

Confidence-Building Measures in the Post-Nuclearisation Era of South Asia

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Abstract

The research discusses the role of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in managing Pakistan-India rivalry and their complex relationships. Since India and Pakistan emerged as independent countries after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the unresolved disputes—mainly Jammu and Kashmir—have severely affected bilateral relations between the two nations. Over more than seven decades, the enduring hostility between Pakistan and India worsened due to the major wars fought between the two neighbouring countries, which have created lasting effects on relations between the two countries and the overall security dynamics of the region. Since achieving nuclear status, both India and Pakistan have found the management of their rivalry to be even more important. As an important series of tools, CBMs serve to reduce strains between countries through improved dialogue and trusted relations. The research examines CBMs during the post-nuclearisation period by analysing current problems, which prevent successful India-Pakistan communication and collaboration. The paper introduces an analytical framework designed to increase the current CBM role while exploring new possibilities for positive diplomatic interactions. This research focuses on the diplomatic approaches and collaborative mechanisms to develop policy guidance for establishing an all-inclusive CBM system. Strategic actions will be instrumental in building trust between Pakistan and India, which together will create enduring peace in the region marked by historic tensions and complicated geopolitical dynamics. Findings of the study show that the post-nuclear period of Pakistan-India relations demands collaboration to address the evolving nature of threats.

Keywords: Pakistan, India, South Asia, Nuclear, CBMs.

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Introduction

Soon after Pakistan became an independent state, relations between Pakistan and India began to be affected by territorial disputes, especially the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, and the unfair distribution of water resources. India occupied the Kashmir valley illegally and unjustly in violation of the partition plan, which gave the princely states of the subcontinent the right of self-determination. Since the illegal Indian occupation of Jammu and Kashmir (IIOK) in 1947, the two neighbouring countries have fought three wars and a limited war over Kargil in 1999. Apart from these major wars, periodic events have also occurred across the Line of Control (LoC), which have enduring effects on Pakistan-India relations (Mohan S. , 2022). Pakistan-India relations became more complicated when India, which already had superiority over Pakistan in the domain of conventional military strength, conducted its first nuclear test. The test gave India nuclear status, which further increased Pakistan's perception of India's threat. India's nuclear power status now pushed Pakistan into a challenging position. This also changed the region's dynamics due to the existence of a nuclear power country. India went for its second nuclear test in 1998. This time, Pakistan decided to respond with its own nuclear test because it was considered vital by Pakistan's political and military leadership for the security of the country.

Though both Pakistan and India are nuclear power countries and peace and stability have been maintained, there is always a risk of nuclear exchange, which requires confidence-building measures (Zehra & Waseem, 2022). Within the strategic considerations of India and Pakistan, there is a presence of nuclear optimism, with many scholars suggesting that nuclear deterrence has effectively operated in the region since nuclearisation. The relationship between the two neighbouring countries is still facing multiple challenges. There has been an effort by the political and military leadership of the two countries to build trust and promote peace. However, these have yielded limited outcomes. Events such as the Pulwama attacks and the revocation of the special status of Kashmir by the BJP government in 2019 have led to further deterioration in diplomatic as well as economic ties between the two countries. Tensions escalated with India's revocation of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, resulting in the suspension of various Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) (Ameen, 2024). The 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis and the 2022 accidental BrahMos missile launch by India into Pakistan's territory highlight the crucial potential of CBMs in mitigating tensions and averting future crises. The current Nuclear Confidence Building Measures (NCBM) system between India and Pakistan does not have enough clear rules for sharing information, holding violators accountable, and creating a way to build trust through feedback.

Despite the Lahore Declaration's commitment to periodic reviews for enhancing NCBM effectiveness and consultations on 'security concepts and nuclear doctrines,' No review mechanism or institutional framework has been established for more than two decades since the agreement's inception. There is an urgent need to address current and future challenges against the backdrop of a transforming international strategic landscape

that has a direct impact on South Asia (Sadia & Chaudary, 2023). Previous studies primarily analyse the developmental pattern of Pakistan-India relations through examinations of enduring disputes and diplomatic challenges alongside physical government interactions since 1998. The post-nuclear tests of 1998 have created a major area of absent research that examines CBMs specifically. This research project addresses the lack of specialised knowledge about confidence-building measures by performing an organised examination of CBMs within post-nuclearisation South Asia.

