

It is time to unlock India and Pakistan's soft diplomacy

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Abstract

For decades, two South Asian countries, India and Pakistan, find themselves in a conflict which is far from ending. The conflict over the territorial status of Kashmir, three wars to attempt regaining control over this territory, painful partition of British India in 1947 and fundamental political, economic and cultural differences make current bilateral relations more complicated. At the same time, all hope is not lost, as there is a soft power instrument that is able to decrease tensions. It is cricket. Cricket is a very popular sport in South Asia, and it has a unique ability to unify people of different nationalities and religious backgrounds. Cricket diplomacy, firstly suggested by former President of Pakistan Zia Ul Haq in 1987, became the most effective confidence-building measure in ensuring peace in the region. At the same time, cricket diplomacy has a checkered history, mainly because states do not use it regularly and because cricket matches due to their competitive nature are associated with war. The article explores in detail the strengths and weaknesses of cricket diplomacy and suggests some recommendations on how to improve it.

Keywords: cricket, soft diplomacy, sport, India, Pakistan

I. Introduction

Bilateral relations between India and Pakistan remain complicated and fragile. The political status of Kashmir, the disputed territory between two countries, is not defined yet and the current situation is far from being resolved. Kashmir is considered as a bone-of-contention in bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. Countries fought three wars in an attempt to gain control over this territory. At the same time, in a world where tensions are high and conflicts persist, non-traditional approaches can be used to bridge the divide between conflicting nations. Sport diplomacy can be such a tool. In the case of India

and Pakistan, cricket diplomacy can help to reduce tensions between two nations.

Cricket diplomacy refers to the use of cricket, which is a very popular sport, to improve bilateral relations between nations. The concept was suggested by former president of Pakistan, General Zia Ul Haq, when he traveled to India to witness an India-Pakistan Test match in Jaipur in 1987. Cricket diplomacy is a strategic diplomatic tool which encourages engagement between conflicting states through matches and tournaments and blurs the religious and ethnic differences, as people would be united by a common passion for sport.

Cricket is considered to be the 2nd most popular sport after football and it is majorly played in South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.¹ According to Crick (2009), after India gained independence in 1947, cricket became associated with patriotism, lost its association with colonialism, and became a way to develop national identity.² Moreover, India and Pakistan are consistently doing good in this sport, meaning that this is a source of national pride. Cricket is a national game that occupies a very important place in Indian society. As former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh acknowledged, “*I must say... nothing brings the people of the subcontinent together more than our love for cricket and Bollywood.*”³ The same applies to Pakistan, as cricket became a “*de facto monopoly in the country's sporting world.*”⁴

At the same time, despite the popularity of this sport, there are two problems associated with cricket diplomacy. Firstly, cricket diplomacy has a checkered history. Sometimes it helped to decrease tensions and sometimes it did not. Sometimes this game brought two conflicting nations together and sometimes it provoked even higher tension and elevated a sense of competition. Secondly, another problem is that there is a certain reluctance to continue to use cricket as a diplomatic tool. This is disappointing, as due its special place in Indian and Pakistani societies, cricket diplomacy has the potential to relieve fundamental socio-economic, religious, ethnic and cultural differences between countries and also inside them. A “soft diplomacy tool” is needed to relax tensions between the two nuclear states. Political and military escalation creates unnecessary local instability and poses a security threat to other subcontinental states such as Bangladesh. Thus, there is a

need to restart soft diplomacy, which is non-coercive and non-military by definition.

Current research does not offer a lot of suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of sport diplomacy. Therefore, in order to tackle this issue, this article will explore the main strengths and weaknesses of cricket diplomacy and explore the possibilities of improvement of this soft diplomacy tool.

II. The ongoing relevance of cricket diplomacy

Cricket diplomacy is perhaps the most effective form of communication in South Asia right now.⁵ Cricket diplomacy possesses several key strengths that make it a potent tool in international relations. Most importantly, it provides a neutral and non-political platform where conflicting states can engage in friendly competition, setting aside diplomatic complexities and disputes. Secondly, the popularity of cricket allows it to reach diverse audiences, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby promoting people-to-people connections. Thirdly, the informal and relaxed atmosphere of cricket matches often promotes positive spirit and sets a certain foundation for personal rapport between leaders, thus facilitating diplomatic negotiations. Cricket diplomacy, as any other type of diplomacy, puts the power of words above the power of weapons.

