



Backchannel Diplomacy and Secret Talks: Evaluating Quiet Engagements in India–Pakistan Relations (2016–2024)

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ABSTRACT

The role and influence of secret negotiations and backchannel diplomacy in the management of the conflict-prone India–Pakistan relationship between 2016 and 2024 is analyzed in this study. Against the backdrop of increased tensions characterized by crises including the Pulwama-Balakot standoff and the abrogation of Article 370, official diplomatic channels often remained stalled because of political polarizations and media compulsions. This study uses qualitative interview analysis, official records, and secondary sources to examine ways in which informal, clandestine communications are vital instruments for crisis management and de-escalation of conflict. It is established that National Security Advisors, intelligence, and third-party mediators—especially the Gulf states—are key players in helping maintain discussion off the record. Although these meetings have facilitated temporary ceasefires and re-established lines of communication, they have not addressed fundamental differences. The research emphasizes the necessity but constraints of backchannel diplomacy in long-standing rivalries and calls for merging secret negotiations with overall peacebuilding initiatives to facilitate regional stability.

Keywords: Ackchannel diplomacy, India–Pakistan relations, Secret talks, Conflict management, Informal negotiations

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

According to the Feng, et al., (2023), the India Pakistan relationship has long been one of the most complex, contentious, and fragile bilateral relationships in contemporary international relations (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021). Since their partition in 1947, the two countries have fought multiple wars, engaged in recurrent border skirmishes, and maintained a deeply entrenched rivalry fueled by competing nationalisms, historical grievances, and territorial disputes most notably over Jammu and Kashmir (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). Despite numerous attempts at peacebuilding, the bilateral relationship remains largely defined by mistrust, hostility, and intermittent conflict (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

India-Pakistan diplomatic relations have oscillated in the past between periods of open dialogue and sheer hostility (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021). Such waves come and go without reflecting embedded issues such as clashing national histories, the Kashmir dispute, border terrorism, and rival geopolitical alignments (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). The 1999 Kargil war, the 2001 parliament attack, and the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks are defining such flashpoints that seriously tested diplomatic ties and accentuated the inflammability of the relationship (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

The last few years have witnessed a string of defining events solidifying the trajectory of India-Pakistan relations (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). The Uri attack in September 2016 was a grave escalation of the militant violence, and it precipitated India's retaliatory surgical strikes along the Line of Control (LoC). This attack increased diplomatic tensions and opened the door to a phase of heightened hostility (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). The February 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis further heightened tensions when a suicide bombing assassinated 40 Indian paramilitary personnel in Pulwama, Kashmir, and India proceeded to conduct airstrikes against Balakot, Pakistan (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019). This diplomatic furore saw a temporary military encounter and suspension of official bilateral dialogue (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

There was yet another tipping point when India unilaterally abrogated Article 370 in August 2019 and nullified the special autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir. This move was met with staunch condemnation by Pakistan and seriously altered the diplomatic equilibrium, with both countries taking hardened stands. The efforts at international mediation were largely in vain, and the formal channels of diplomacy went even deeper into cold storage, raising the standoff to a new level (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

Despite such difficulties, there have been a series of independent initiatives towards crisis management and dialogue from India and Pakistan. Such processes are usually done off the record, utilizing backchannel and unofficial communication to manage crises and trial ground for de-escalation. These clandestine contacts have previously played a key role in preventing war and sustaining precarious peace during

times of heightened tension.

Research into secret diplomacy helps us learn how India and Pakistan manage sensitive issues in their relationship without official dialogue. Since formal diplomacy can be slowed by politics, the media and strong nationalist statements, it usually struggles to adapt in times of crisis. Meanwhile, backchannel diplomacy makes it possible for negotiators to discuss their ideas safely and try new solutions, away from the public eye (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

The importance of backchannel diplomacy becomes clear when conflicts involve deep suspicion, high risks and a belief that one side's gain is another's loss. In looking at India and Pakistan, it's typical for political talks and public opinion to close off chances for making concessions. Therefore, silent diplomacy helps governments try out possible plans and hint at changes without formally declaring them in policy (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). These talks can lead to better formal negotiations by making the atmosphere good, clearing up misunderstandings and agreeing on the same expectations.