The focus of this research is on analysing the existing CBMs signed between Pakistan and India in the post-nuclear period (1998) and the need for signing CBMs for addressing the evolving challenges. The study attempts to expand traditional CBMs by identifying new strategic approaches to boost meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan, considering the evolving challenges of cyber threats, which stand out as a crucial field for both nuclear security and national security. The research emphasises this domain, but it also reveals the importance of creating an extensive CBM framework capable of handling traditional security matters and emerging threats from technological progress. The research adopts a comprehensive approach to CBMs to build enduring peace through stability while facing ongoing historical enmities, global competing dynamics in the region, and addressing the evolving challenges through CBMs.

Conceptual Framework

Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) play an important role in reducing tensions by opening ways for conflict resolution. Rival states/parties implement CBMs, both bilateral and unilateral, to thaw rivalries and maintain peace. CBMs are adopted for the sole aim of preventing conflicts, building trust, and opening ways for peace. In international conflicts, it is considered an effective tool that is adopted to bring the parties involved closer together by building trust and encouraging them to take steps for peace. CBMs are of various types, but all types of CBMs serve as tools for risk reduction and trust building (Ahmad , 2023). Rival states can mitigate their tensions through CBMs, which establish pathways toward conflict resolution. International initiatives serving as bilateral or unilateral formats seek to remove existing tensions between hostile groups while working to maintain peaceful conditions. CBMs exist to stop conflicts while building trust among nations in their route toward peaceful solutions. Both rival nations accept CBMs as fundamental mechanisms which enable conflict resolution (Mason & Siegfried, p. 2013). When systems support communication and coordination, they lead adversaries to engage in peace-building initiatives. Various types of CBMs exist, including diplomatic engagements, military transparency initiatives, and cultural exchanges, but they all serve a common purpose: such methods both minimise potential threats and build faith between adversaries. Through their use, CBMs dramatically reduce the chance of conflicts, starting with failed communication and erroneous assumptions .

Through their facilitation of dialogue, states get better access to address grievances while actively working together for solution-making. Several measures that combine joint military operations with communication bridge systems and weapon

control pacts form the basis for developing trust between states (Singh, 2021). The successful application of CBMs results in setting a stable platform that ensures long-lasting peace. The successful deployment of CBMs emerges as essential in developing regional cooperation because areas known for historic animosity and current conflict benefit from their usage. CBMs offer an alternative diplomatic approach that can be effective in situations where trust issues, security concerns, and negotiation deadlocks hinder traditional methods (Nora, 2021). Firstly, CBMs came to be known during the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) held in 1957 and can be found in texts like the Helsinki Final Act, the Vienna Document, and the Stockholm Document on Confidence and Security-Building Measures.

CBMs rose to prominence during and during the Cold War, primarily to develop trust between major countries such as the US and the USSR by tackling concerns such as weapons control, war avoidance, conflict resolution, and nuclear proliferation. The post-Cold War CBM strategies sought multifaceted approaches to conflict resolution at both the state and domestic levels. CBMs include demilitarisation mechanisms for the Rhineland after World War I and the installation of a hotline between the USSR and the US in 1963. Although CBMs have a historical preexistence, rapid technical improvements and increased international interactions in recent times have considerably broadened their scope (Zdzislaw, & Rotfeld). Barry Buzan has highlighted the social aspect of threat in the process of its identification. He calls this process “securitisation”, in which a threat is erected by its presence fundamentally in the form of some perceptible objects, as well as gets flared up when a society or group of people designate that object as a threat. This process is shaped by the behaviour of people toward that object and gets fortified when a society recurrently keeps referring to it in negative connotations.