Any type of sport diplomacy proves that sportsmen are important diplomatic actors, and Cricket diplomacy is no exception. For example, in 2005, when the year was declared as the International Year of Sport & Physical Education, the national cricket team of India & Pakistan were appointed as “Spokesperson” to promote the objectives of the year. The teams were selected due to their

¹ Srijita Chakrabarti, *Analysing India-Pakistan Cricket Diplomacy*, (Youth Policy Review, 2022).

² Emily Crick, *Contact Sport: Cricket in India-Pakistan Relations Since 1999*, (South Asian Survey, 2009) .

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ma Chunying, *Cricket and National Identity in Pakistan*, (Punjab University, n.d.).

⁵ Roshni Chakraborty, *Cricket Diplomacy and Nationalism in South Asia*, (Harvard International Review, 2018) .

success in promoting peace and overcoming tensions between the two conflicting countries.⁶

Cricket diplomacy is a diplomatic tool that Indians and Pakistanis have used throughout many years, thus proving that it is the most effective and well worked-out method of maintaining relationships. This soft diplomacy tool has been used since 1987. It was perfect timing for cricket diplomacy. India and Pakistan were on the brink of a new war because of India's alleged plan to attack Kahuta's nuclear installation complex in 1982-1984 and the Brasstack crisis that followed. Since then, Indian and Pakistani cricket teams have toured neighboring countries to play Test matches. In January-February 1999, the Pakistani team toured India, despite the new crisis fueled by nuclear tests in both countries in 1998. More than 40,000 Indian spectators gave a standing ovation in Chennai.⁷ Then manager of the Pakistan cricket team during the tour and later chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, Shaharyar Muhammad Khan, remembered how this tournament provided communicational opportunities and conversational space for both countries. In his book *Cricket: A Bridge of Peace* he wrote: "I had not intended to publish my impression until the unexpectedly warm welcome by the people of India to the enemy team...I realized cricket could act as a bridge of peace."⁸ This is an example of how soft diplomacy can transform the views of a particular nation at an individual level. Cricket is perceived as an effective diplomatic tool even by those who

were skeptical at first. Cricket, unlike any other sport, is able to unite people even though there is a difficult political situation. Moreover, despite alarming signals coming from rival countries, Indians and Pakistanis realized that military escalation is not the best way to maintain relationships. Cricket diplomacy can be compared to a calm that happens after the storm.

In 2004, when the Indian cricket team toured Pakistan, it was received with a warm welcome. That cricket tournament helped build friendly relations as Indian players started to be admired in Pakistan. 2004 became an important year for restarting cricket diplomacy. Then Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee and President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf met in Islamabad on the margins of a SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) summit.⁹ During this dialogue, leaders discussed not only the issue of Kashmir, but also agreed to restart the cricketing series. This meant that India would undertake the first full cricket tour of Pakistan since 1989. The thaw began after a 14-year freeze in bilateral full test series.¹⁰ Media also observed facts like Pakistani fans draping in the Indian flag and the absence of violence and riots, which had occasionally happened in previous cricket tournaments. As a result, cricket diplomacy managed to ensure significant progress in the way Indians and Pakistanis perceive each other. This sport helped people to decrease the influence of politics in relations with neighbors and enjoy a common passion.

The next three years were also successful for cricket diplomacy. For example, when the Pakistani team came to India, it was cordially received by Indian fans. That era

⁶ Ibtesam Mazahir, Dr. Aazadi Fateh Muhammad, Safeena Yaseen, *Examining Sports/Cricket Diplomacy as a Tool to Instigate Political Interests: A Comparative Analysis of Media Portrayal of Cricketing Relations between India and Pakistan*, (PalArch Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, 2020).

⁷ Muhammad Tasleem Ashraf, Dr. Ali Shan Shah & Muhammad Adnan, *Pakistan-India Relations: Bridging the Gap through Cricket Diplomacy for Peace and Political Integration*, (Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 2022).

