record low point”. The annulment of the “special status of Jammu and Kashmir” as a result of the “revocation of Article” 370 of the “Indian constitution” intensified the freeze in bilateral relations, including the “down-gradation of diplomatic relations”. Following “Hindu nationalist policies” of “Hindutva”, Prime Minister “Modi’s government” has upped the ante of hostility towards Pakistan, firmly denying any contact or engagement with Pakistan, including any sporting links. The bilateral relations have reached a new level of impasse after “the four-day war” in May 2025. Under the circumstances, it is essential that the two countries engage with each other, albeit through back channels, to

²⁷ Samir Ahmad, *Track Two Diplomacy Between India and Pakistan: Peace Negotiations and Initiatives* (Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003454526>.

²⁸ Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland, eds., *Investigating Crises: South Asia’s Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories* (Stimson Center, 2018).

improve the climate of deep mistrust and to avoid the “risk of miscalculation” and confrontation.

8. TRADITIONAL HURDLES IMPEDING PROGRESS

As discussed earlier, the process of CBMs between India and Pakistan has been a start again and stop again phenomenon. Positive results were achieved, though they were not long-lasting. The following are the leading hurdles to lasting peace.

8.1 INDIA’S UNWILLINGNESS TO DISCUSS THE KASHMIR DISPUTE AND ITS UNRELENTING ATROCITIES AGAINST KASHMIRIS

In her book “Shaking Hands with Clenched Fists: The Grand Trunk Road to Confidence Building Measures between Pakistan & India”, “Asma Shakir Khawaja” rightly asserts that the continuing hostility between India and Pakistan is predominantly credited to the “bone of contention of the Kashmir dispute”.²⁹ From Pakistan’s perspective, India’s unwillingness to discuss the “final settlement of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute” and its continuing “inhuman repression of the innocent Kashmiris” are the primary obstacles to peace. Pakistan desires a solution in line with the “UNSC resolutions and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.” India on the other hand, considers Kashmir its integral part. At the same time, India's repression of the Kashmiri people continues unabated. Following the Indian actions in August 2019, relations have gone into deep freeze.

8.2 KASHMIRI FREEDOM STRUGGLE BRANDED AS CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM

²⁹ Asma Shakir Khawaja, *Shaking Hands with Clenched Fists: The Grand Trunk Road to Confidence Building Measures between Pakistan & India* (National Defence University E-9, 2020).

India conveniently masks the “freedom struggle of the Kashmiris” as “cross-border terrorism”, sponsored by Pakistan. After the 9/11, India was able to exploit the “anti-terrorism sentiment” to its advantage.

“Some Pakistan-based radical groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed were (allegedly) found involved in attacks in (Indian occupied) Kashmir.”³⁰

8.3 INDIA'S RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE ON CORE ISSUES

India avoids “meaningful discussions” on the “Jammu and Kashmir dispute”, water disputes (now it has unilaterally and illegally suspended the “Indus Water Treaty”), “Siachen, and Sir Creek”, etc., instead focusing solely on terrorism while ignoring Pakistan’s key concerns.

8.4 INDIA'S HAND IN TERROR ACTIVITIES IN PAKISTAN

Indian RAW is involved in actively fanning terrorism and targeted killings in “Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”. The arrest of “Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016” is solid proof of India’s direct involvement.³¹ India is also heavily involved in financing and patronising terrorism by the TTP, mainly originating from Afghanistan.

8.5 MILITARY CONFRONTATIONS AND ESCALATORY CYCLES

“India-Pakistan history is replete with the phenomenon of military engagements and escalatory cycles.”³²

³⁰ T.C.A. Raghavan, *The People Next Door: The Curious History of India-Pakistan Relations*.

³¹ Aqsa Iram Shahzadi and Amna Fazail, “A Historical Examination of Raw’s Funding of Baloch Insurgents and Its Representation in Pakistani Media,” *Journal of Law & Social Studies (JLSS)* Volume 5, no. Issue 3 (n.d.): 397–408.

³² T. V. Paul (Editor), *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

8.6 INDIA MEDIA'S ANTI-PAKISTAN PROPAGANDA

Indian media, driven by “hyper-Hindu nationalism” and “war-mongering”, e.g., calls for “surgical strikes” after every terror attack, poisons public opinion,³³ making peace efforts politically risky.

8.7 DOMESTIC OPPOSITION AND INSTITUTIONAL MISTRUST

Both countries have hardline lobbies that label concessions as “weakness,” constraining leaders.

There is “deep-seated suspicion and mistrust” between the “military establishments” of the two countries. This mistrust only grows after each covert operation of overt conflict. Keeping the above in mind, the former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan Mr Riaz Muhammad Khan, believes that

“India and Pakistan need permanent and reliable institutional mechanisms for diplomatic and political contacts to prevent or handle crises.”³⁴

9. POTENTIAL OF SOFT CBMs TO JUMP-START INDIA-PAKISTAN DIALOGUE

Given the “heightened tensions” and “hostile rhetoric” from both sides, in the aftermath of the “May 2025 4-day hostilities” in which next-generation lethal weaponry was used, it is essential to “cool down temperatures” and find “ways and means” to resume “constructive engagement” between the “two nuclear neighbours”. The need for dialogue is all the more important as the threshold of justifying an attack across

³³ “Indian Media Fuels Panic with Disinformation | Al Jazeera Media Institute,” accessed July 15, 2025, <http://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/3188>.