In this way, stereotypical thinking influences the psyche of the general public and remains entrenched in the strategic thinking of a particular society. In this manner, social behaviour constructs the threat and presents it as a security issue. In South Asia, when we look at how traditional Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) work, we see that if social behaviours create a threat, changing those behaviours through different CBMs can challenge that belief, leading to a reduction in security concerns. Nuclear CBMs, on the other hand, work at two levels. These tools seek to avoid both a nuclear war that could occur from wrong perceptions or incorrect calculations. The other goal of hotline exchanges involves preserving strategic balance through clear information exchanges over robust communication networks, followed by decision-makers recognising that offensive actions usually produce more cost than value (Noor, 2012).

Current Challenges to Pakistan-India Relations

Pakistan and India maintain a relationship that shapes the regional security environment of South Asia while creating complex geopolitical interactions. An extended competitive tension exists between these two nations, which started with their historic conflicts along with their disputes about Kashmiri territory. The security environment becomes more complex because of

both Pakistan-India conflicts and growing tensions between India and China. China expands its South Asian influence by leveraging its relationship with Pakistan, which presents multiple security challenges. The bilateral tensions arising from border conflicts, together with India's competing quest for Asian supremacy, have emphasised ongoing mistrust between India and China. The strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, along with their relationship with India, profoundly affects both nations as they strive to pursue win-win partnerships and strategic opposition differently (Mohan M. , 2003).

These competing relationships between states in the region have stimulated a substantial military race throughout the region as both nations heavily fund military developments that encompass nuclear weaponry. The intense military investments create higher conflict risks and potentially dangerous mistakes during confrontations that become threats to security across both regions and internationally. Conflicts are intensifying security challenges since threatening factors such as terrorism combine with economic imbalances and humanitarian crises stemming from rising tensions. The developing Pakistan-India relationship, together with evolving Sino-Indian relations, functions as a key determinant in shaping the security architecture across South Asia. Both dialogue and CBMs need to become fundamental elements for reducing tensions among regional actors to establish a peaceful and stable order in the region (Haider, 2021).

Since the creation of Pakistan as an independent country, there have been four wars and numerous clashes along the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary (WB), mainly due to the Indian illegal occupation of Kashmir and its policies in the region. The Indian strategic culture, which believes in the supremacy of the Hindu religion, is the main element of India's policy. The Indian strategic culture belies influences of ancient scriptures and realpolitik interpretation of the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Arthashastra. These influences inform, inter alia, India's worldview. Hindutva reflects many features of fascism. Its distinguishing features include extreme socioeconomic regimentation and violent opposition suppression. Hindutva has overarching imprints on Indian society, influencing every aspect of Indian society with far-right hyper-nationalism. Hindutva is a violent ideology that is altering India's internal dynamics. It is characterised by exclusive and discriminatory Hindu supremacy and majoritarianism (Howard & Khan, 2022).

Right-wing ultra-nationalist BJP leadership has steadfastly promoted Hindutva by patronising the Muslim minority and fostering religious divides. The revocation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian government in August 2019 and its subsequent implementation of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) are all steps toward promoting Hindu supremacy. BJP, led by Narendra Modi, has successfully employed Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism to win elections twice, in 2014 and 2019. Its election manifesto marked a clear departure from those of its rival political parties. BJP

has been blatantly drawing upon its Hindutva underpinnings in the conduct of foreign and domestic political and economic policies for the furtherance of its strategic ambitions. Modi envisions a restrictive foreign policy centred on Hindu nationalism, which has had a significant impact on India-Pakistan ties. Bilateral diplomatic relations are now being degraded, bilateral trade is stopped, and borders are mostly closed. The current government in India is hesitant to resolve bilateral concerns with Pakistan. Furthermore, the Indian government's aggressive behaviour, along with its continued efforts for military modernisation and its goal of technological and nuclear superiority, endangers the region's peace and stability (Hassan & Isaque, 2024).