⁸ Shakeel Ahmad Shahid, Kauser Perveen, *Cricket for Politics and Peace; from 1987 to 2007 Cricket World Cup between India and Pakistan*, (International Journal of Science Culture and Sport, 2015).

⁹ Muhammad Tasleem Ashraf, Dr. Ali Shan Shah & Muhammad Adnan, *Pakistan-India Relations: Bridging the Gap through Cricket Diplomacy for Peace and Political Integration*, (Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 2022)

¹⁰ Shakeel Ahmad Shahid, Kauser Perveen, *Cricket for Politics and Peace; from 1987 to 2007 Cricket World Cup between India and Pakistan*, (International Journal of Science Culture and Sport, 2015).

between 2004 and 2008 is considered as “the golden era” of political relations between India and Pakistan.¹¹ This is an example of reciprocity, when both sides were clearly interested in decreasing existing tensions. Indian and Pakistani teams became ambassadors of goodwill.

Cricket diplomacy also proved to be powerful in the context of building personal relations between two rival leaders. For example, in 2005 President Musharraf visited India on the invitation of Prime Minister Singh. Given the state of relations between two countries, the visit symbolized the readiness for a continued dialogue. Cricket series were not stopped even when the Samjhauta Express train suffered a bomb attack in February 2007, in which many innocent people lost their lives.¹²

In 2011, Singh invited Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani to watch together the semifinals of the Cricket World Cup between their respective countries. Then Gilani invited Singh to visit Pakistan. Based on this warming relationship, the Pakistani team went to India to play three One Day International games and a T-20 game,¹³ despite the terrorist attack on the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008. Thus, once again cricket diplomacy showed itself as a tool that can break the ice in personal relations. Personal rapport between leaders becomes increasingly important in modern international relations. At the same time, a certain locomotive is needed to keep up the relations. Soft power like sport diplomacy can certainly work in this situation.

¹¹ Saeed Khan, Amna Ameer Ali, *Public Diplomacy between Pakistan and India: An Analysis*, (Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, 2019).

¹² Ibtesam Mazahir, Dr. Aazadi Fateh Muhammad, Safeena Yaseen, *Examining Sports/Cricket Diplomacy as a Tool to Instigate Political Interests: A Comparative Analysis of Media Portrayal of Cricketing Relations between India and Pakistan*, (PalArch Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, 2020)

¹³ Shakeel Ahmad Shahid, Kauser Perveen, *Cricket for Politics and Peace; from 1987 to 2007 Cricket World Cup between India and Pakistan*, (International Journal of Science Culture and Sport, 2015)

Current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, is also interested in using cricket diplomacy to improve bilateral relations. In 2015, he openly spoke about the wish to restart cricket diplomacy. Moreover, in September 2023 the Vice President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), Rajeev Shukla, emphasized that “cricket has always been a bridge between the people of India and Pakistan, transcending political differences” and urged “not to mix politics with cricket.”¹⁴ In fact, the relations between the BCCI and the PCB (Pakistani Cricket Board) have always been smooth and continuously friendly.¹⁵

Perceptions of cricket diplomacy by ordinary citizens are also mostly positive. Kusha Anand, a research fellow at University College London, interviewed several teachers in India and Pakistan about their opinion on this soft diplomacy tool. One of the responses from Delhi said that “We both support the best players, either Indian or Pakistani.”¹⁶ Another opinion was that there were “no learners talking against Pakistan or anti-Pakistan, so there were no anti-Pakistani feelings.”¹⁷ Teachers in Lahore, Pakistan, share similar opinions. For example, one of them said that cricket is a great opportunity for entertainment and extensive engagement with India: “Students often say this to me: Pakistan and Indian cricketers should be together.”¹⁸ Therefore, seeing that most of the youth are in favor of diplomacy instead of confrontation is quite promising. Perhaps, cricket diplomacy will gain stronger momentum once they will be in charge of their countries.

The role of the media in positive portrayal of cricket matches also cannot be overlooked. For example, Mazahir, Fateh Muhammad & Yaseen (2020) conducted an

¹⁴ Nagpur Today, *Is India-Pakistan “cricket diplomacy” still a thing?* (Nagpur Today, 2023).

