

WEAPONIZING SPORTS: INDIA'S QUEST TO APPEAR MORE MUSCULAR IN ITS FOREIGN POLICY

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Image Courtesy: Pinterest

“Cricket for peace is my mission, and I have come with that spirit.”*

(President General Muhammad Ziaul Haq, while talking to media after watching Pak-India match at Jaipur, India on February 21, 1987.)

Role of Sports in Harbouring Peace

Sports and recreation play a vital role in advancing human life. While sports are instrumental in individual and social life of human beings, at times they are also employed to harbor peace, foster goodwill, and enhance relations. Even in the ancient Greece, the hostile city-states used to revert to truce in their wars in order to compete in games. Given the nature of sports being a universal tool for cultural outreach and people-to-people exchanges, states have added them to their diplomatic toolkit with a view to both projecting their soft power and advancing their national interest through other means. In the initial phase of their contacts, China and the United States employed the famous ‘ping-pong diplomacy’ to break the ice and shape a favourable environment for practitioners to carve out avenues for further engagement and eventual rapprochement.

History of Sports Diplomacy between India & Pakistan

Amid a myriad of thorny issues between India and Pakistan, the people of the two countries share a remarkable zest for sports, especially cricket (and hockey), which can potentially play a part in

* Shaikh Aziz, “A leaf from history: Cricket diplomacy checks war pitch,” Daily Dawn, November 15, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1219397>.

bridging differences at various levels and promoting a more conducive environment. In 1987, for instance, the two countries had reached the brink of war, but to the great surprise for India's political leadership, General Ziaul Haq sprang up what he termed as "*Cricket for Peace*" and landed in India to watch a cricket match between the two teams. Before leaving for the stadium, General Ziaul Haq convincingly underscored to Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that the world could not afford a nuclear war between the two South Asian arch-rivals. It was possibly this warning and Zia's positive gestures during the test match in Jaipur that brought the leadership of the two countries to the table the following day.¹

Following the tit-for-tat nuclear tests in May 1998, the Pakistan cricket team visited India for a two-test series in 1999. According to Shaharyar M. Khan, Pakistan's former Foreign Secretary and Chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), the public acclaim of this bilateral series ultimately provided much-needed basis for Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's 'bus yatra' through Wagah in February 1999.² During the ambitious peace process of the early 2000s, the political leadership once again reverted to sports diplomacy when the two countries played each other on annual basis from 2004 till 2007. In the aftermath of 26/11, the two countries revived bilateral cricket for a brief period, and a limited-over series was played in December 2012 and January 2013, so far the last at the bilateral level.

These instances did not merely accentuate the competitive enthusiasm of the two cricketing nations, but also provided an opportunity for the leadership and the peoples to use the energy generated in the playground to advance diplomacy as well as people-to-people ties. President Ziaul Haq and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi agreed to further engage on tough political and security issues after the Jaipur cricket match. In 2005, the two countries agreed to carry forward the peace process when President Pervez Musharraf visited India to watch a cricket match.³ In an ice-breaking effort, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani joined his Indian counterpart at Mohali's cricket stadium to watch the India-Pakistan semi-final in 2011 Cricket World Cup.

This *soft-to-hard* engagement approach, however, met a serious blow as India began using sports as a weapon as part of its so-called 'muscular' approach towards Pakistan, seek to extend its hegemonic designs to the playgrounds as well, and politicize Pakistan-India sports ties since 2014.

¹ Aziz, "A Leaf from History: Cricket diplomacy checks war pitch."

² Shaharyar M. Khan, *Cricket: A Bridge of Peace*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005), P. 92.

³ By Soutik Biswas, "Pervez Musharraf: Pakistan Leader's Love-hate Relationship with India," February 5, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61769226>.

How India Weaponized Sports?

As noted, bilateral sports competitions offered a window of opportunity to defuse tensions even at times when the forces of the two countries were on a high alert and war appeared imminent. This space has, however, been systematically closed in the post-2014 Indian foreign policy approach towards Pakistan under Narendra Modi. It is a part of New-Delhi's 'over-securitization' of a range of domains from trade to water to sports. India has been employing multiple ways to advance this agenda -- including calling-off bilateral fixtures; denying visas to sports-stars; trying to influence the international sports bodies to harm Pakistan; refusing to play Pakistan even in the multilateral tournaments; trying to isolate Pakistan in sports; terrorizing local Muslims and Kashmiri people cheering Pakistani teams; making efforts to snatch Pakistan's due share in hosting international games; and, above all, projecting Pakistan as a dangerous, insecure country, unsuited to hosting mega international sports events.

As mentioned above, sports at times managed to rescue the India-Pakistan relationship when the two countries appeared to be at the brink of a conflict. In recent years, however, New Delhi has not only blocked every effort to allow the Indian team to play Pakistan bilaterally, but also used the sports grounds to project a hyper-nationalistic, even a militaristic, posture. The cricketing community was shocked to see the Indian players wearing army-style caps when they entered the ground to play Australia in March 2019.⁴ This was just a few days after India's military misadventure in the Balakot area, suitably and forcefully responded to by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). In the past, the cricket, hockey, and kabaddi stars from the two sides had traveled to the other side and were warmly greeted as the ambassadors of peace, on and off the field. Indian cricketers wearing camouflaged caps not only got away with this shocking image, but also in the process further squeezed the space for people-to-people exchanges.