Nuclearisation of South Asia and Pakistan's Quest for Security

The nuclear discourse in South Asia originated after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. India pursued nuclear capability, justifying it for its threat perception against China. In 1974, India conducted a nuclear test, altering regional security dynamics. Key factions in the Indian leadership, including the Congress elite, civil bureaucracy, military, and Hindu extremist parties, contend that possessing and deploying nuclear weapons enhances India's standing in the international community. When India built nuclear weapons and nuclearised the region, Pakistan's perception of India grew further because India was now a nuclear power country and could pose more serious security challenges to Pakistan. India carried out the so-called Peaceful Nuclear Explosion in 1974 and five nuclear tests in May 1998 (Aizad, 2024).

The so-called "peaceful" nuclear test conducted by India posed significant security challenges to Pakistan. After the first nuclear test by India, Pakistan's political and military leadership decided to start a nuclear weapons program because it was critical for its security. If Pakistan had not developed and acquired nuclear weapons, India would have posed serious security threats to Pakistan, considering the hostile relations between the two countries and the wars fought between them in the past. Pakistan relied solely on nuclear weapons to maintain balance with India, as conventional military strength could not sustain this balance. After the nuclear test by both Pakistan and India, there is an environment of peace. However, there is always a need for confidence-building measures to prevent risk and actions that endanger peace and stability (Khan & Rehman, 2025).

Analysis of CBMs between Pakistan and India

Despite the unending rivalry and the strained relations between the two countries, there have been efforts to restore confidence through diplomatic engagements as well as efforts on the military-to-military level (See tables 1 & 2 for details of diplomatic engagements between the two countries and CBMs in the military and nuclear fields).

Agreements	Objective	Facilitated	Outcomes
Ceasefire in 1949	Ceasefire in Kashmir	United Nations	Partially successfully
The Liaquat-Nehru agreement	Regarding the rights of migrating Muslims and Hindus, emphasis is placed on safeguarding minority rights.	Bilateral	Partially successfully
The Indus Water Treaty, 1960	the equitable distribution of water resources	The World Bank	Successful, but concerns remain due to Indian violation
The Tashkent Declaration, 1966	Concluding the events of the 1965 war	Russia	Failed
Simla Accord signed in 1972	An agreement outlining future relations and settlements post the 1971 war.	Bilateral	Failed Primarily due to numerous conflicts after the agreement.
The Lahore Declaration, 1999	Resolving issues through positive engagement to facilitate dialogue	Bilateral	Failed due to Kargil War
Agra summit 2001	Initiating a thaw in relations following the Kargil conflict	Bilateral	Inconclusive
Islamabad summit 2004	The way forward for peaceful relations rephrase	Bilateral	Significant breakthrough, yet lacking tangible outcomes.
Composite Dialogue 2004–2008	Engagements at multiple levels to resolve the issues rephrase	Bilateral	Failed despite the initial progress
Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meeting 2015	Participation across various domains to enhance relations.	Bilateral declaration on a multilateral Forum	The Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) failed to materialize due to the visit of the Kashmiris and the subsequent backlash.
Kartarpur corridor 2019	Pakistan's effort to facilitate the Sikh pilgrimage to Nankana Sahib.	Bilateral	Despite ongoing border tensions, the agreement was successful and garnered high appreciation from the international community.

Table: 1 Diplomatic Engagement between Pakistan and India

Source: Effendi Maria Saifuddin, Choudhry Ishtiaq Ahmad. “India–Pakistan CBMs Since 1947: A Critical Analysis.” *South Asian Studies* 2016, 31 (1): 187–205.

As a result of the nuclear tests of 1998 by India and Pakistan, the security landscape in South Asia drastically changed, demanding the two countries' positive initiatives for peace and stability. The conflict in Kargil that took place in 1999 had almost resulted in a large-scale war between the two nations, which had the potential to escalate to nuclear war. In addition, these developments in the region tend to reshape the security concerns of both India and Pakistan, and there is a need for new prospects for managing the significant issues by employing cooperative threat reduction and CBMs. Given the nuclearisation of the region, there was an urgent need for a formalised approach to reduce tensions and promote regional peace. Pakistan and India, to avoid an accidental confrontation, have signed a series of agreements in a bid to prevent any escalation that could lead to confrontation (Nasir & Asif, 2025).