¹⁵ David Hassan & Ciaran Acton, *Sport and Contested Identities: Contemporary Issues and Debates*, (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶ Kusha Anand, *Teaching India-Pakistan Relations*, (UCL Press, 2023).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

investigation on how cricket is framed in Indian and Pakistani media. Researchers found that sports/cricket is usually portrayed by news media in such a way that it strengthens relations between India and Pakistan both in terms of politics and culture. Out of all articles used during their research, positive tones are followed in major share of the articles at 75.8%, whereas, 11.1 % of the articles were reported with negative tones followed by 10.0 % for the ambivalent and 3.0 % for the neutral tones respectively. Out of 75.8% positively written articles, 32% are written in Pakistan and 43.8% in India. Also, there is less negative coverage of the news by Pakistani media (4.3%) compared to Indian media (6.8%).¹⁹ Newspapers such as “The Dawn” (Pakistan) and “Hindustan Times” (India), which are major sources of information, form a positive opinion on cricket matches. Cricket was often associated with frames like “peace”, “development”, “confidence building measures”, and “national identity.”²⁰ Thus, it is evident that cricket diplomacy has a positive impact and is associated with optimistic words. This is a good situation. Since the media is a very powerful actor in modern communities, it is likely that a positive message will be transmitted to the general audience.

Sport is a universal language that citizens can understand. Once people find a common language, it becomes easier to achieve progress in removing obstacles in bilateral Indian-Pakistani relations. Sport diplomacy demolishes the image of sport as exclusively a battlefield where two rivals fight. Instead, sport diplomacy promotes human-to-human contact among athletes, fans and politicians, thus making people feel empathy towards each

other. Moreover, in the case of India and Pakistan, sport helped to ensure stability in the South Asian region.

III. When diplomacy is not so powerful

Although cricket diplomacy has the power to create a spirit of fraternity, it cannot resolve existing issues that put an obstacle to normalization of bilateral relations. Confidence-building measures, cricket diplomacy included, failed to establish a long-term relaxation in bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. There are a lot of barriers that diminish the effect of sport diplomacy.

Security is still a problem in cricket diplomacy. Even though India and Pakistan experienced a golden era in bilateral relations in the 2000s, the terrorist attack in Mumbai on 26 November 2008 destroyed the peace process. After the attack, the Indian government banned its cricket team from playing against Pakistan. Unfortunately, provocations like this can destroy fragile pathways towards peace and understanding. In February 2009, Indian Minister of Sport highlighted that “you cannot have one team coming from Pakistan to kill people in our country and another team coming from India to play cricket there.”²¹ That means, cricket diplomacy can only work if both sides can guarantee security for each other. If one side fails to do so, then all diplomatic efforts receive a blow. Similarly, after the Kargil war in 1999 and the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, cricket diplomacy froze.

Pakistan also had problems with security. The Lahore attack on 28 May 2009 had a negative impact on Pakistani cricket diplomacy, as the country was stripped from hosting the 2011 World Cup and Champions Trophy. So there were fears that Pakistan would lose international branding because of its associations with unsafe conditions.²²

¹⁹ Ibtesam Mazahir, Dr. Aazadi Fateh Muhammad, Safeena Yaseen, EXAMINING SPORTS/CRICKET DIPLOMACY AS A TOOL TO INSTIGATE POLITICAL INTERESTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF CRICKETING RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN, (PalArch Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, 2020)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Hassan & Ciaran Acton, *Sport and Contested Identities: Contemporary Issues and Debates*, (Routledge, 2018).

²² Ibid.

In addition, cricket diplomacy is not used on a regular basis. It is often the case that it stops abruptly and then a lot of time has to pass before it can restart again. As explained by Shahid & Perveen (2015), President Zia's cricket diplomacy that started in 1987 was purely cosmetic and did not set the foundation for consistent long-lasting relations.²³ There was a long period of non-action from both sides after the visit. The countries did not play with each other for a long time. Similarly, after the Kargil war of 1999, the Indian Government decided to enforce sporting sanctions against Pakistan and the two countries did not play a full series against each other again until 2004. Next, in 2008 cricket diplomacy stopped again because of the already mentioned attack in Mumbai. In 2015, Prime Minister Modi expressed the wish to restart cricket diplomacy, however, in comparison with the previous decade, no significant changes happened. In 2021, Pakistan was given the right to host the 2023 Asia Cup, which is a significant progress for the country. However, a year later the BCCI refused to play in Pakistan because of political reasons.²⁴ Although India and Pakistan ended up playing a match during the Asia Cup, one match did not make a difference anyway. Actually, in a tournament like the Asian Cup, where teams compete for the award, tensions only increase.