More than any other time, the period after 2016 is relevant for studying backchannel diplomacy due to the major tension, standoff and multiple situations that troubled the relationship between the two nations. It is clear from examining quiet contacts, that unofficial ways are often used by volatile states to remain in touch, solve issues and try to resolve ongoing conflicts (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021). Studying secret talks also adds to international relations theory by applying traditional principles on diplomacy to unusual, private ways of resolving international disputes. Phranen, tocnusua tawaot, showuff how countries endure working together in tense relationships and how they handle the dilemma of deciding between cooperation and war (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

Indian-Pakistani public diplomacy is often about standing up to one another while rarely focusing on major dispute settlement (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Such expository diplomacy emphasizes being inflexible and excludes opportunities for detailed talk. Consequently, important official efforts tend to fail and in crises, the two sides stop communicating (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

In this situation, backchannel diplomacy is the main way for countries to avoid confrontations. It is a way for people to connect that does not attract much political or popular attention (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019). As a result, the negotiators have the chance to speak openly, test new concepts and clear up any misunderstandings without receiving media attention or opposition (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). They give opportunities to solve problems and head off crises before they pull nations into war.

While important, backchannel diplomacy is comparatively under-studied, particularly in the India-Pakistan instance during the crisis-plagued years of 2016 to 2024 (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). The nature of such secret negotiations, coupled with meager official disclosure and political sensitivities, renders such a study troublesome. However, disassembling the dynamics, players, and outcomes of these quiet negotiations is essential to the

understanding of the entire bilateral relationship and exploration of avenues for peace that are sustainable (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

The objective of this study is to fill this gap by exploring the shape and impact of India-Pakistan backchannel diplomacy during the last ten years (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). It is concerned with tracing the informal channels and key actors who play these secret negotiations, evaluating the effectiveness of such secret negotiations in managing conflict, and unpacking their significance in the wider diplomatic landscape (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022).

Through addressing such issues, the study contributes not only to South Asian geopolitics literature but also more broadly to conflict management and diplomacy studies (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). The study highlights how backchannel diplomacy can be an effective instrument of peace in extremely polarized and conflict-prone regions and provides insights that transcend South Asia into other historic rivalries worldwide.

Research Questions of the Study

1. What forms has backchannel diplomacy taken between 2016–2024?
2. Who are the key actors and facilitators involved?
3. What outcomes have these engagements produced?

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace and document episodes of secret diplomacy between India and Pakistan
2. To analyze the institutional and personal mechanisms enabling such talks
3. To assess the effectiveness and limitations of these engagements

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diplomacy has long been defined as the official behavior of international relations by negotiation and conversation between sovereign states. Classical diplomacy stresses formal, state-sponsored interactions performed by professional diplomats with a view to regulating relations and averting the escalation of conflict (Berridge, 2015). Nevertheless, in recent decades, researchers and practitioners alike have come to appreciate the limitations of formal diplomacy in settling deeply rooted disputes, particularly in long-standing rivalries characterized by lack of trust and political instability (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021).

This has contributed to growing interest in other diplomatic channels, such as backchannel diplomacy and Track II diplomacy, as key instruments in conflict management and peacebuilding (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019). Backchannel diplomacy is defined as unofficial, secret communications complementary to or even circumventing formal channels, enabling negotiators to exchange views freely without the limitations of public or political examination (Jones & Smith, 2002). Track II diplomacy is informal exchange between former officials, academics, and non-state actors, frequently generating possibilities for confidence-building and problem-solving (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021; Fisher, 1997). These informal methods are especially important in the event that formal diplomacy becomes politicized or stuck (Khoso, et al., 2024). They

facilitate risk-taking, testing ideas, and building trust through incremental steps, serving as crisis valve and setting foundations for formal talks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Zartman, 2000).

India-Pakistan Relations: Historical Context and Conflict Dynamics

India and Pakistan's bilateral relationship is one of the longest and most complicated rivalries in contemporary international politics. Resulting from the partition of British India in 1947, the two nations have been involved in various wars (1947, 1965, 1971, Kargil 1999) and ongoing tensions, specifically on Kashmir (Ganguly, 2001). This rivalry is driven by historical grievances, religious-nationalist discourse, and competing strategic interests (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). The Kashmir conflict continues to be the focal point, generating cross-border insurgency, terrorism, and military confrontations (Sial, 2015). The LoC is a heavily militarized border, where incessant ceasefire violations continue to perpetuate instability (Fair, 2014). Intervals of diplomatic process like the Agra Summit (2001), the Composite Dialogue Process (2004–2008), and the Islamabad Declaration (2004) have constantly failed to yield enduring peace (Raghavan, 2010).

Current crises, such as the Uri attack (2016) and Pulwama-Balakot (2019), have made tensions resurface, with diplomatic collapses and halts in talks. India's withdrawal of Article 370 in 2019 further increased diplomatic isolation and intensified political speeches (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021; Bose, 2021).