In 1991, the two sides signed an agreement that called for advance notice for military exercises, manoeuvres, and troop movements. The agreement was ratified in August 1992. In addition to this, the agreement says the two sides cannot carry out military operations close to or in the direction of their shared international border. Moreover, Islamabad and New Delhi have signed an agreement on the Prohibition of Attacks on Nuclear Installations and Facilities. Soon after the 1998 nuclear tests, nuclear-armed rivals realised the need for cooperation (Jaspa, 2011). The first step in this context was the meeting between the premiers of the two countries—Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif—where they adopted key documents aimed at preventing escalation. These documents are a joint statement by the two premiers, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by the foreign secretaries of the two states, and the Lahore Declaration. Notably, nuclear safety, security, restrictions on the hazard, and alert status are part of nuclear issues included in the Lahore documents (Batool, 2024).

To resolve these issues, a CBM was signed between the two countries, and the prime ministers of the two countries acknowledged in the ministerial statement that the nuclearisation of the region increases their responsibilities to play a positive role and reduce the risks of confrontation. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) text underscores the reduction of nuclear risks and the implementation of measures to enhance nuclear security while preventing nuclear accidents. Additionally, it highlights measures to avert accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons and advocates for the establishment of a communication mechanism. Furthermore, the two sides have concurred to share information regarding their nuclear doctrines and security concepts, aiming to forestall inadvertent nuclear crises. They will cooperate to enhance control over their nuclear arsenals and reinforce a mutual moratorium on nuclear testing, with binding commitments unless exceptional circumstances threaten their paramount interests. Additionally, a memorandum of understanding on ballistic missile flight tests mandates a three-day notice before the commencement of a testing window (Batool, 2024).

In 2003, Islamabad and New Delhi reached an informal ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control (LoC) and the ground position line near the Siachen Glacier. The agreement involved crucial steps such as joint patrolling along the international border, intermittent flag meetings, and a ban on the creation of new forward posts (Naseer, 2024). The year 2004 saw other significant steps when the inaugural biannual meeting

between the Indian Border Security Forces and Pakistan's Rangers took place. Subsequently, in 2005, the two sides agreed to form a link between the Indian Coast Guard and Pakistan's Maritime Security Agency. Building on diplomatic strides, Pakistan and India formalised an agreement regarding advance notice on ballistic missile tests. Furthermore, as part of CBMs, Pakistan and India signed an agreement in 2007 to reduce the risk emanating from nuclear weapons-related accidents. It was extended in 2017 until 2022. In 2018, India made a significant announcement, declaring a ceasefire in Jammu & Kashmir during the month of Ramadhan for the first time in history. In 2021, the Directors General of Military Operations of the two countries jointly released a statement to reinstate the cease-fire agreement of 2004 along with LoC and Jammu & Kashmir.

Agreements	Year
1. A hotline between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) was established	1965
The two sides agreed to Prohibit attacks against Nuclear Installations and Facilities	1998/ratified 1992
Agreement on Advance Notification on Military Exercises, Maneuvers and Troop Movements	1991
Agreement to Prevent Airspace Violations and Allow Overflights and Landings by Military Aircrafts.	1991
A formal ceasefire agreement relating to the International Border (IB), Line of Control (LOC), and Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Jammu and Kashmir has been established between India and Pakistan.	2003
Annual meetings between the Indian Border Security Forces and the Pakistani Rangers.	2004
Agreement on Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests	2005
Initiating a communication link between the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency and the Indian Coast Guard.	2005
The two sides agreed to mitigate the risk of accidents related to nuclear weapons.	2007

Table 2: Pakistan India-Military and Nuclear CBMs

Back-channel communication methods have contributed to the formulation of constrained CBMs, as exemplified by recent ceasefire agreements. Diplomacy conducted away from media attention may effectively navigate political distractions, yielding concrete results — as demonstrated by the 2021 announcement from DGMOs. Track-II diplomatic initiatives like the Neemrana Dialogues, Chaophraya Dialogue, and Pugwash-India Pakistan dialogue, recurring over two decades, stand as significant communication CBMs. However, it is difficult to highlight a correlation between these dialogues and consistent norm compliance or implementation (Mugheesa, 2024).

