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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Why India and Pakistan Don't Talk Any More — Looking Back, and Ahead

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Is the breakdown of India-Pakistan dialogue now structural rather than episodic — and if so, what conditions, if any, could make resumption possible without rewarding cross-border terrorism?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

Indian Express traces the systematic dismantling of India-Pakistan dialogue mechanisms across six crises spanning two decades — from the suspension of the Composite Dialogue Process after 26/11 to the near-total severance of channels following Operation Sindoor in May 2025. The editorial argues that the breakdown is now structural, not episodic: each crisis has removed a layer of engagement, and the cumulative architecture of diplomatic contact is near-zero. The question is no longer how to resume dialogue but whether the conditions that make dialogue meaningful — credible Pakistani action against cross-border terror infrastructure — can ever be created under the current Pakistani state configuration.

A SYSTEMATIC DISMANTLING

The history of India-Pakistan engagement since 2004 is not a story of dialogue disrupted by crises and then resumed. It is a story of dialogue being dismantled, layer by layer, with each crisis removing a layer that was never fully restored. The Composite Dialogue Process (CDP), launched in 2004 under PM Vajpayee and continued by PM Manmohan Singh, was the most ambitious bilateral architecture since the Shimla Agreement (1972). It encompassed eight formally designated baskets of issues: (1) Peace and Security including CBMs; (2) Jammu and Kashmir; (3) Siachen; (4) Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project; (5) Sir Creek; (6) Economic and Commercial Cooperation; (7) Terrorism and Drug Trafficking; and (8) Promotion of Friendly Exchanges in various fields.

The 26/11 Mumbai attacks of November 2008 ended the CDP. India required Pakistani action against the Lashkar-e-Taiba perpetrators as a precondition for any resumption. Pakistan’s response — the slow, inconclusive trial of LeT figures, the continued freedom of Hafiz Saeed — did not meet that bar. Resumed contacts in 2010-2011 were exploratory, not structural. The Manmohan-Zardari era produced goodwill gestures: liberalised visa regimes, back-channel commercial negotiations, the 2012 proposals for non-discriminatory market access. None was institutionalised before the next disruption arrived.

CRISIS	YEAR	INDIAN RESPONSE	WHAT WAS SUSPENDED
26/11 Mumbai Attacks	2008	Diplomatic pressure; CDP suspended	Composite Dialogue Process
Pathankot Air Base Attack	2016	NIA access; talks frozen	Resumed dialogue (Ufa follow-up)
Uri Attack	2016	Surgical strikes; SAARC pullout	SAARC engagement
Pulwama/Balakot	2019	Air strikes; MFN withdrawn; envoys recalled	MFN status, trade, visa, ambassador-level contact
Pahalgam Attack + Operation Sindoor	2025	IWT abeyance; Attari-Wagah closed; air strikes	Indus Waters Treaty cooperation, all land crossings, airspace

THE UFA MOMENT AND ITS AFTERMATH

The high-water mark of the BJP government’s early diplomatic engagement with Pakistan was the Ufa Declaration of July 2015. PM Modi and PM Sharif met on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in Ufa, Russia, and agreed to a framework for dialogue: National Security Adviser-level talks on terrorism, and Director-General of Military Operations (DGMO) contacts on the LoC. The handshake photograph circulated globally; the editorial note it generated was optimistic.

By early 2016, it was over. The Pathankot Air Base attack on January 2, 2016, carried out by Jaish-e-Mohammed — the same organisation that had struck the Indian Parliament in 2001 — ended the Ufa process before it had produced a single structural deliverable. India invited a Pakistan JIT (Joint Investigative Team) to visit Pathankot — an unprecedented gesture of transparency — but the JIT’s report was inconclusive and the Pakistani prosecution of JeM leadership never materialised.

The Ufa episode crystallised a pattern: Pakistan’s civilian leadership, when it seeks dialogue, lacks the authority to act against the Army-sponsored terror infrastructure that triggers Indian suspension. The Army — the actual locus of Pakistan’s foreign and security policy — sees the terror groups as strategic assets and has no incentive to dismantle them regardless of diplomatic costs to the civilian government. Any Indian government that resumed dialogue without a change in this underlying configuration would face the same termination at the next crisis.

POST-PAHALGAM: THE STRUCTURAL BREAK

The Pahalgam attack of April 22, 2025 — in which 26 civilians, predominantly Hindu tourists, were killed in a targeted attack in the Kashmir Valley — triggered a sequence of Indian responses qualitatively different from any previous cycle.