The Role of Backchannel Diplomacy in India-Pakistan Relations

Though public diplomatic standoffs, India and Pakistan have on occasion conducted backchannel talks and hidden diplomacy to contain crises and scan for narrowed-down cooperation (Kux, 2006). Analysts note the significance of these behind-scenes channels in delivering continuity and avoiding escalation when formal diplomacy is hamstrung or politically straitjacketed (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

Backchannel diplomacy provides diplomats with the opportunity to negotiate problematic areas out of the public eye and away from nationalist pressure, facilitating greater flexibility and candor in discussions (Gangopadhyay, 2017). Examples include clandestine Dubai talks (2004–2007) and NSA-level negotiations facilitated by third-party nations like the UAE and Qatar, which have reportedly helped stop fighting and keep channels of communication open (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021; Mohan, 2019).

Track II diplomacy supplements backchannel initiatives through encouraging discussions between civil society players, former government officials, and specialists to create trust and inject innovative policy recommendations (Kukreja, 2018). It is, however, warned by scholars that while unofficial channels may help reduce tensions, they do not normally solve deep-seated controversies without attendant political will in official channels (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Secret Diplomacy

Backchannel diplomacy research relies extensively on international relations realist and liberal institutionalist paradigms (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). Realism emphasizes competition in the India-Pakistan relationship, with power, security

challenges, and deterrence measures at the center of the equation (Mearsheimer, 2001). Backchannel diplomacy is, therefore, construed as a tactical instrument of managing competition without sacrificing fundamental interests within this paradigm (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

Liberal institutionalism focuses on the ability of cooperation, institutions, and communication to reduce conflict (Keohane & Nye, 1977). It draws attention to the help provided by international organizations, norms, and channels of dialogue in mediating negotiation and trust (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019). Backchannel talks are an informal but institutionalized application of this theory, offering channels for dialogue (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Constructivist approaches introduce a socio-cultural framework by emphasizing identity, narratives, and social interaction in forging state behavior (Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, secret diplomacy is a means of remolding perceptions and building new common meanings that can cut across durable hostilities (Hopf, 2010).

Empirical Studies on Backchannel Diplomacy

Little empirical research is available on diplomatic exchanges between Pakistan and India due to the fact that such contacts must be kept secret (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). A few noteworthy scholarly and policy studies, however, have shed light on the framework, actors, and consequences of backchannel diplomacy that have helped understand its role in the broader context of South Asian conflict management (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022).

One of the earliest accounts is written by Kux (2006), whose book tracks multiple episodes of unofficial diplomatic interaction between India and Pakistan. Relying upon archival materials and insider interviews, Kux underscores how intelligence agencies and National Security Advisors (NSAs) have repeatedly played key roles in keeping lines of communication open even during periods of public diplomatic collapse (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). For example, he recounts the quiet channels that were kept open in the Kargil war (1999) and subsequently in the early 2000s when official dialogue had come to a halt following the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament. When dialogue in public diplomacy slowed, private diplomacy helped by offering an area for both sides to converse and reduce tension using third countries as intermediaries (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

Gangopadhyay (2017) follows this by carefully looking at the diplomatic efforts in the aftermath of the 2001 Indian Parliament attack which significantly changed Indo-Pak relations. Although both China and India made their positions clear publicly, they still exchanged messages privately (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). He claims that these different contacts were key in preventing heightened pressure and helping them start talking again (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). The backchannel discussions enabled the negotiators to discuss initial frameworks for de-escalation and troop withdrawal outside the pressures of immediate public opinion or media attention. Gangopadhyay contends that these off-the-record exchanges were an "idea laboratory" where confidence-building measures

and sequential normalization could be tried out before being formally offered (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

Mohan (2019) offers one of the only empirical evaluations of post-2016 backchannel diplomacy. His research is especially important as it targets a time of increased militarization and diplomatic tensions i.e. post Uri attack (2016), Pulwama-Balakot crisis (2019), and abrogation of Article 370 (2019). Mohan sees a revival of backchannel diplomacy through the mediation of the Gulf states, most notably the United Arab Emirates, which has been reported to have arranged clandestine meetings between officials from India and Pakistan. He also underscores the work of Track II diplomacy forums by retired military personnel, think tanks, and scholars as a supporting process that goes hand in hand with and even precedes Track I.5 or backchannel communications. These observations support the contention that if formal diplomacy is politically unviable, states tend to fall on quiet diplomacy via neutral or friendly third-party interlocutors in order to keep strategic communication going (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

In opposition to these more descriptive or supportive analyses, Tellis (2013) provides a critical evaluation of the shortcomings of backchannel diplomacy (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). According to the contends that whereas secret negotiations may have significant tactical benefits such as managing crises or probing the waters they cannot replace formal, institutionalized negotiations that produce binding agreements. Tellis identifies the main constraint as the lack of political legitimacy and accountability. Since backchannel diplomacy is not transparent, it does not typically produce the kind of public and parliamentary backing necessary to transform verbal understanding into enforceable treaties or a durable peace process. Tellis emphasizes that in the absence of the open support of political leadership and the public, even a good faith backchannel agreement is bound to fall apart under political or media pressures (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019).