³⁴ Riaz Muhammad Khan, *CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT Challenges in Pakistan-India Relations*, n.d.

sovereign borders has been reduced to a very low level, as well as the high risk of such conflicts spiralling out of control.

At present, militarily, diplomatically, and morally, Pakistan is not in a position of weakness vis-à-vis India. There is little international sympathy for India in the aftermath of the “four-day war” and its “unilateral suspension” of the IWT. Pakistan can consider undertaking positive initiatives to engage with India. It is the right moment for contacts to be re-established between the two countries, as a first step, either through a third party or by adopting the tried and tested “Track II diplomacy”.

10. SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES

Initially, through “non-official and informal channels”, the idea of “Soft CBMs” may be advanced. The first short-term objective would be to “melt the ice” by agreeing on cooperative actions that are “people-centric”, “low-cost and low-risk”, essentially to improve the atmosphere. The ultimate objective is the full resumption of a “comprehensive dialogue”, covering all the divisive issues, especially the “Jammu and Kashmir dispute”, on the basis of “mutual respect and sovereign equality”. Eventually, India and Pakistan should have a “reliable institutional mechanism” for crisis management and conflict prevention.³⁵

³⁵ Riaz Muhammad Khan, *CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT Challenges in Pakistan-India Relations*.

11. SUGGESTED SOFT CBMs

The following are some suggested “Soft CBMs”:

1. Consideration could be given to adopting some unilateral voluntary soft “Transparency and Confidence Building Measures” (TCBMs). For example, reaching out to favourable Indian opinion makers and engaging them for positive messaging.
2. Encouragement of “Track II dialogue” to gradually pave the way for a firm understanding on both sides of the desirability of the “resumption of a comprehensive dialogue on all major issues”.
3. Establishing sporting links is a “well-tested soft CBM”. An effort is required for the resumption of sports links, especially cricket and hockey, including the tri-series to be arranged in third countries.
4. Common environmental challenges, non-political in nature, such as winter smog, could be easy starting points for joint collaborative actions.
5. Limited opening of religious tourism in both countries at selected locations. For example, Kartarpur and Nankana Sahib in Pakistan. On the Indian side, it could be Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan, and the Hazrat Nizamuddin Tomb in Delhi.
6. Selected media interaction to build confidence. Pakistani and Indian private channels could collaborate and initiate a series of programmes on topics of relevance to easing tensions between the two countries.
7. People-to-people contacts, including invitations to non-political opinion makers in cultural events.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Considering the established usefulness of “soft CBMs”, it is desirable that back-channel, Track II contacts be established with India, with mutual consent, to ease tensions.
2. “Soft CBMs” may be incrementally expanded. The core objective to be the eventual resumption of a comprehensive dialogue on all major issues, based on sovereign equality and mutual respect.
3. Pakistan could consider some voluntary, “Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures (TCBMs)”, to occupy a higher moral ground internationally.
4. On a parallel track, intense diplomatic pressure may be brought to bear on India, exposing its patronage of terrorism in Pakistan, its illegal unilateral suspension of the IWT, its repression of Kashmiris, and its hegemonic policies in the region.
5. Fresh initiatives must be undertaken to forge deeper partnerships with South Asian countries, including with the involvement of China, especially with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. The effective extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics would enhance Pakistan’s profile.
6. Pakistan should not make any unilateral concessions on any key issue to India.
7. Pakistan may formally propose a bilateral crisis management and conflict prevention mechanism to prevent accidental miscalculations and to control the escalation of any future crises.

13. CONCLUSION

Given the impasse in bilateral relations with India, worsening with the annulment of Article 370 in 2019, and culminating in a war in May 2025, it is in the interest of both countries to restart engagement. Despite many obstacles, CBMs did succeed in the past in ameliorating the atmosphere and reducing tensions between the two countries, especially during 2002-2007 period. However, such measures were not enough to create conditions for lasting peace. The key reasons for the lack of lasting progress are opposing threat perceptions, inflexibility in official stances, and India's inability to recognise Kashmir as a fundamental dispute between the two countries. India's intransigence and hubris have increased manifold during the BJP-led Prime Minister Modi's era, driven by its "Hindutva ideology".

