

Why India and Pakistan Still Can't Be Friends: Structure, Interests, and Narratives Blocking Rapprochement

Areez Tariq

Independent Political Analyst

Email: areeztariqkhan@gmail.com

Abstract: Despite periodic breakthroughs, India–Pakistan normalization repeatedly stalls. This paper argues the impasse is overdetermined by: (1) unresolved partitions of territory and memory, (2) a stability–instability dynamic under the nuclear shadow, (3) organizational interests—especially within Pakistan’s praetorian civil–military regime—that benefit from rivalry, (4) incompatible national narratives and domestic politics on both sides, and (5) thin, brittle interdependence. While functional cooperation (e.g., on rivers) has historically survived crises, recent shocks since 2019–25 have eroded even these guardrails. Durable improvement would require parallel progress on violence restraint, incremental de facto arrangements over Kashmir, and insulation of trade and water regimes from crisis diplomacy.

Keywords: India–Pakistan Relations; Kashmir Conflict; Partition of 1947; Security Dilemma; Stability–Instability Paradox; Cross-Border Terrorism; Trade and Economic Interdependence; Indus Waters Treaty.

INTRODUCTION

Partition was not a single rupture but a prolonged, state-making process that entrenched rival nationalisms and refugee politics. That “long partition” continues to shape citizenship, property, and security institutions, producing mutually exclusive narratives of victimhood and sovereignty.

Authoritative histories show how elite bargains and mass violence hardened zero-sum identities that later policy could not easily reverse. These legacies still inform claims over Kashmir and the politics of “unfinished business.”

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE AND THE KASHMIR KNOT

Kashmir remains the core sovereignty dispute. Detailed scholarship documents its origins in accession, war, and failed democratization, producing a layered conflict (center–periphery inside J&K, India–Pakistan interstate rivalry, and transnational militancy). Even sophisticated autonomy or power-sharing ideas have struggled against hardened red lines.

Backchannel diplomacy occasionally neared a pragmatic, LOC-plus arrangement (soft borders, demilitarization in phases, joint mechanisms), but political shocks repeatedly derailed it.

THE NUCLEAR SHADOW AND THE STABILITY–INSTABILITY PARADOX

Nuclearization reduced incentives for large-scale conventional war but widened the space for subconventional probes and punitive but limited retaliation—producing recurring crises (1999, 2001–02, 2008, 2016, 2019, 2025). Theoretical and empirical work argues this “dangerous deterrent” dynamic sustains low-level conflict rather than resolving it.

Recent escalatory episodes—including 2019’s air confrontation and tit-for-tat strikes again reported in 2025—illustrate how nuclear backstops fail to translate into political compromise and can instead enable risk-acceptant tactics.

ORGANIZATIONAL INTERESTS AND REGIME POLITICS

Analysts of Pakistan’s security establishment show how a revisionist, identity-guarding military doctrine has repeatedly prioritized parity with India and territorial claims over economic or diplomatic normalization. These organizational preferences—and the military’s domestic role—make sustained détente costly.

On the Indian side, central governments face electoral and ideological pressures to signal resolve; conciliatory moves can be punished domestically after terror attacks, narrowing the political bandwidth for risk-taking. Public statements during commemorations and after major attacks reinforce these incentives.

COERCION–TERRORISM CYCLES AND AUDIENCE COSTS

Militant violence emanating from Pakistan-based groups (denied by Islamabad) repeatedly resets the diplomatic clock by imposing audience costs on Indian leaders and triggering coercive signaling. Each cycle further discredits dialogue-first constituencies on both sides.

Classic security-dilemma logic explains why even defensive measures look offensive across the border, entrenching mistrust and making unilateral restraint politically perilous.

THIN, BRITTLE INTERDEPENDENCE

Trade and mobility linkages are too small to counterweigh security shocks. India revoked Pakistan's MFN benefits and imposed 200% tariffs after Pulwama (2019); Pakistan then suspended most bilateral trade and downgraded diplomatic ties. Much commerce shifted to costly third-country routes via the Gulf and Singapore—hardly the thick interdependence that lobbies for peace.

Periodic signals about “considering” trade restoration have not survived subsequent crises, underscoring fragility.

COOPERATION THAT SURVIVED—NOW FRAYING

For decades, the Indus Waters Treaty (1960) embodied compartmentalization: technocratic rules buffered politics. Arbitration and neutral-expert channels kept disputes just manageable. But water has become securitized in recent crises, with public threats and strikes against hydro assets reported in 2025—signs that even this firewall is under stress.

WHY “FRIENDSHIP” KEEPS FAILING (SYNTHESIS)

Put together, three levels interact:

Structure: An enduring security dilemma under nuclear cover creates crisis-prone stability.

Institutions & interests: Pakistan's military prerogatives and India's domestic audience costs penalize compromise after violence.

Ideas & narratives: Partition memories and incompatible nation-building stories harden red lines, especially on Kashmir.

Thin economic ties and the erosion of functional regimes (trade, water) remove buffers that might otherwise accumulate pro-peace constituencies.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: WHAT COULD ACTUALLY HELP

Violence-management first: A reciprocal, verifiable restraint regime on cross-border militancy and punitive raids; hotlines and incident-prevention at multiple echelons; third-party facilitated forensics after mass-casualty attacks.

Kashmir pragmatism: Revive a backchannel focused on humanitarian and mobility gains along the LoC; build joint technical working groups before sovereignty talks.

Re-insulate water: Recommit to IWT dispute-resolution pathways; create a monsoon data-sharing “no-cutout” pledge even during crises.

De-politicize low-stakes trade: Start with limited schedules (perishables, medicines, parts) and dedicated “peace logistics” corridors that can be paused without destroying the whole edifice.

None of these make the countries “friends,” but they reduce the frequency and cost of breakdowns—conditions under which friendlier politics sometimes emerge.

CONCLUSION

The inability of India and Pakistan to build genuine friendship is not the product of a single issue but rather the result of intertwined historical grievances, unresolved territorial disputes, military doctrines, domestic political imperatives, and weak

economic interdependence. Partition's legacies and the Kashmir conflict continue to shape national identities in ways that sustain zero-sum rivalries. The nuclear environment has deterred full-scale war but paradoxically enabled low-intensity conflicts, while terrorism and militant violence repeatedly derail peace initiatives. Domestic politics on both sides reward toughness over compromise, preventing sustained dialogue. Furthermore, the erosion of functional cooperation in trade and water-sharing removes crucial safety valves that once kept hostilities contained.

Ultimately, India and Pakistan are not destined to remain adversaries, but genuine friendship will require deliberate efforts to insulate cooperation from crises, manage cross-border violence, and engage in pragmatic, incremental confidence-building measures. Until both states prioritize long-term stability over short-term political gains, their relationship is likely to remain one of managed hostility rather than true partnership.

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