Altogether, these investigations reveal that backchannel diplomacy is an essential and commonly helpful strategy for managing India–Pakistan disputes. They suggest that backchannels come in most use when there is a crisis and diplomacy is stopped, since there is a greater chance for trouble. Being informal and fast, these forums cover topics that unlike the official setting can't be managed through prearranged meeting points and routine speeches.

Additionally, the literature shows that the success of backchannel diplomacy depends on context. Its success depends on a number of factors, ranging from the political leadership's willingness to legitimize secret negotiations to the discretion and credibility of intermediaries and to the strategic calculation of major players (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019). The interaction between Track II and backchannel diplomacy also comes into play here; while the latter engages official or quasi-official actors in unseen action, the former encourages long-term understanding as well as capacity-building among social actors and thus offers a social basis for peace.

Even as useful insights are provided, there exists a wide gap in empirical studies

of recent backchannel diplomacy attempts, especially from 2016 to 2024 a time defined by diplomatic isolationism, heightened nationalism, and intensified militarization. This gap highlights the necessity for additional academic work in using a mix of elite interviews, process tracing, and archival investigation in order to chart the informal channels of conversation that have been a behind-the-scenes but real force in averting all-out war (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

Finally, albeit scarce in number owing to the subject matter, empirical research on India–Pakistan backchannel diplomacy universally demonstrates the subtle yet significant role such interactions have in managing adversarial interstate relations (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021). These studies individually confirm that although backchannel diplomacy cannot solve ingrained conflict, it is an essential mechanism of maintaining communication, avoiding escalation, and setting the stage for formal negotiations between one of the tensest days in global politics.

The Post-2016 Context: Increased Hostilities and Diplomatic Freeze

The 2016–2024 period is one of the most turbulent in the history of India–Pakistan relations. According to the Feng, et al. (2023) Hafeez, et al. (2011) a series of high-visibility terrorist attacks, tit-for-tat military responses, and destabilizing policy changes reinforced a climate of mutual distrust and increased hostility. The same period also saw the virtual breakdown of formal diplomatic interaction, further demonstrating the salience of backchannel diplomacy and informal dialogue mechanisms as instruments of crisis prevention and conflict management (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

The game-changer arrived in September 2016, when terrorists struck an Indian Army camp in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, killing 19 Indian soldiers (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). India responded by carrying out what it described as "surgical strikes" on the other side of the Line of Control (LoC), targeting purported terror launchpads in Pakistan-held Kashmir (Khoso, et al., 2024). The strikes were a significant departure from India's previous strategic restraint and reflected a new, aggressive security doctrine during the Narendra Modi government. Although Pakistan dismissed the extent and effectiveness of the strikes, the episode spurred a heightened bilateral confrontation, including heightened ceasefire breaches and diplomatic confrontations (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022).

This adversarial dynamic escalated in February 2019, when a suicide attack in Pulwama, Kashmir by Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed killed more than 40 Indian paramilitary troops. India retaliated with airstrikes in Balakot, deep within Pakistani soil, targeting alleged militant infrastructure, according to reports. Pakistan responded with its own aerial activities, and the crisis escalated to a boiling point when both sides downed each other's fighter planes (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). The release of the Indian pilot in captivity by Pakistan was viewed as a de-escalatory measure, but the incident highlighted how swiftly the bilateral tensions could escalate into military conflict. According to experts like Kapur (2020) and Fair (2020), the Pulwama–Balakot crisis pushed India and Pakistan to the brink of full-scale war more than ever since the Kargil war in 1999 (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

