

Batting for Peace in the Nuclear Shadow: Cricket Diplomacy between India and Pakistan

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Sport's potential for peace has received an increasing amount of attention in recent years as highlighted in the United Nations International Year of Sport and Physical Education in 2005, which saw the players of the national cricket teams of India and Pakistan appointed as spokespersons. Since the entry of cricket onto the diplomatic arena in South Asia in 1987, it has continued to affect and be affected by the political-diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Cricket diplomacy as a system of representation and communication has, when introduced at the right time, been an important determinant for the continued success of the recent peace process between India and Pakistan. Timing is an important factor for the outcome of sport diplomacy in general, and timing also in large parts determines the durability of sport diplomacy. These two factors combined provide the tools with which to discuss if cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan has worked or not.

Cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan has been one of the factors behind the success of the two countries' recent rapprochement and peace process dating back to 2003. This year marks the twentieth anniversary since Pakistani president Gen. Zia-ul Haq in 1987, in the face of an impending crisis, unexpectedly stated his intention to travel to India to watch a cricket match between the two countries. Gen. Zia's visit helped defuse tensions and ultimately contributed to the crisis being resolved through dialogue and negotiations. Cricket has continued to affect and be affected by the nuclear neighbours' political and diplomatic relationship, and the sport's importance was recognized in 2005 when the United Nations appointed the national teams of India and Pakistan as spokespersons for the International Year of Sport and Physical Education in recognition of their efforts at overcoming regional tensions and encouraging peaceful relations between their respective countries (United Nations, 2006: 6).

The Most Complex Divorce in History³⁹

India and Pakistan emerged as independent states in 1947 after the departure of their British colonial rulers led to the partition of British India into separate states for the subcontinent's Hindus and Muslims respectively. The relationship between the two countries can best be described as the story of a divorce that went terribly wrong, involving the Kashmir question, numerous disputes, and four wars in sixty years, only one of which did not relate to the Kashmir issue (Racine, 2004: 112-113).

There are hardly any intractable conflicts in the world where the stakes are higher than in the extremely adversarial political relationship between India and Pakistan. Their relationship constitutes what some have called an archetype of enduring rivalry, which is characterized by zero-sum perspectives making it hard for any side to make concessions and reach agreements (Paul, 2005: 4). The severity of the conflict has been worsened by both nations obtaining nuclear power status in the

course of the last thirty years, which has led to fears that conflicts could escalate to the worst-case scenario of nuclear war in South Asia. In this kind of relationship defined by persistent antagonism and distrust, building confidence between the parties is a precondition for building peace (Qadeem, 2003: 159). This is where cricket enters the arena as a way of building confidence between the parties.

Cricket in India and Pakistan

The first to play cricket in South Asia were British sailors and soldiers as early as 1721 (Guha, 2002: 3). But the British Empire's local subjects soon came to discover a liking for this sport of the ruling class. Cricket teams in colonial India were formed along communal lines with the Parsis,⁴⁰ a relatively small community in Mumbai, the first to adopt the British game in the 19th century. The other religious communities followed suit, leading to the establishment of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and even Jewish cricket clubs, a pattern that was to be followed all across British India. Sown into this segmented system were the seeds of social conflict, as what had been a countrywide rivalry at club level between Hindus and Muslims was replaced after Independence by a cross-border rivalry of dimensions. Thus, the history of cricket relations between India and Pakistan almost exactly mirrors the history of cricket relations between Hindus and Muslims in British India, with obvious repercussions for the prestige put into winning cricket contests against the rival (Ibid. 428).

All over South Asia, cricket has assumed an all-consuming hold on people from every walk of life (Khan, 2005: vii). Cricket permeates practically every layer of Indian and Pakistani societies and has a central place in the identity of their citizens. It is the subcontinent's secular religion, uniting Indians and Pakistanis of all creeds and beliefs in their passion for it. Especially in ethnically divided nations such as Pakistan, and to a certain extent India, cricket serves as one of the major components that glue society together. Cricket can, in

³⁹ Described by Dominique LaPierre and Larry Collins (2006) in *Freedom at Midnight*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing.

⁴⁰ Parsis are followers of the Zoroastrian religion, living in India since they were exiled from Persia.

short, be argued to be one of the few things that can unite the two countries.

