

The Asia Cup: Death of Cricket Diplomacy

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Summary

The recent cricket Asia Cup will be remembered for the acrimony between India and Pakistan. It also marked the nadir of cricket diplomacy.

The recently-held Asia Cup, which brought together the top Asian cricketing nations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), will be remembered less for the cricket and more for the off-field politics. India's captain, Suryakumar Yadav, refused to shake hands with his Pakistani counterpart, Salman Agha, in all three matches, including the final, between the two countries. Similarly, the two teams did not engage in handshakes after all their matches, as is the norm in cricket matches. To worsen matters, the Indian team refused to collect the trophy after winning the final since it was being presented by Mohsin Naqvi, the Asian Cricket Council Chairman and Pakistan's Interior Minister.

The animosity was not confined to the refusal to shake hands. In the post-match press conference, after the first match between India and Pakistan, Yadav dedicated the victory to [India's "armed forces"](#). In the second match, Pakistani batsman Sahibzada Farhan mimicked the firing of an AK-47 rifle upon reaching a milestone and Pakistani bowler Haris Rauf made gestures depicting the downing of aircraft, in apparent references to the recent India-Pakistan conflict. Before the final, Naqvi, who is also the head of the Pakistan Cricket Board, [reposted images on X](#) (formerly Twitter) of Pakistani cricketers wearing flight suits with images of airborne fighter jets in the background.

The Indian team's on-field action reflected the Board of Control for Cricket in India's and, by extension, the Indian government's stand on Pakistan following the recent border conflict and the Pulwama terror attack. The cricketers merely did what they were told to do. The same applied to the Pakistani players who were told to engage in brinkmanship during their match against the UAE to ostensibly protest against the match referee's actions in the India-Pakistan match. The [lack of agency of Indian cricketers](#) can be attributed to the subservience of sportspersons to the state and the various sports federations that are also, more often than not, controlled by politicians.

In the larger scheme of things, however, the Asia Cup spells the demise of what has been termed 'cricket diplomacy'. The connection of sport and nationalism has been noted by many, including writer George Orwell and historian E J Hobsbawm. India-Pakistan sporting contests, especially on the cricket pitch, are a good example, irrespective of the public rhetoric, of the fusion of sport and nationalism. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai had once described India-Pakistan contests as ["thinly disguised national wars"](#).

However, cricket has also been a tool to foster better relations between India and Pakistan, leading to the coinage of the term 'cricket diplomacy'. India and Pakistan played against each other for the first time on the cricket field in 1952. The series, played in good spirit,

was an example of sport bringing together two nations only five years after their birth in the midst of unprecedented violence, suffering and war. Since then, there have been many instances of cricket cutting through animosity, albeit fleetingly.

The two nations continued playing Test matches until the 1965 the India-Pakistan war snapped cricket ties between the countries for over a decade. When sporting relations resumed in 1978, a few years after the 1971 India-Pakistan war and the birth of Bangladesh, the term ‘cricket diplomacy’ first came into currency. After India’s tour of Pakistan in 1978, then Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq said at a farewell dinner for the Indian cricketers that the goodwill and friendship generated by the cricket matches should bring the two countries closer, even in politics. Indian’s then Foreign Minister and future Prime Minister, [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#), noted that the Indian cricket team had made a “significant contribution towards promoting goodwill and understanding between the people of India and Pakistan”.

Perhaps the best example of this was the so-called ‘[friendship series](#)’ in 2004, when the Indian cricket team toured Pakistan for the first time in 14 years, not too long after the Kargil war and the terror attack on the Indian parliament. Then Prime Minister Vajpayee put the series into perspective when he famously said, “[Khel hi nahin, dil bhi jitiye](#) (Win not only matches, but hearts too)”. Some 20,000 Indians crossed over to Pakistan to watch the matches, resulting in an unprecedented people-to-people exchange. The following year, then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf accepted an invitation from India to watch a match in New Delhi alongside then India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

After the Mumbai terror attack in 2008, cricketing ties nosedived. Pakistani players were shunned in the Indian Premier League after 2008 and continue to be banned. However, while bilateral tours were put off, cricket diplomacy did not die. When India and Pakistan played each other at Mohali in the semi-final of the 2011 cricket World Cup, then Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was invited for the match and he watched it in the company of Singh, his Indian counterpart.

Though Congress Member of Parliament and former Minister of State of External Affairs, Shashi Tharoor, noted that “[cricket will follow diplomacy, not precede it](#)”, the game has occasionally played a role in thawing relations when other doors have been shut. Indeed, Tharoor argued that by [refusing to shake hands](#), India demonised an “entire populace” and played “directly into the hands” of forces that it sought to combat.

The Asia Cup marks the nadir, if not the death, of cricket diplomacy. The equating of the cricket field with a battleground too was made starkly clear by [Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) when on X he described India’s victory as an ‘Operation Sindoor’ – the codename for India’s missile strikes in May 2025 on terrorist sites in Pakistan – on the “games field”.

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