However, the two nuclear neighbours, well equipped with military wherewithal, cannot afford to remain disengaged, and thereby risk accidental miscalculation and escalation. Under the circumstances, it is desirable to initiate Track II, back-channel communications, to agree on risk-free soft CBMs to improve the political climate for the resumption of formal engagement. The objective would be a sincere recommencement of a comprehensive dialogue on all outstanding issues, including the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, on the basis of sovereign equality and mutual respect. Both countries should also discuss a "reliable institutional mechanism" for "crisis management and conflict prevention".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmad, Samir. *Track Two Diplomacy Between India and Pakistan: Peace Negotiations and Initiatives*. Routledge, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003454526>.
- “Annual Exchange of Lists of Nuclear Installations and Facilities between Pakistan and India.” Accessed September 19, 2025. <https://mofa.gov.pk/annual-exchange-of-lists-of-nuclear-installations-and-facilities-between-pakistan-and-india>.
- Aqsa Iram Shahzadi and Amna Fazail. “A Historical Examination of Raw’s Funding of Baloch Insurgents and Its Representation in Pakistani Media.” *Journal of Law & Social Studies (JLSS)* Volume 5, no. Issue 3 (n.d.): 397–408.
- Arndt Michael. “Realist-Constructivism and the India-Pakistan Conflict: A New Theoretical Approach for an Old Rivalry.” *Asian Politics and Policy* Volume 10, Number 1—Pages 100–114, no. Number 1 (2021): 100–114.
- Asma Shakir Khawaja. *Shaking Hands with Clenched Fists: The Grand Trunk Road to Confidence Building Measures between Pakistan & India*. National Defence University E-9, 2020.
- Basit, Abdul. *Hostility: A Diplomat’s Diary on Pakistan-India Relations*. HarperCollins, 2021.
- Darilek, Richard E. “East–West Confidence-Building: Defusing the Cold War in Europe.” *Stimson Center*, n.d.
- Haider, Muhammad W., and Tahir M. Azad. “THE ROLE OF CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND INDIA.” *World Affairs* 184, no. 3 (2021): 294–317.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200211030222>.
- “India and Pakistan: Need for Creative Solutions? | IPCS.” Accessed July 14, 2025.
https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=3068.
- “Indian Media Fuels Panic with Disinformation | Al Jazeera Media Institute.” Accessed July 15, 2025. <http://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/3188>.
- Ishtiaq Ahmad. “Kashmir & Nuclear War.” *Publication of Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad*, n.d.
- Jones, Peter. “Track Two Diplomacy and the India-Pakistan Conflict.” In *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia*. Routledge, 2022.
- Khalid, Asma. “Confidence Building Measures Between India-Pakistan: Hope for Bilateral Peace.” *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, May 14, 2021. <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/confidence-building-measures-between-india-pakistan-hope-for-bilateral-peace/>.

- Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri. *Neither a Hawk Nor a Dove*. 2015.
- Krepon, Michael, ed. *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building, and Reconciliation in South Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
- Lalwani, Sameer, and Hannah Haegeland, eds. *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*. Stimson Center, 2018.
- Matamis, Joaquin. "A Shared Interest: Why India and Pakistan Should Strengthen the Indus Waters Treaty • Stimson Center." *Stimson Center*, June 27, 2024. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/a-shared-interest-why-india-and-pakistan-should-strengthen-the-indus-waters-treaty/>.
- "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian." Accessed June 24, 2025. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>.
- Military Confidence-Building Measures – UNODA*. n.d. Accessed May 26, 2025. <https://disarmament.unoda.org/convarms/military-cbms/>.
- Mohammed Badrul Alam. "In Pursuit of Peace: A Micro Study of Confidence-Building Measures between India and Pakistan." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, no. Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (June-December 2010) (2010): 41-60 (20 pages).
- Nasim Zehra. *From Kargil to the Coup: Events That Shook Pakistan*. Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018.
- Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "The Kashmir Dispute: Key to South Asian Peace." *IPRI Journal* XIV, no. No 1 (2014).
- Riaz Muhammad Khan. *CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT Challenges in Pakistan-India Relations*. n.d.
- Sartaz Aziz. *Between Dreams and Realities: Some Milestones in Pakistan's History*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Ščerbak, Igor' Nikolaevič. *Confidence-Building Measures and International Security: The Political and Military Aspects: A Soviet Approach*. With Vereinte Nationen. United Nations, 1991.
- "Simla Agreement." *Security Council Report*, n.d. Accessed July 5, 2025. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/simla-agreement.php>.
- Singh, Surender. *CBMs In India-Pakistan Relations*. K.K. Publications, 2021.
- T. V. Paul (Editor). *The India-Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- T.C.A. Raghavan. *The People Next Door: The Curious History of India-Pakistan Relations*. Harper Collins, 2018.

“Track II Dialogues.” *Jinnah Institute*, n.d. Accessed September 19, 2025.
<https://jinnah-institute.org/events/track-ii-dialogues/>.

“UNITED NATIONS INDIA-PAKISTAN OBSERVATION MISSION (UNIPOM) - Background.” Accessed July 5, 2025.
<https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/unipombackgr.html>.

Yusuf, Moeed, and Adil Najam. “Kashmir: Ripe for Resolution?” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 8 (2009): 1503–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590903321869>.