Conclusion

Despite their rivalry, the two countries have made efforts that have yielded limited outcomes, producing intermittent periods of negative peace. Cordial relations remain elusive. The Pakistan-India rivalry continues to define the regional security landscape of South Asia. India's reluctance to resolve bilateral issues, including the long-standing dispute of Jammu and Kashmir through negotiation, has negatively affected bilateral relations as well as the regional security, political, and economic landscape. The possession of nuclear weapons by both Pakistan and India has eliminated the possibility of full-scale war. However, the lack of cooperation on critical issues and the absence of steps toward improving relations continue to pose risks that require urgent attention by policymakers on both sides. It is a fact that nuclear weapons possession by both Pakistan and India has created an environment in which both sides are realising the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, leading to an avoidance of military confrontation.

CBMs demonstrate potential to reduce security risks between the countries. Certain CBMs have successfully managed tensions, but persistent violations, primarily attributed to India, undermine their overall effectiveness across the region. Security-related violations directly undermine mutual trust, which creates growing security anxieties that destabilise the already volatile region. Changing regional and global dynamics further complicate the situation. Relations between India and Pakistan undergo changes based on growing global power involvement in the area and the domestic political conditions practiced by both nations. Geopolitical arrangements and economic priorities, alongside nationalist sentiment, often generate policy transformations which do not support dialogue or reconciliation. Currently, India has halted substantive strategic dialogue with Pakistan and resisted efforts to establish a strategic restraint regime. Digitalisation and cybersecurity have added another dimension to Pakistan-India relations. The unending India-Pakistan rivalry and periodic conflicts create fresh opportunities for intensified competition in cyberspace.

While current cyberattacks are relatively limited, the potential escalation dynamics between these nuclear-armed rivals underscore the need for consistent dialogue and established norms. In the absence of such measures between the two countries, cyberattacks are posing significant risks to regional stability. The two countries should take steps to ensure a strategic restraint regime, avoid the arms race, and address challenges to strategic stability in South Asia. To address cybersecurity challenges, the two sides should establish a Joint Probing Committee, which is crucial in a crisis. In addition to the existing DGMO hotline, creating a dedicated Cyber Hotline between Islamabad and New Delhi is essential for promptly addressing urgent cyber-related matters. Despite previous challenges in establishing hotlines and learning from past experiences, both sides should actively engage in regular use of the cyber hotline, potentially connecting Pakistan's interior secretary with their Indian counterpart. Adhering to the bilateral Non-Nuclear Aggression Agreement, India and Pakistan can extend their commitment to cyberspace. Identifying and pledging not to target vital economic, energy, financial, and security apparatus would enhance stability.

There are several international agreements and collaborations that aim to

promote cooperation in the cybersecurity domain. As a case in point, in November 2023, Saudi Arabia's National Cybersecurity Authority (NCA) signed four memoranda of understanding (MoUs). We aim to promote cybersecurity cooperation with countries such as Qatar, Romania, Spain, and Kuwait on the sidelines of the third edition of the Global Cybersecurity Forum (GCF). Pakistan and India can also follow this cooperation mechanism to promote collaboration in the cyber domain. In a challenging international environment where technologically advanced states are enhancing cyberattack capabilities under the guise of defence, efforts at the UN General Assembly and elsewhere have proven inconclusive. In this context, India and Pakistan have the opportunity to set a global example by spearheading the development of cyber security CBMs. Progress can be made by identifying shared interests between Islamabad and New Delhi, fostering communication channels, and engaging all stakeholders in shouldering the responsibility. Pakistan and India should also take initiatives to ease impediments to their bilateral trade relations. The resumption of trade between the two countries would help in building mutual trust and opening ways to improve diplomatic ties. For this, India should cooperate with Pakistan and restore diplomatic ties first, which would help in dialogue and signing CBMs in critical areas for peace and stability between the two countries and the overall security environment of the region.

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