Cricket diplomacy needs to be systematic and consistent, so it should be restarted for at least a year. Right now, it is very unstable. It takes effort to re-engage in soft diplomacy again, while stopping it is very easy. Currently, the prospect of a breakthrough in India-Pakistan relations through cricket diplomacy seems highly unlikely because of the absence of concrete steps from both sides.

²³ Shakeel Ahmad Shahid, Kauser Perveen, *Cricket for Politics and Peace; from 1987 to 2007 Cricket World Cup between India and Pakistan*, (International Journal of Science Culture and Sport, 2015).

²⁴ Jannatul Naym Pieal, *Is India-Pakistan "cricket diplomacy" still a thing?* (The Business Standard, 2023).

In addition, the Indian position on cricket diplomacy is not stable. The Indian Government imposed a ban on most cricket matches with Pakistan, and then lifted it when relations improved. Indian media is also very divided on the topic of cricket diplomacy. Some people share concerns about the possibility of tragic events during the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972. However, another opinion was that cricket diplomacy would bring the two countries closer.²⁵ Moreover, it looks like some Indian players felt strong pressure from the atmosphere of competition and hostility during matches. Here are their thoughts: "My very first experience in Pakistan makes it amply clear that the political differences between these two countries get translated into this game"; "I don't really agree with this goodwill issue – it's a cricket match and both teams are competing to win".²⁶ In addition, some Pakistanis, in particular in Lahore, blamed India for isolating Pakistan in areas like cricket and trade. Specifically, when asked, a Pakistani player said that "India always raises matters in the cricket series" like Siachen and Kashmir, territories disputed with China and Pakistan respectfully.²⁷ Perhaps, there is a tendency to politicize cricket games. They present an opportunity for some dissatisfied people to reflect chauvinism and religious division. However, cricket, like any other sport, should be free from politics, although it is understandable that some spectators would want to raise political, religious and social issues that matter to them.

Cricket matches are often surrounded by protests, violence, provocations and nationalist sentiments. In such conditions, cricket diplomacy fails to perform its goodwill

²⁵ Emily Crick, *Contact Sport: Cricket in India-Pakistan Relations Since 1999*, (South Asian Survey, 2009).

²⁶ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Feel Good, Goodwill and India's Friendship Tour of Pakistan, 2004: Cricket, Politics and Diplomacy in Twenty-First-Century India*, (The International Journal of the History of Sport, 2008).

²⁷ Kusha Anand, *Teaching India-Pakistan Relations*, (UCL Press, 2023).

function. For example, during a cricket match in Karachi, a Pakistani fan ran to the pitch to attack the Indian captain, while fans threw stones at Indian players. In 2006, a Hindu extremist dug up a hole on the cricket pitch in Delhi to protest against the visit of the Pakistani team.²⁸ The same thing happened in 1991 and then in 2000, when an activist from Indian ultranationalist party Shiv Sena dug up the wicket on the eve of test matches. As a result, the tours of Pakistani teams were canceled.²⁹ Here, it is evident that cricket diplomacy will fail if there are provocations from both sides. In addition, Shiv Sena called on Indian Muslims to prove that they were not Pakistan sympathizers.³⁰ This is an example of how sports can make a certain social group vulnerable. Instead of carrying out a diplomatic function, sport can act as a divisive force between Muslims and Hindus. Speaking metaphorically, cricket diplomacy makes the fire hotter rather than attempting to put it out. Bandyopadhyay & Majumdar (2004) highlight that cricket occupies such an important place in Indian society that the sport becomes associated with “hypernationalism,” “war,” and “entertainment.”³¹ Another unpleasant aspect here is that Indian Muslims are accused of supporting Pakistan in India-Pakistan matches.³² When Muslims did try to celebrate an Indian win over Pakistan, they were actively prevented from doing so, sometimes ending in violence. It looks like cheering for Pakistan in cricket is the way to express a different identity. The emotive issues of partition in 1947 and the role of Muslims within the secular state of India are often brought

to the fore during India-Pakistan cricket matches when nationalistic sentiments are at their highest.³³