Delaying or denying visas to Pakistani sport-stars, journalists, general public, and even the international players of Pakistani origin has been used by India all too frequently. Pakistan's junior hockey team could not participate in the Junior Hockey World Cup 2016 in Lucknow as the players were denied visa.⁵ Later, in the Hockey World Cup of 2018 held in Odisha, Pakistani journalists were

⁴ Krishna N. Das and Amlan Chakraborty, "Indian cricketers wear army camouflage caps as patriotism grips country," Reuters, March 8, 2019, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sports/indian-cricketers-wear-army-camouflage-caps-as-patriotism-grips-country-idUSKCN1QP18S/>.

⁵ Abdul Ghaffar, "India Did Not Grant Visas to Pakistan's Junior Hockey Team for World Cup: PHF," *Daily Dawn*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1299845>.

not granted visa by New Delhi.⁶ Going further, this Indian approach has affected even international sports figures having Pakistani roots. Saqib Mahmood, a veteran English cricketer, could not travel to India with his team in 2019 and 2024 because his visa application was rejected due to his Pakistani origin.⁷ On the other side, Pakistan has, on many occasions in the past decade, facilitated visits of the Indian sports teams to participate in regional or international events in kabaddi, tennis, and other sports.⁸

India has also been using its clout and capital share to pressurize international sports bodies against Pakistan. India decided to withdraw from the 2017 Sultan Johor Hockey Cup in Malaysia citing Pakistan's presence in the tournament. Later, the International Hockey Federation (IHF), led by an Indian, excluded the Pakistan team from the tournament at India's behest.⁹ Recently, India made every effort to convince the International Cricket Council (ICC) and top cricketing bodies to shift the 2025 edition of the Champions Trophy from Pakistan. Failing this, India refused to allow its team to travel to Pakistan and will play its matches in the UAE. In contrast, despite the Indian team barred from visiting Pakistan for the Asia Cup 2023, Pakistan sent its national team to play the Cricket World Cup in India, even at the cost of some domestic criticism.

India's approach must be seen in its context. It is driven by a zero-sum perspective, where a gain for Pakistan in terms of positive contribution to the world of sports is seen as a loss for India. Itself a victim of terrorism, Pakistan could not host international teams for a number of years. Now, when international cricket has finally returned to the country and every other team has visited Pakistan, India is busy trying to sow doubts about Pakistan's security and safety measures and deny its rightful share in the international calendar. In its attempts to project a false image of Pakistan in the international community, India's conduct is undermining the very essence and spirit of cricket—a gentlemen's game and a bridge of peace.

While India exerts pressure on international sports bodies and teams, its myopic and self-serving conduct is causing palpable damage not only to sports, but also to the possibilities of bridging gaps

⁶ Sandip Sikdar, "Hockey World Cup 2018: Pakistan Journalists Denied Visa to Cover Event," *Hindustan Times*, November 28, 2018, https://www.hindustantimes.com/other-sports/hockey-world-cup-2018-pakistan-journalists-denied-visa-to-cover-event/story-5zUPAb9ySzSgRp2fgfJg4H.html#google_vignette.

⁷ Koushik Paul, "IND Vs ENG: Relief for Saqib Mahmood, England as Pakistan-origin Pacer Granted India Visa After Initial Delay," *Mint*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.livemint.com/sports/cricket-news/ind-vs-eng-relief-for-saqib-mahmood-england-as-pakistan-origin-pacer-granted-india-visa-after-initial-delay-11737113055098.html>.

⁸ Namit Kumar, "'We Are Well Looked After', Says Indian Davis Cup Manager on Landing in Pakistan," *The Indian Express*, January 30, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/tennis/we-are-well-looked-after-says-indian-davis-cup-manager-on-landing-in-pakistan-9133546/>.

⁹ Syed Intikhab Ali, "Pak Olympians Surprised by India's Boycott," *The News International*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/199468-Pak-Olympians-surprised-by-Indias-boycott>.

and improving the environment of bilateral relations. Pakistan's state, society and sports survived, and flourished, despite tough challenge of terrorism in the recent past. Now that Pakistan is being viewed as an attractive destination by international sports-stars, tourists, and investors, New Delhi's smear against Islamabad rings hollow and does cause international reputation to India.

Conclusion

In the past, spectators in India would see Bal Thackeray's threats to Pakistani players and his supporters digging pitches when an Indo-Pak match was around the corner.¹⁰ This Bal Thackeray approach seems to have been adopted by the Indian state and sports institutions over the past decade. Instead of using sports to project the country's soft image and foster goodwill, India's attempts to advance its narrow political interests of 'isolating' Pakistan also through sports only smack of weaponizing sports. It is up to the international community to uphold the true spirit of sports and take steps for defeating the Indian design of strangulating their very essence.

¹⁰ ESPN Digital Media Private Limited, "India Pledges ``Fool-proof'' Security to Pakistani Cricketers (9 January 1999)," *ESPNCricinfo*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.espnricinfo.com/story/india-pledges-fool-proof-security-to-pakistani-cricketers-9-january-1999-80265>.