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Pakistan Withdraws from SAFF Women's Championship 2026 — Sports Diplomacy and India-Pakistan Relations

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Pakistan Withdraws from SAFF Women's Championship 2026 — Sports Diplomacy and India-Pakistan Relations

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WHY IN NEWS

The **Pakistan Football Federation (PFF)** officially withdrew from the **2026 SAFF Women's Championship** to be hosted by India in Goa, stating it could not obtain a **No Objection Certificate (NOC)** from relevant Pakistani authorities due to ongoing diplomatic tensions with India following the **April 22, 2025 Pahalgam terror attack**. The tournament will now proceed with six teams instead of seven, scheduled from **May 25 to June 6, 2026** at **Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, Margao, Goa**.

SAFF WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP — BACKGROUND

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Full name	SAFF Women's Championship
Organiser	South Asian Football Federation (SAFF)
First edition	2010
Frequency	Biennial
Members	8: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan
India's record	Most titles in SAFF Women's Championship
2026 venue	Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, Margao, Goa
2026 dates	May 25 – June 6, 2026

South Asian Football Federation (SAFF)

SAFF is the governing body for football in South Asia, a sub-confederation of the **Asian Football Confederation (AFC)**. It organises:

- SAFF Championship (men) — biennial senior competition

- SAFF Women’s Championship — biennial
- SAFF U-17/U-20 competitions

PAKISTAN’S WITHDRAWAL — WHAT HAPPENED

The NOC System

In Pakistan, athletes and sports teams require a **No Objection Certificate** from relevant government bodies to travel to India for competitions. Since the Pahalgam terror attack (April 22, 2025) and subsequent India-Pakistan tensions — including India’s suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, closure of the Wagah-Attari border, and India’s military action (Operation Sindoor, May 2025) — Pakistani authorities have not issued such clearances for travel to India.

Precedent

This is not the first time Pakistan has skipped India-hosted tournaments:

- Pakistan has repeatedly not participated in **India-hosted SAARC events**
- Pakistan and India have historically not played **bilateral cricket** in India since 2013 (neutral venues only for ICC events)
- At the **2024 T20 World Cup** hosted by USA and West Indies, Pakistan and India played but in a neutral venue

Impact on Tournament

BEFORE WITHDRAWAL	AFTER WITHDRAWAL
7 teams	6 teams
Pakistan included	Pakistan absent
Full South Asian representation	Sub-regional representation

Remaining teams (2026): India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives.

INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS — POST-PAHALGAM CONTEXT

Key Bilateral Measures Taken Post-Pahalgam (April 2025)

ACTION	INDIA'S STEP
Indus Waters Treaty	Suspended (India put in abeyance)
Wagah-Attari border	Closed to trade and people movement
Diplomatic missions	India expelled Pakistani military attachés; downgraded missions
Airspace	Pak airspace closed to Indian aircraft (reciprocal)
Trade	Bilateral trade suspended

Operation Sindoor (May 6-7, 2025)

India's **military operation targeting terror infrastructure** in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir — described as “focused, measured, and non-escalatory.” A ceasefire was agreed on May 10, 2025, following Pakistan's DGMO reaching out to India's DGMO.

SPORTS DIPLOMACY — INDIA-PAKISTAN CONTEXT

When Sport Intersects with Diplomacy

TERM	MEANING
Sports diplomacy	Use of sporting events to build or repair bilateral ties
Cricket diplomacy	Historic examples: Vajpayee's Lahore bus visit (1999); “Friendship Series”
Sports boycott	Withholding participation as political signal

Key examples:

- **1980 Moscow Olympics boycott** — USA-led boycott after Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- **Cricket diplomacy (India-Pakistan)** — Bilateral series suspended since 2013
- **ICC Champions Trophy 2025** — India did not travel to Pakistan; played from neutral venue

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- SAFF Women’s Championship 2026: India hosts; Goa (Margao); May 25–June 6
- Pakistan withdrawal reason: No NOC (India-Pakistan tension)
- SAFF: Sub-confederation of Asian Football Confederation (AFC)
- Operation Sindoor: May 6–7, 2025 — India’s response to Pahalgam attack

Mains

- “Sport as an instrument of diplomacy: advantages and limitations.” (GS2)
- How the Pahalgam attack reshaped India’s Pakistan policy — evaluate the spectrum of measures

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
SAFF Women’s Championship 2026	India hosts; Margao, Goa; May 25–June 6, 2026
Pakistan withdrawal reason	No NOC; India-Pakistan post-Pahalgam tensions
Remaining teams	6: India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives
SAFF organiser	South Asian Football Federation
SAFF sub-body of	Asian Football Confederation (AFC)
Pahalgam attack	April 22, 2025 — 26 killed
Operation Sindoor	May 6–7, 2025 — India struck terror infrastructure
Indus Waters Treaty	Suspended by India post-Pahalgam

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