Cricket diplomacy is also surrounded with skepticism regarding its usefulness. For example, American writer Mark Marqusee pointed out that people should not assign cricket diplomacy too much significance, otherwise politicians will evade their responsibilities.³⁴ Policymakers, diplomats and politicians should resolve political issues between India and Pakistan through traditional diplomacy, and not focus on cricket diplomacy. Moreover, Sambil Bal, an Indian journalist for Wisden Asia Cricket argued that “cricket is only a sport; it cannot be mistaken for diplomacy. The essence of sport is contest.”³⁵ Given the competitive nature of cricket matches, it may be difficult to associate them with feelings of goodwill and reconciliation. Competitive feelings clearly win over goodwill, and thus it would be strange to expect sportsmen to represent their country in competition and advocate for peace at the same time. They would feel even more pressure in this case, and this is not an objective of cricket diplomacy, which instead calls for relaxation and reconciliation.

Cricket players on both sides experience extremely high pressure to perform well, because winning a match symbolizes victory over an enemy. Players are seen as defenders and guards of national pride. In India, for example, triumph over Pakistan is a cause for celebration and losing a match is considered a national humiliation.³⁶ Similarly, Pakistani fans become furious if Pakistan loses to India. In 1996, when Pakistan lost the World Cup match in the Indian city of Bangalore, Pakistan’s captain Wasim

²⁸ Dr. Aslam Pervez Memon, et al, SPORTS AS A DYNAMIC FORCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONS AMONG NATIONS IN GLOBAL POLITICS, (International Journal of Physical Education & Sports Science, 2011)

²⁹ Laurence A. Wenner, *The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Society*, (Oxford University Press, 2022).

³⁰ Emily Crick, *Cricket and Indian National Consciousness*, (Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2007).

³¹ Kausik Bandyopadhyay & Boria Majumdar, *Cricket as Everyday Life*, (Economic and Political Weekly, 2004)

³² Ibid.

³³ Emily Crick, *Cricket and Indian National Consciousness*, (Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2007)

³⁴ David Hassan & Ciaran Acton, *Sport and Contested Identities: Contemporary Issues and Debates*, (Routledge, 2018).

³⁵ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Feel Good, Goodwill and India's Friendship Tour of Pakistan, 2004: Cricket, Politics and Diplomacy in Twenty-First-Century India*, (The International Journal of the History of Sport, 2008)

³⁶ Nisha Nair, *Cricket obsession in India: Through the lens of identity theory*, (Sport in Society, 2011).

Akram was stoned by unhappy fans. Moreover, considering that it is a rare occasion when these two countries get to play together, the quality of cricket that they usually demonstrate is lower because of the extreme pressure that surrounds these matches. As former Pakistani cricketer Asif Iqbal said, “avoiding defeat becomes the primary and overwhelming objective.”³⁷ The fear of defeat is so strong that a draw becomes a very satisfying result. This is an unhealthy situation where there is little space left for actual soft diplomacy.

The cricket pitch often becomes a battlefield of negative mutual feelings and a platform for demonstrating hostility. The feelings of ordinary citizens are reflected too. For example, an elite private school teacher in Lahore said that students often get upset if a cricket team loses to India, and that the feeling is similar to the loss at war.³⁸ Cricket matches are surrounded by controversy, where defeat is acutely experienced. A teacher from a lower private school in Delhi shared a similar opinion in the sense that cricket matches aggravate hostility towards Pakistan, which is even perceived as a terrorist country by some Indian teenagers. Students refer to Pakistan as a terrorist country and show an agreement to their ban on participation in IPL (Indian Premier League).³⁹ In addition, students support the government decision to not have cricket ties with Pakistan.⁴⁰ Such views hinder successful restart of cricket diplomacy, because there would be people who will openly protest against it. Bearing in mind that it is also difficult to change opinions that form from a young age.