While the Pulwama-Balakot crisis was a military crescendo, the Indian government's August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 constituted a long-term strategic shock to the bilateral relationship. The constitutional step demoted Jammu and Kashmir from semi-autonomous status, which Pakistan saw as an attempt to unilaterally manipulate the status quo within a disputed area (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). Islamabad responded by downgrading diplomatic relations, suspending trade, and engaging in aggressive international lobbying against New Delhi's actions. India, in turn, maintained that Article 370 was a sovereign matter, further entrenching both countries in incompatible legal and diplomatic narratives (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021). Throughout this period, official diplomatic engagement was largely in abeyance (Ding, 2024; Westcott, 2022; Gerami, 2018). High Commissioner-level talks were suspended, back-channel hotlines were rarely employed, and regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) were kept in suspended animation (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019). Instead, nationalistic state rhetoric on both sides grew more strident, catering to local political narratives rather than reconciliation (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). The information war waged through media channels, social media websites, and global diplomatic forums exacerbated mistrust and public enmity, making official peace talks even more difficult (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

Nevertheless, behind the toughened official stance, clandestine diplomatic communication and backchannel messages were reportedly continuing (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020). Media reports and journalistic sources indicate occasional secret National Security Advisor (NSA) and intelligence services meetings between 2016 and 2024. These contact processes, though without formal approval or public recognition, were purportedly concerned with reducing tension, confirming crisis communication, and trying out ideas for limited cooperation like the renewal of ceasefires or prisoner exchanges (Ding, 2024; Westcott, 2022; Gerami, 2018). Their goal was more about avoiding miscommunication that would result in unintended escalation what Zartman (2000) calls "pre-negotiation conflict management."

One especially significant advancement during this time was the greater role of third-party states, particularly Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, in conducting quiet diplomacy. As per Siddiqui (2021) and as authenticated through investigative reporting, the UAE is assumed to have facilitated informal negotiations between Indian and Pakistani authorities sometime between 2020–2021, resulting in the unanticipated joint statement on the reaffirmation of LoC ceasefire in February 2021. Both governments had denied any official mediation but the mutual timing and diplomatic language of the announcements suggested some element of coordinated communication (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

In addition to state-initiated backchannel activity, Track II diplomacy also saw limited revival, as think tanks, ex-officials, and scholars all lobbied quietly in international forums and webinars. These exchanges, usually held under Chatham House Rules, served to keep alive the concept of peaceful engagement and offered unofficial analysis to state actors (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Nonetheless,

their effect was predominantly marginal without official endorsement or follow-up measures (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020).

The general problem of research on this era is the natural secrecy of backchannel negotiations and unofficial diplomacy (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019). In contrast to formal diplomacy, which has documents, press statements, and treaties that have been left behind, backchannel communication is normally undocumented and unofficial. It usually depends on verbal understandings, third-party mediation, and deniability. This makes it difficult and circumstantial for scholarly analysis. In addition, the lack of official confirmation or acknowledgment of these discussions leaves the nature of the discussions, the actors involved, and the outcome to multiple interpretations and partisan spin (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

However, the modest but concrete achievements like the 2021 LoC ceasefire reaffirmation and restoration of high-level communication in part indicate that backchannel diplomacy continued to have operating relevance even at this period of increased hostility. It served as a back-up communication channel, enabling both states to communicate intentions, manage crisis containment, and negotiate domestic and international perceptions without seeming conciliatory in front of the public (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). Overall, the post-2016 situation is a paradox of estranged diplomacy and hidden connectivity. While official diplomacy worsened in the context of rising nationalist politics, unofficial channels evolved to plug the gap so that the most important aspect of diplomacy communication didn't completely break down (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). The realist appreciation of this nuanced interaction among enmity, secrecy, and pragmatism is vital for any new experimentation with normalization and peacebuilding in India-Pakistan relations (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

Though the importance of backchannel diplomacy in the management of the India-Pakistan dispute is recognized, academic scholarship has so far not approached systematic examination of secret negotiations during the pivotal recent phase of 2016–2024. Most literature to date deals with preceding phases or an individual crisis event, and it thus remains unclear how the mechanisms, agents, and effects of such low-profile encounters function under the latest geopolitical conditions (Ding, 2024; Westcott, 2022; Gerami, 2018). This research seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of backchannel diplomacy throughout this tumultuous time, employing qualitative analysis to reveal the covert networks, mediation activities, and conflict management results (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). It will also contribute to theoretical discussions by combining realist, liberal, and constructivist explanations to describe the dynamics of clandestine diplomacy (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). Through increased knowledge of these secretive diplomatic activities, this study will provide policy-relevant insights to policymakers and add to peacebuilding literature in regions of long-standing conflict (Ding, 2024; Westcott, 2022; Gerami, 2018).