Sport and International Relations

It is obvious but often understated in academic literature that sports such as cricket have an important part to play in social life and in relations between states. Cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan is a prominent showcase for how certain sports can play exactly such a decisive role in relations between states. Cricket, and sport in general, derives this role from a significant symbolic value in terms of identity and nationalism. They are more than mere reflections of society, but can also 'create interests, principles and meanings which do not exist if there is no sport and which have an effect on other aspects of society' (Allison, 2000: 54).

The one aspect of politics that has possibly been most affected by sport is nationalism and national identities. Sport is a very prominent social institution in every society, and in South Asian societies cricket has an appeal perhaps only rivalled by religion and Bollywood movies. Sport has the potential above all to bring people and nations together as it creates a shared language and shared passions, as with cricket across South Asia (Sengupta, 2004: 585). Furthermore, particular sports are sometimes considered to exemplify the very spirit and standing of a nation. The symbolic value attached to cricket is inextricably linked to the fact that attainment of national prestige vis-à-vis the enemy can be achieved through sporting success, and in India and Pakistan the national teams carry great symbolic value as metaphors for the nation.

As noted, International Relations theory has tended to pay little attention to the above realities, but there are indications this is about to change due to the realization that sport and politics intertwine at several levels, including diplomacy, nation building and access into the international arena. States have used sport in principally two ways: to sell themselves and enhance their image internationally, and to penalize international behaviour of which

they disapprove. In the first case, government involvement has been linked to promoting the prestige and power of the nation through sporting success in the international arena. At the other end, the cutting off of sporting ties has been used as a negative diplomatic sanction as has been witnessed in the India-Pakistan case. In sum, the abovementioned myth of sport's autonomy from other social processes should be discarded, and sport's place in International Relations theory should no longer need justification.

Sport Diplomacy

Diplomacy is broadly conceived of as conduct of business between states by peaceful means, whereas professional sport such as cricket is inherently competitive. George Orwell (1953: 195) famously characterized serious sport as 'war minus the shooting,' and argued that 'sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will between states.' This pessimistic outlook contradicts the very concept of sport diplomacy, but in Secretary-General Kofi Annan's report to the United Nations, *Sport for Development and Peace: the way forward*, sport is positively viewed as possessing the ability to bring people together, bridge differences, promote communication and understanding, and not least contribute to lasting peace (United Nations, 2006: 20). In other words, sport is considered as having the potential of acting as a 'bridge of peace'⁴¹ between belligerents.

The art and practice of diplomacy is an institution as old as the history of mankind itself (Eban, 1998: 27). It can be characterized as the engine room of international relations without which international life as we know it would simply be impossible. Diplomacy is in essence about the framework in which international relations take place; it is 'the medium that is both a necessary condition, and the lubricant, of international politics' (Melissen, 1999: xvii).

It has been argued that a transformation of diplomatic practice has taken place that has seen it extended across a much wider range of activities (Beacom, 2000: 14). In consequence, 'sport diplomacy' has been

⁴¹ A term conceived by former chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, Shaharyar M. Khan (2005: 180).

added to the vocabulary of international relations. Sport diplomacy can be defined as a system of representation and communication. Athletes and sport officials act as symbolic representatives, and they derive their autonomy as sporting ambassadors from the fact that they represent sovereign countries. In other words, when cricket players from India and Pakistan enter the playing field in their national team colours, they not only represent themselves but also carry the hopes and expectations of millions onto it. This symbolic representation is significant as the fate of the nation can, in the national imagination, be related to the failure or success of the national team. Similarly, sport provides channels of communication which can help build confidence and create a sense of shared purpose and common bonds between adversaries. Nelson Mandela remarked on this during a visit to Great Britain in 1996, commenting that 'sport is probably the most effective means of communication in the modern world, bypassing both verbal and written communication and reaching directly out to billions of people worldwide' (Beck, 2004: 77). Combined, diplomatic representation and communication through the use of sport can open up a 'conversational space' between opposing parties in a conflict, something that is an important aspect of reconciliation and rapprochement.

Individuals and groups other than those whose formal roles are to make peace can do something to facilitate it in protracted conflicts (Byrne & Keashley, 2000: 112). Sport diplomacy as such provides an unofficial route for discussing official, 'track-one' business both by providing a low-risk testing ground for estimating the public's reaction to another country, and an informal venue for dialogue and communication at what can be termed 'track-two' and 'track-three' level diplomacy. It is the diplomatic amateurism and unofficial nature of the sport's most visible actors that has given sport diplomacy its enduring power. Athletes and sport officials are seen as non-threatening precisely in light of their limited capacity to engage in official diplomatic repartee. The primary attraction of sport as a diplomatic tool for governments derives from

these attributes.

