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35 Years of Nuclear Lists — India-Pakistan's Most Durable Confidence-Building Measure

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SUBJECTS COVERED

IR SECURITY & DEFENCE

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35 Years of Nuclear Lists — India-Pakistan's Most Durable Confidence-Building Measure

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WHY IN NEWS

India and Pakistan completed their 35th consecutive annual exchange of nuclear installation lists on January 1, 2026 — the longest-running bilateral Confidence-Building Measure (CBM) between the two countries. The exchange persisted despite years of diplomatic freeze, two mini-crises, and the continuing absence of formal peace talks. It represents a unique case study in how nuclear-armed adversaries maintain minimal communication channels even without broader normalisation.

THE AGREEMENT THAT CREATED THIS CBM

The **Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities** was signed on **December 31, 1988** — during the brief diplomatic opening under Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv Gandhi — and entered into force on **January 27, 1991**.

The agreement is simple: each side will annually provide the other with a list of nuclear installations and facilities. Neither country may attack any installation on the other's list. The list exchange happens on **January 1 every year**, simultaneously through both capitals' diplomatic channels.

This was not a disarmament treaty. It was not an arms control treaty. It was not even a communication about the number or type of weapons. It was simply an agreement that certain facilities — civilian reactors, research centres, enrichment facilities, perhaps weapons facilities — would not be targeted in any future conflict.

The agreement's genius is its **narrowness**. By requiring only a list exchange — not verification, not inspection, not negotiation — it created an obligation both countries could fulfil without political embarrassment and without revealing strategically sensitive information.

35 YEARS THROUGH EVERY CRISIS

The list exchange has happened every single year since 1992, including through:

1998 nuclear tests: India tested at Pokhran on May 11-13, 1998; Pakistan responded at Chagai on May 28-30, 1998. The diplomatic rupture was severe — sanctions, suspended talks, international condemnation. Yet on January 1, 1999, the list exchange happened as scheduled.

Kargil conflict (1999): India and Pakistan fought a limited but intense war at Kargil from May to July 1999. The nuclear shadow was explicit — Pakistan's Foreign Minister hinted at nuclear use. The list exchange happened on January 1, 2000.

Parliament attack crisis (2001-2002): Following the December 2001 attack on India's Parliament, India mobilised 500,000+ troops to the border in Operation Parakram. The two countries came the closest to conventional war since 1971. The list exchange happened on January 1, 2002 and 2003.

Pulwama-Balakot (2019): After the Pulwama suicide bombing (February 14, 2019, 40 CRPF personnel killed) and India's Balakot airstrike, Pakistan scrambled F-16s toward Indian airspace. Wing Commander Abhinandan was shot down and captured. Yet the January 2020 list exchange continued normally.

Pattern: The nuclear list exchange is the floor of India-Pakistan diplomatic interaction — the minimum that persists when everything else collapses.

WHAT THE CBM ACHIEVES — AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

What it achieves:

- Creates a communication channel that operates independently of the political relationship
- Signals to each side that the other maintains some interest in crisis limitation
- Provides minimal transparency about the general architecture of each other's nuclear programmes (what is listed = what exists; what moves off the list = what has changed)
- Demonstrates to the international community that both countries maintain some nuclear responsibility frameworks

What it doesn't achieve:

- **No verification:** Neither country can verify whether the lists are complete or accurate
- **No operational meaning:** In a crisis, the agreement has no enforcement mechanism; a country could simply violate it and the only consequence is diplomatic protest
- **No information about weapons:** The agreement covers installations (reactors, enrichment plants, laboratories), not warheads, delivery systems, or operational status
- **No escalation management:** There is no hotline, no direct military communication, and no agreed procedure for managing a nuclear near-miss

India and Pakistan have relatively poor crisis communication compared to US-Russia or even US-China. There is a **Director General Military Operations (DGMO)** hotline — used occasionally for military-to-military communication — but no equivalent to the US-Soviet Direct Communications Link (the "hotline") established after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

THE BROADER INDIA-PAKISTAN CBM ARCHITECTURE

The nuclear list exchange exists within a sparse but real architecture of bilateral agreements:

Nuclear CBMs:

- Agreement on Nuclear Installations (1988/1991) — the annual list
- Agreement on Advance Notice of Ballistic Missile Launches (2005)
- Pre-notification of military exercises within 150 km of the border