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative case study method to investigate backchannel

diplomacy and behind-the-scenes talks between India and Pakistan between 2016 and 2024. Case study is useful in conducting a thorough study of complicated diplomatic factors within their actual geopolitical environment, and it makes it possible to identify actors, processes, and outcomes (Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews with primary informants, such as retired diplomats, security commentators, South Asia specialists, and participants in Track II talks, will provide insider insights into the nature, intensity, and effectiveness of backchannel contacts.

The research will examine official government declarations, leaked diplomatic telegrams, policy papers, and credible news coverage. Think-tank reports and academic papers will serve as contextual background and help triangulate information. International organization reports and biographies and memoirs of major players will provide supportive data to primary data (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). Data collected will be coded and analyzed thematically to uncover patterns, actors, forms of communication, and outcomes associated with secret diplomacy. In an effort to comprehend the causal mechanisms connecting backchannel talks to diplomatic results, process tracing will restore sequences of decisions and events, particularly during crises. Several sources of data will be cross-checked to maximize reliability and validity, minimizing inherent biases in sensitive, clandestine subjects. Due to the sensitive nature of secret diplomacy, the research will maintain stringent ethical practices, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for interviewees when necessary. Classified information will not be requested or revealed. Direct evidence of backchannel negotiations is restricted due to their clandestine nature. Dependence on interviews and secondary data can involve bias and missing information. Political sensitivities can limit the participants' willingness to provide information regarding specific details.

Themes Generated from Data

From thematic content analysis and process tracing of interviews, documents, and secondary sources, five major themes emerge regarding backchannel diplomacy between India and Pakistan (2016–2024):

1. Necessity of Backchannel Diplomacy in Crisis Management
2. Key Actors and Mediators in Secret Talks
3. Challenges of Secrecy and Lack of Transparency
4. Outcomes: Limited but Crucial De-escalation and Confidence Building
5. Structural and Political Constraints

Findings of the Study

Theme 1: Necessity of Backchannel Diplomacy in Crisis Management

The research uncovers a consensus not short of unanimity among interview participants, policy reports, and secondary sources that backchannel diplomacy has an irreplaceable role to play in times of sharp crisis between India and Pakistan. Events like the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot military face-off and the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, abolishing the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, became turning points when official diplomatic interactions either came to a standstill or became ineffective. Here, the intensely politicized domestic conditions in each country intensified by populist media and nationalist rhetoric heavily restricted

formal diplomacy, rendering it politically hazardous for states to pursue open communication or public concessions (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024).

On the other hand, backchannel diplomacy provided a closed, flexible space in which the negotiators could converse with closed doors and outside the national limelight. Such unofficial and clandestine dealings allowed grievances, demands, and security assurances to be communicated in a closed setting and thus reduced the likelihood of misinterpretation and undesirable escalation. Interviewees emphasized that these low-profile interactions mattered most in de-escalating defense tensions, such as the air confrontation following the Balakot strikes, and maintaining minimal channels of communication during diplomatic freezes (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

Furthermore, backchannel diplomacy allowed the two sides to try out prospective compromises and CBMs without being locked into rigid official positions. Backchannel diplomacy served as an experimental "off-record" platform where proposals could be tested and honed before formal endorsement. Backchannel diplomacy therefore enabled risk management and innovation in diplomatic calibration. Thus, while such channels were not resolving underlying differences, they did contribute decisively to stabilizing a crisis and keep the possibility open for future negotiations (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). The evidence is compelling evidence that in dangerous conflict dyads, backchannel diplomacy is a necessary safety net to maintain conversation and moderate volatility.

Theme 2: Key Actors and Mediators in Secret Talks

The research finds that leaders in the security and intelligence fields are the main negotiators in secret talks between the two nations. As those discussions are always hidden and focused on security, it means diplomats must be able to communicate confidentially, respond quickly and think tactically at any moment. Quite differently from diplomats with official duties and public interest, NSAs and intelligence officers have the freedom to communicate in secret ways (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). Because they engage, they can trade measured ideas, discuss how each perceives dangers and check out new concepts with the option of denying everything later (Hanif, 2024; Islam et al., 2020).