India put the Indus Waters Treaty into abeyance — a step with no precedent since the IWT's signing in 1960. The treaty survived three full-scale wars (1965, 1971, 1999) and multiple crises. Putting it in abeyance signals that India now considers economic and resource leverage, not merely diplomatic protest, as a legitimate instrument of pressure. The Attari-Wagah border was closed; Pakistani nationals were given 48 hours to leave India; Pakistani traders were barred; airspace restrictions were imposed. Operation Sindoor followed on May 7-10, 2025 — nine precision strikes on terrorist infrastructure in PoJK and Pakistan's Punjab province.

One year later, in May 2026, the bilateral relationship is near-frozen at every level that matters. There is no ambassador-level contact. Trade is suspended. The IWT remains in abeyance. Back-channel contacts reportedly operate through UAE and Turkish interlocutors, but without an agreed framework or agenda. The ceasefire negotiated at the DGMO level in May 2025 holds on the LoC, but a ceasefire is not a dialogue process — it is the bare minimum of managed coexistence.

PAKISTAN'S STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Any analysis of the India-Pakistan dialogue breakdown that focuses exclusively on Indian policy choices misses the more fundamental determinant: Pakistan's internal configuration.

Pakistan's Army retains effective control over foreign and security policy. Elected civilian governments — whether PPP, PML-N, or PTI — have consistently lacked the authority to make, and then deliver on, security commitments to India. The IMF bailout dependency (Pakistan is in its second consecutive Extended Fund Facility programme) has not produced an Army-supervised strategic reorientation; it has produced fiscal adjustment without strategic adjustment. The Army sees the Kashmir dispute, the terror infrastructure, and the India-Pakistan rivalry as core to its institutional rationale and budget allocation.

Pakistan is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, as is India. Foreign ministers meet at SCO ministerial meetings — as they did at the 2023 Goa SCO Council of Foreign Ministers meeting and the 2024 Astana SCO Heads of Government Summit. These marginal contacts exist, but they exist at the margins precisely because both sides understand that substantive dialogue requires preconditions that SCO margins cannot establish.

MECHANISM	STATUS (MAY 2026)	LAST ACTIVE
Foreign Secretary Talks	Suspended	2015
NSA-level talks	Suspended	Ufa 2015 (abortive)
Back-channel (secretive)	Reportedly via UAE/Turkey	Active but informal
DGMO contact	Ceasefire maintained	May 2025
SCO margins contact — Astana	EAM Jaishankar; ministerial-level only	July 2024
SCO margins contact — Islamabad	EAM Jaishankar represented India at SCO Heads of Government meeting; met Pakistani FM on sidelines (October 2024)	October 2024
High Commission (Ambassadors)	Envoys not at ambassador level	Post-Pulwama 2019
Indus Waters Treaty	In abeyance	Post-Pahalgam 2025
Trade	Suspended	Post-Pulwama 2019

THE SIMLA AGREEMENT AND THE BILATERAL FRAMEWORK

India's position, rooted in the Simla Agreement of 1972, has consistently been that all disputes between India and Pakistan — including the status of Jammu and Kashmir — must be resolved bilaterally, without third-party mediation. The Simla Agreement's Article 1(ii) commits both sides to “settle their differences by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations.” India has invoked this framework to resist internationalisation of the Kashmir dispute at the UN and at other [multilateral](#) fora.

The Lahore Declaration of 1999 — signed just months before the Kargil War — added a nuclear dimension: both sides recognised the dangers of nuclear weapons and committed to intensified dialogue. The Declaration's signal was overwhelmed by the Kargil intrusion within weeks.

India's “talks and terror cannot go together” doctrine — articulated most sharply after 26/11 and reaffirmed after every subsequent crisis — is not merely a tactical position. It reflects a structural argument: that any dialogue conducted while Pakistani state-linked groups continue to operate against India rewards the terror infrastructure. The counter-argument, advanced by some strategic analysts, is that no dialogue means no de-escalation pathway, and that a frozen relationship between two nuclear-armed states creates its own escalation risks.

IS THERE A PATHWAY?

The editorial does not offer optimism on a near-term timeline. Three conditions would need to align for any meaningful resumption:

First, a demonstrable Pakistani action against the terror infrastructure — not a statement, not a trial, but an operational dismantlement of groups that have attacked India. The Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and their offshoots would need to be structurally degraded, not merely rhetorically condemned. Given the Pakistani Army's posture, this is a political rather than operational question.

Second, a change in Pakistan's internal configuration — either a genuine shift in the Army's strategic calculus (unlikely without a change in leadership and doctrine), or a civilian government with sufficient authority to constrain Army-sponsored groups (historically absent).

