**[Lost in the din](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758029/lost-in-the-din)**

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ON a crisp September day in 2005 at the Wagah-Attari border, the flags of Pakistan and India were flying high, while the drums rolled on both sides to announce one of the largest prisoner exchanges between the two countries. On the ground standing in a neat line were prisoners from both countries, some with no shoes on their feet, waiting anxiously to reunite with their families.

The drummers on either side competed with one another to be louder, but the festive mood was not reflected in the eyes of the prisoners. They glared at the big gates dividing the two rival nations with disillusionment; most of them had spent a longer time in prison than their sentences required. Some had even developed mental illnesses as a result of their incarceration.

This prisoner exchange took place as part of the ‘confidence-building measures’ (CBMs) between India’s then prime minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan’s Gen Pervez Musharraf.

Later in May 2008, a consular access agreement was signed, under which both countries are required to exchange lists of prisoners in each other’s custody, to provide timely consular access and prompt repatriation after the prisoners had completed their sentence. However, after the Mumbai attacks, the process suffered and prisoners continued to be incarcerated even though they had served their sentence.

Similarly, as part of the CBMs, a bus service across the Line of Control in Kashmir was launched in April 2005, allowing divided families to meet. Through the bus service, a mother met her daughter after 30 years and elderly twin brothers reunited — they had last seen each other when they were young men.

However, every time there was a skirmish or an attack, the bus service was suspended. And finally it was suspended completely in April 2020, when, in a unilateral move, India announced the suspension of trade. But much before that, the die had been cast on India-Pakistan relations after the Mumbai attacks.

All hopes for the resumption of diplomatic ties were crushed.

The Mumbai attacks were a watershed moment for India where 174 people were killed on live television for the world to see. Young Indians were convinced that Pakistan was exporting terror to their cities and the new narrative negated the romantic notions that the older generation of Indians had nurtured since partition of a land lost. The new generation of Indians now viewed Pakistan through the prism of the Mumbai attacks.

When Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari [embarked on his journey](https://www.dawn.com/news/1751066) to Goa to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, he was taking an immense political risk. In Pakistan, the trial of those accused in the Mumbai attacks is still to be concluded.

Three prosecutors have been changed in this case since 2009. One was murdered, the second died of a heart attack and the third was abruptly dismissed. While the accused in the Mumbai attacks are being tried in anti-terrorism courts in Pakistan, the state has tried civilians and even human rights activists in non-civilian forums. The inconsistency in pursuing cases linked to the Mumbai attacks has not gone unnoticed by New Delhi.

When Foreign Minister Bhutto-Zardari arrived in Goa recently, his past remarks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi — “Osama bin Laden is dead, but the butcher of Gujarat lives…” — still rankled the BJP. Mainstream Indian media were waiting to take a swipe at Pakistan’s top diplomat, but they had little opportunity, because he did not hold a press conference with Indian media.

At home, the hawks in PTI were condemning Bhutto-Zardari for even attending the summit, while political commentators were piling on the pressure to raise the issue of Kashmir at the multilateral forum. As a goodwill gesture, the foreign minister announced the release of 600 Indian fishermen, a move that should have softened the Indians.

However, his interviews to two top Indian journalists where he defended Pakistan’s position on Kashmir irked the BJP leadership, who were of the view that at a multilateral summit, bilateral relations should not have been brought up. The Indians were even more upset when he cautioned them “not to get caught up in weaponising terrorism for diplomatic point-scoring”.

All hopes for the resumption of diplomatic ties were crushed when the foreign minister said it would not happen unless India went back to its [position in Kashmir before August 2019](https://www.dawn.com/news/1498227). He condemned India for hosting a G20 meeting in Srinagar and warned that when it was held “we will give such a response that it will be remembered”.

His remarks were promptly carried by the media and patched with the news that in Jammu and Kashmir’s Rajouri district five army personnel were killed in a gun battle with militants, an insinuation that Pakistan would be held responsible for any militancy in Kashmir during the G20 summit.

As soon as Bhutto-Zardari was on the tarmac to fly home, India’s External Affairs Minister Subramanian Jaishankar in a scathing press conference burst out: “Weaponising terrorism! We are not scoring diplomatic points, we are diplomatically exposing Pakistan.” And on Kashmir he thundered: “Pakistan has nothing to do with the G20 summit or Kashmir, they should just vacate … Kashmir [AJK]!”

Suddenly the SCO, a multilateral forum where members were discussing ways to economically take the bloc further, was turned into an India-Pakistan round-off, a rude reminder of how their mutual hostility had made Saarc redundant.

And here lies another opportunity for these two cantankerous nations — either move forward with the rest of the world, which is focused on regional and economic integration, or continue to undermine the potential of their people. For now, stray fisherfolk and divided families who pose no threat to the security of either nation, continue to pay the price of self-proclaimed patriotism.

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