One of the most significant applications of sport in diplomacy is its use as a device for building closer relationships between enemies, something that Ronald Reagan stressed in relation to the US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War: 'If we must compete, let it be on the playing field and not the battle field' (Saunders, 1991: 55). This is often achieved through the use of sport exchanges, the most famous example to date being the 'ping-pong diplomacy' between the United States and the People's Republic of China in 1971, which signalled the normalization of relations between the two countries. Sport as the world's common language plays an important part in this equation, and cricket's role in South Asia is no exception.

Has Cricket Diplomacy Worked?

Cricket has been seen in the past to mimic the political dispute between India and Pakistan, so that the underlying rivalry off the field has been virtually projected onto the field. The chances for cricket diplomacy to succeed could therefore be considered marginal, but improvements in the political relationship between the two countries should be reflected by an improving cricket relationship. Indeed, cricket is the common love of people all over South Asia, which makes it a possibly permanent bridge of peace.

Since Gen. Zia's groundbreaking cricket diplomacy in 1987, India and Pakistan have engaged in bilateral cricket contests on six more occasions. Bilateral cricket between India and Pakistan is highly politicized, with political considerations often going into the decision on whether to engage in these contests or not. The match series have taken place under various political backdrops, with varying levels of success or failure as a consequence. Two factors have been most important regarding the success or failure of cricket diplomacy. First, there is the question of *timing*. This means taking into account the prevailing political and diplomatic climate at the time of its initiation. For sport diplomacy to contribute to the ending of enduring conflicts, both favourable general conditions and willing and imaginative leaders are

needed, and this all comes down to timing. Second, the *durability* of cricket diplomacy also needs to be considered. Durability concerns the question of whether sport diplomacy once underway can survive periods of deteriorating state-to-state relations, and if so, maintain a vital line of communication between adversarial states as in the India-Pakistan case. These two factors ultimately determine the chance for cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan to be successful.

Sporting ties are an important indication of the state of bilateral relations. Experiences since 1987 have been mixed, but it seems that cricket diplomacy has been most successful when introduced following a general thawing of bilateral political relations, as is the case with the current peace process. After the Indo-Pakistani peace process was re-ignited in 2003, three successive instalments of bilateral cricket contests were held in 2004, 2005, and 2006. The two latter series of matches took place in a climate of amicable bilateral relations following directly from the success of the 2004 series in Pakistan, labelled 'the Friendship Series.' This demonstrates the importance of timing, and the current process has despite some setbacks also demonstrated a high degree of durability uncharacteristic of earlier experiences. Two other instances where a thawing of relations preceded cricket diplomacy, in 1989 and 1999, saw severe deterioration of bilateral relations ensure its non-survival. In 1989, the Kashmiri uprising put a lid on bilateral cricket, as did the Kargil war and its aftermath in 1999. If cricket diplomacy is initiated in a climate of strained relations on the other hand, as in 1997, its durability seems virtually non-existent.

Adolf Ogi, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace, has stated that he believes both national cricket teams are pioneers in the quest for peace and stability in South Asia, and can serve as role models for other countries and regions around the world (United Nations, 2005). Ogi thus acknowledges that cricket diplomacy has been successful, and could provide lessons for other conflicts. The general

lesson seems to be that a thawing of relations between adversarial states is a prerequisite for successful sport diplomacy. Sport diplomacy's ability to survive periods of deteriorating relations has in the India-Pakistan case been varying, but if successful it can provide an essential channel of communication if official dialogue is broken off. Cricket diplomacy has clearly been successful in recent years, as witnessed by successive instalments of bilateral cricket contests since 2004, and the ongoing peace process, which led to the resumption of the Delhi-Lahore bus line in 2003 and the *Samjhauta Express*⁴² train service in 2004, as well as the opening of a bus service across the Line of Control in Kashmir in 2005. Orwell's pessimistic view of sport as 'war minus the shooting' should in this case therefore largely be discarded. Nothing is ever certain when these terrible twins of world politics are involved, however, and therefore it is too early to definitely conclude if cricket has contributed to lasting peace on the subcontinent. Nevertheless cricket has, in its role as South Asia's common language and passion, helped unite and build a bridge of peace between the people of India and Pakistan.

⁴² Commonly called the 'Friendship Express.'

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