Third, an agreed framework for dialogue that does not require India to pre-accept any outcome on Kashmir, and that builds in verification mechanisms for Pakistani counter-terror commitments before trade, visa, or diplomatic normalisation is restored.

None of these conditions exist in May 2026. The DGMO ceasefire holds, which is the minimum. Beyond that minimum, the relationship is frozen in a configuration that is stable in the short run and corrosive in the long run — for regional trade, for people-to-people contact, for the 1.5 billion people on both sides of the border whose prosperity depends, partly, on a neighbourhood that is not in permanent cold war.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 — India's Foreign Policy, India-Pakistan Relations, Regional Security

- **Composite Dialogue Process (CDP), 2004-2008:** Eight-basket framework — (1) Peace & Security/CBMs; (2) J&K; (3) Siachen; (4) Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project; (5) Sir Creek; (6) Economic & Commercial Cooperation; (7) Terrorism and Drug Trafficking; (8) Promotion of Friendly Exchanges — suspended after 26/11; the benchmark against which all subsequent dialogue attempts are measured.
- **Simla Agreement, 1972:** Bilateral resolution framework for all disputes; Article 1(ii) — peaceful means, bilateral negotiations; India's consistent position against third-party mediation.
- **Lahore Declaration, 1999:** Nuclear stability commitment; overwhelmed by Kargil within months — demonstrates fragility of political declarations without structural change.
- **Ufa Declaration, 2015:** Modi-Sharif meeting; brief hope; ended within six months by Pathankot attack — illustrates the civilian-army gap in Pakistan.

- **“Talks and terror cannot go together” doctrine:** India’s explicit policy since 26/11; reaffirmed after Pathankot, Uri, Pulwama, Pahalgam.
- **IWT in abeyance (post-Pahalgam 2025):** Unprecedented step; treaty survived three wars (1965, 1971, 1999); signals India’s use of economic/resource leverage.
- **Operation Sindoor (May 7-10, 2025):** Nine strikes on terror infrastructure in PoJK and Pakistan’s Punjab — structural shift from strategic restraint.
- **Pakistan’s Army control over foreign policy:** Civilian government lacks authority to deliver on security commitments — structural, not episodic, constraint.
- **SCO membership (India and Pakistan):** Minimal contact at margins; key events — 2023 Goa SCO Council of Foreign Ministers meeting; July 2024 Astana SCO Heads of Government Summit; October 2024 Islamabad SCO Heads of Government meeting (EAM Jaishankar represented India, met Pakistani counterpart on sidelines) — insufficient for substantive dialogue.
- **MFN status:** India withdrew Pakistan’s MFN status post-Pulwama 2019 — trade as diplomatic instrument.
- **Nuclear overhang:** Both nuclear-armed states; Pakistan’s first-use posture; India’s No First Use — escalation management central to any dialogue framework.

Mains Questions:

- 1 “The breakdown of India-Pakistan dialogue since 2008 is structural, not episodic.” Critically examine this argument, identifying the conditions that would need to change for meaningful engagement to resume.
- 2 Trace the evolution of India’s response to cross-border terrorism from the Kargil War (1999) to Operation Sindoor (2025). What doctrinal shifts does this trajectory reveal?
- 3 India’s decision to put the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance following the Pahalgam attack marks a new phase in India’s Pakistan policy. Assess the strategic logic and the risks.
- 4 Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation serve as a forum for India-Pakistan confidence-building measures? Evaluate with reference to its institutional mandate and limitations.

Keywords: Composite Dialogue Process, Simla Agreement 1972, Lahore Declaration 1999, Ufa Declaration 2015, talks and terror doctrine, Indus Waters Treaty abeyance, Operation Sindoor, Pahalgam attack 2025, Pulwama 2019, MFN withdrawal, Pakistan Army **strategic autonomy**, SCO India-Pakistan, DGMO ceasefire, back-channel diplomacy, UAE Turkey interlocution, nuclear first-use, calibrated deterrence, structural breakdown, civilian-military gap Pakistan, cross-border terrorism, bilateral framework

Indian Express's underlying argument is that India and Pakistan are trapped in a structural deadlock: India cannot resume dialogue without Pakistani action on terror, and Pakistan's Army cannot deliver that action without undermining its own institutional rationale. The result is a frozen relationship that is neither war nor peace — managed coexistence between two nuclear-armed states, maintained by a DGMO-level ceasefire and back-channel whispers through third parties. Breaking this deadlock will require not a diplomatic formula but a change in the Pakistani Army's strategic calculus — a change that no Indian government can produce from the outside, and that no Pakistani civilian government has yet managed from the inside.

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