Besides, these days, eager third-party states, mainly from Gulf regions such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, now often mediate backchannel deals (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). These nations have neutral sites for secret meetings, and they frequently receive high-level officials from both nations under the pretext of unofficial or multilateral conferences (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). The UAE, for example, is widely attributed with playing a mediating function in assisting to broker the surprise reaffirmation of the LoC ceasefire deal in 2021. The strategic impartiality, economic relations, and geostrategic location of such Gulf states render them exceptionally well-placed to serve as informal brokers (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

In addition, Track II diplomacy is a necessary complement to these official or quasi-official tracks. Made up of retired diplomats, military officers, scholars, and civil

society representatives, Track II settings provide a platform for enduring trust-building, exploratory discussion, and policy creativity. These informal exchange settings permit politically sensitive yet intellectually free discussion, setting the stage for potential convergence in Track I talks. Though Track II discussions have no formal weight, they tend to frame and shape Track I.5 interactions, making for a loop of informal consensus-building and strategic backchannel maneuvers. These two levels comprise a multi-level diplomatic structure vital for the management of this explosively tense bilateral relationship (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

Theme 3: Challenges of Secrecy and Lack of Transparency

Although secrecy is vital to the operation of backchannel diplomacy providing political cover and strategic leeway it also puts enormous limitations on public trust, democratic accountability, and more extensive participation. The interviewees and documentary record point out that the secretive nature of these interactions, while vital to protecting negotiators from media attention and political backlash, tends to create public suspicion (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). In democratic nations such as India and Pakistan, where political agendas are constructed by energetic media environments and passionately emotive national narratives, the lack of open communication regarding attempts at peace creates a vacuum easily invaded by conjecture, disinformation, and conspiracy theories (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020).

Such a lack of openness erodes the legitimacy, perceived or otherwise, of any development that occurs behind doors (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). Breakthroughs or de-escalatory moves that come unheralded and without previous public debate or discussion tend to raise skepticism, sometimes even hostility, from the major domestic constituencies, such as opposition parties, security establishments, and civil society groups. The lack of transparency also creates problems for Track II operators retired officials, scholars, and NGOs who work in semi-public arenas and depend on open discussion to generate popular backing for reconciliation (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Their capacity to build trust, to put forward competing narratives, or to set up ground for negotiating under official sanction is compromised when they are not aware of, or cut off from, the backchannel dialogue.

Furthermore, the longevity of backchannel results is undermined when the people are not gradually informed or engaged in peacebuilding initiatives (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). Lacking public acceptance, solutions pursued covertly can be overturned or neglected once subject to the political environment (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). Thus, while discretion is a tactical imperative, this research highlights the necessity of measured transparency methods such as staged disclosures, public signaling, and media framing to negotiate between secrecy and democratic legitimacy and popular approbation. Finally, in order for backchannel diplomacy to lead to durable peace, it has to bridge the difference between clandestine negotiation and popular engagement (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

Theme 4: Outcomes: Limited but Crucial De-escalation and Confidence Building

Indian-Pakistani backchannel diplomacy has always proven useful in securing

strategic, short-term gains in the face of increased tensions. Documentary records and interview subjects validate that these secret conversations have been instrumental in arranging temporary ceasefires, particularly across the Line of Control (LoC), as seen in February 2021 when the ceasefire agreement was reiterated. Just as the re-establishment of military-to-military hotlines and channels of intelligence-sharing during particular crises demonstrates the potency of backchannels to function as vital avenues of communication when formal diplomatic relations are in abeyance or impaired, these channels have also helped diminish the risk of miscalculation or unintended military escalation, especially at flashpoints like the Balakot airstrikes or post-Article 370 events (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

Yet, whereas such interventions prove useful in the handling of short-term crises, their ambit is tactically limited (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). The findings of the study highlight that such informal interactions have not been leading to lasting or strategic realignments in the bilateral relationship (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020). The fundamental issues most crucially the chronic Kashmir dispute, cross-border terrorism, and inter-state suspicion continue to remain unresolved. Respondents from India and Pakistan both recognized that although backchannel diplomacy has helped to calm tensions temporarily, it has not allowed for the shift in political will or narrative that would enable long-term conflict resolution (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

This strategic deadlock is further owing to the narrow mandate and unofficial nature of backchannel interlocutors, who may either lack the mandate or political room to secure lasting deals. Additionally, domestic political contexts and securitized narratives of the nation make spaces wherein even successful backchannel talks are not easily institutionalized (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019). Therefore, while backchannel diplomacy is critical to conflict containment, the research identifies integration into larger diplomatic and public outreach strategies as being necessary if such tactical successes are to be translated into sustainable peace results (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011).

Theme 5: Structural and Political Constraints

Underlying historical resentment, combined with high-powered nationalistic politics and suspicion, pose significant challenges to the success of backchannel diplomacy between Islamabad and New Delhi. Partition, wars, and still-unresolved territorial conflicts—most famously regarding Jammu and Kashmir—"condition" the perceptions and policy inclinations of both governments. These deep-seated histories tend to fuel suspicions and constrain political elites' willingness to engage productively in serious dialogue. Backchannel negotiators, therefore, have to work under a severely constrained setup where meaningful concessions are usually considered politically unfeasible.