Humanitarian CBMs:

- Consular Access Pact (2008): Exchange of lists of detained nationals (as happened January 1, 2026, with 257 Indians in Pakistani custody)
- Fishermen release: Both countries hold fishermen who cross into each other's territorial waters; periodic releases represent a CBM even without formal framework

Trade and communication:

- Samjhauta Express (train) and Dosti Bus services — suspended after Pulwama-Balakot (2019)
- Attari-Wagah land crossing — used for limited trade; India suspended trade with Pakistan in 2019
- Kartarpur Corridor (2019): Sikh pilgrims can cross to Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan; uniquely, this has continued even through tensions

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: India-Pakistan Agreement on Nuclear Installations (December 31, 1988; effective January 27, 1991; January 1 annual exchange); 35th exchange in 2026; Consular Access Pact (May 21, 2008); DGMO hotline; Lahore Declaration (1999); Simla Agreement (1972); Operation Parakram (2001-02); Balakot airstrikes (February 26, 2019); Kartarpur Corridor (November 2019); IWT (Indus Waters Treaty 1960); MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime).

Mains GS-2: India-Pakistan CBMs — their origin, durability, and limitations | India's nuclear doctrine (No First Use vs Pakistan's First Use ambiguity) | Crisis management between India and Pakistan — institutional gaps | India's approach to Pakistan: comprehensive bilateral dialogue vs issue-based engagement | SAARC and regional integration — why bilateral tensions constrain South Asian cooperation.

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS CBM:

Agreement: December 31, 1988; entered force January 27, 1991

Exchange: January 1 annually; 35th exchange on January 1, 2026

Signatories 1988: PM Benazir Bhutto (Pak) and PM Rajiv Gandhi (India)

Covers: Nuclear installations and facilities (not warheads/delivery systems)

No verification mechanism; no enforcement

INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE:

Announced: January 2003

Key principles: No First Use (NFU); Massive Retaliation to nuclear attack; No use against non-nuclear states; Civilian Political Control (Nuclear Command Authority — PM chairs)

NCA: Nuclear Command Authority; PM chairs; National Security Advisor is member; Strategic Forces Command operationalises

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR POSTURE:

Full Spectrum Deterrence: includes tactical nuclear weapons (battlefield use)

No NFU pledge: retains first-use option; threshold criteria: territory, armed forces, economic strangulation, political destabilisation

SPD: Strategic Plans Division; Army GHQ-linked; different from India's civilian NCA

INDIA-PAKISTAN KEY AGREEMENTS:

Simla Agreement (July 2, 1972): Bilateral resolution of disputes; LOC recognised

Lahore Declaration (February 21, 1999): Signed by PM Vajpayee and PM Sharif; CBMs; IWT reaffirmation

Nuclear Installations Agreement (1988/1991): Annual list exchange

Consular Access Pact (May 21, 2008): Lists of detained nationals exchanged on January 1

Advance Notice of Missile Tests: Agreement prevents miscalculation during test launches

INDIA'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS STATUS (ESTIMATED):

Warheads: ~160-170 (SIPRI 2025 estimate)

Delivery systems: Agni-I (700 km), Agni-II (2,000 km), Agni-III (3,500 km), Agni-IV (4,000 km), Agni-V (5,000+ km ICBM-class), Prithvi ballistic missiles, BrahMos cruise missile, INS Arihant (submarine-launched Sagarika K-15)

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS STATUS (ESTIMATED):

Warheads: ~165-170 (SIPRI 2025 estimate)

Delivery systems: Shaheen-III (2,750 km), Ghauri-II (2,300 km), Babur cruise missile (700 km), Nasr (60 km — tactical), Taimoor (600 km, air-launched, tested January 2026)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Pokhran-II: May 11-13, 1998; "Operation Shakti"; 5 nuclear tests (3 on May 11, 2 on May 13); Atal Bihari Vajpayee PM

Chagai-I: May 28, 1998 (Pakistan's 5 tests) and Chagai-II: May 30, 1998 (1 test)

Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG): India agreed with NSG waiver in 2008 for civilian nuclear trade

> India's nuclear power capacity: ~8,180 MW (6,780 MW operational; 1,400 MW commissioning) from NPCIL; target 22,000 MW by 2031-32

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, SIPRI, PIB, AffairsCloud

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