Nevertheless, cricket diplomacy attempts to build stronger connections between ordinary citizens from both

countries. However, it might be difficult to achieve its goals if people imagine cricket matches as an avenue of war between India and Pakistan, or associate a rival country with something very negative like terrorism. Unfortunately, this sport is often compared to war, and games are described as battles where the goal is to defeat the enemy.

IV. Creating a better version of cricket diplomacy

Given the difficulties that cricket diplomacy faces, it is necessary to reflect on how to make most of it in later occasions.

One suggestion would be to organize social events beyond cricket competitions where Indian and Pakistani teams can interact more closely and perceive each other not as just sportsmen from a rival country but as companions. It is evident that the matches themselves are perceived as battlefields, and so it would be better to organize events where there is a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Perhaps, the teams can visit the most important monuments in their countries, be seen together in public or even carry out social projects, like visiting schools to meet children from a neighboring country. This would be an example of a true people-to-people diplomacy that is not limited to just competition and promotes positive thinking about the neighboring country.

Another suggestion would be to promote cricket diplomacy among Indian and Pakistani children and teenagers. As the opinion of young people is greatly influenced by what adults tell them, it is recommended to teach them how to respect a neighboring country even despite a difficult political situation. A good argument would be that politicians have their own disagreements, however they should not be a guide on how to view India or Pakistan. Politics should not penetrate deeply in society, and cricket is no exception. Perhaps, youth cricket teams can play more often together.

³⁷ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Feel Good, Goodwill and India's Friendship Tour of Pakistan, 2004: Cricket, Politics and Diplomacy in Twenty-First-Century India*, (The International Journal of the History of Sport, 2008).

³⁸ Kusha Anand, *Teaching India–Pakistan Relations*, (UCL Press, 2023)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

In addition, Pakistan needs to improve their security during sport gatherings and make sure that Indian guests will be well protected from any possible attacks. It is evident that cricket diplomacy did not reach its true potential because of security issues. Once the situation improves, there would be more confidence and most importantly, more trust. Pakistan needs to demonstrate that it is a welcoming place for Indian visitors.

The next recommendation would be to highlight the importance of accountability. It is true that sport diplomacy is a voluntary option. However, if both sides are interested in peaceful conflict resolution and believe cricket might help, then there needs to be more accountability as proof of the strife for peace. Perhaps, India and Pakistan could create a joint commission on cricket diplomacy, which will be in charge of setting goals and objectives, collecting evidence of public opinion, and organizing cricket matches in partnership with Ministries of Sport. Evidently, the goals do not have to be long-term. Given the complicated relations, it is better to set short-term goals that are easier to accomplish and are also more realistic. Then, the commission would monitor the progress and see if soft diplomacy works. In addition, India and Pakistan must think about the consequences of potential escalation. For instance, will it threaten the security of more vulnerable states in the region like Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan? It is strongly recommended to pay more attention to cricket, as so far it proved as the only soft power tool that has a certain positive effect.

V. Conclusion

Rohit Brijnath, an Indian sports journalist, commented that “Cricket will not heal wounds (...). Perhaps this experiment can only work if we remember it is just cricket, that no nation is a lesser one for losing or a superior one for winning.”⁴¹ It is true that cricket diplomacy probably

would not help to solve fundamental political disagreements between India and Pakistan. However, this soft power tool became the best confidence building measure in the South Asian region. Cricket is a rare thing that can help different ethnic groups within both countries to be engaged and enjoy.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the sports arena and the battlefield are two distinct places. Sport should not become a victim of political disagreements. Moreover, India-Pakistan matches at least helped to humanize difficult bilateral relations. Sportsmen are above all human beings. When representatives of rival countries interact with each other, they are exposed to their humanness and the myths associated with their opponents start to fade away.⁴² This is a very important outcome of cricket diplomacy, given that the matches are surrounded with belligerent rhetoric. It is important to remember that cricket is just a game and not a battlefield, applying greater effort to make cricket a symbol of continuous dialogue, even though it has an underlying competitive spirit. If two nuclear states escalate a decades-long conflict, then the consequences could be unpredictable. This is why soft power needs to be valued more.

⁴¹ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Feel Good, Goodwill and India's Friendship Tour of Pakistan, 2004: Cricket, Politics and*

Diplomacy in Twenty-First-Century India, (The International Journal of the History of Sport, 2008).

⁴² Ibid.

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