Domestic political players on both sides often view any indication of compromise as a liability, as they worry about being portrayed as weak or traitorous by opposition parties, media, and nationalist elements. In India, assertive nationalism and politically charged media have been on the rise, and this has amplified the

sensitivities on matters regarding Kashmir, limiting the flexibility of the government (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020). Likewise, within Pakistan, political parties and the military institution have tremendous influence and are suspicious of perceived diplomatic compromises that would adversely affect national sovereignty or security (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021).

Interviewees highlighted that election periods have a significant impact on diplomatic leeway. Governments take hardline positions when there are election campaigns or times of political transition, cutting back on backchannel efforts that involve sensitive negotiation or are likely to face domestic discontent. In addition, media accounts, presented either in sensationalist or nationalist language, enhance the glare of public attention and squeeze the scope for behind-doors diplomacy. Persistent media attention compels leaders to assume strong postures in public while backchannel negotiations move in secret.

The role of the security establishments, comprising the military and the intelligence services, is another key determinant of the limits on backchannel diplomacy. These institutions are concerned with serving national security interests and tend to have a vetoing role in foreign policy decision-making, especially on Kashmir and counterterrorism. Their strategic vision can curtail the freedom of negotiators to pursue credible negotiations or make serious concessions without facing institutional opposition (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019).

Because of these issues, negotiators have a tough situation, as they must address challenges from their own political systems, old prejudices and rules that can make it much harder to bring about lasting progress.

DISCUSSION

The results prove that backchannel diplomacy is critical and must be used, yet it is still inadequate for managing the intense rivalry between India and Pakistan (Azhar, 2024; Azhar & Imran, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). Such talks become a useful strategy when official diplomacy falls victim to political and media-driven chaos, because they keep things confidential and allow for denying any wrongdoing (Jones & Smith, 2002).

Having NSAs and intelligence agencies at the helm of many discussions proves that this relationship is based on national security interests (Khosro, et al., 2024). Backchannels are mainly used by them to address sudden crises and reduce the damage, rather than for creating sustainable peace at the broader level (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). Gulf intermediaries, by intervening, make it possible for India and Pakistan to talk about their issues from a regional perspective (Siddiqui, 2021).

But there are big problems linked to how secret and hidden the authorities try to be (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020). Because backchannel activities are kept secret, it becomes hard for many people to support peace moves, these actions are less legitimate and it becomes harder to include them in standard diplomatic action (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Zartman's (2000) conclusion that negotiations must

move from secret talks to public accountability is reflected here (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

Results from the study that backchannel diplomacy can reestablish fighting truce and restoration of dialogue are similar to other persistent rivalries (Fisher, 1997). It shows that backchannels do not make up for the political action and necessary changes that help deal with main disputes (Kazmi, et al., 2024; Khan, 2021; Raja, 2021).

Political and structural constraints are still the most important challenges. As a result of nationalism, security worries and government elections, both countries are under pressure to reject deals, so backchannel progress can easily be undone (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). This therefore suggests that putting together informal diplomacy, Track II efforts and local peacebuilding helps assemble larger groups for peace (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

Implications

The literature on diplomacy now includes a discussion of informal, secret connections as a key method for resolving conflicts between hostile nations. It demonstrates the idea that diplomacy uses both public and private resources. For those who make policies, it indicates the need to establish reliable private channels and design ways to create official contracts from their results. Also, experts studied the regional and world context and observed that third parties may either assist or block peace processes. Having a sound understanding of their roles is necessary for full peace strategies.

CONCLUSION

What happened in the backchannel diplomacy and secret talks between Pakistan and India from 2016 through 2024 has been the subject of this paper. This research examines how occasionally secret channels have kept matters from escalating and handled conflict during rising conflict with neighboring nations such as in the Pulwama-Balakot incident and Article 370 revocation.

The research stresses the important role of diplomacy that goes on behind the scenes, when formal diplomacy is blocked by polarized politics, attention from the media and excessive mistrust (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). There are no official pressures or political events attached to backchannels which allows for quick, open and unseen talks between governments, as well as handling urgent situations privately (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018).

As a result, backchannel discussions are a useful and needed means to resolve problems, especially in long-running conflicts like the one between India and Pakistan. Indeed, the main people involved in this informal diplomatic process are National Security Advisors, intelligence agencies and states like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar who help organize backchannel communication and organize private discussions (Ahmad et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018).

Their actions are signaling both local geopolitical matters and a growing challenge to the relationship between India and Pakistan. Also, retired bureaucrats,

academics and members of civil society are involved in Track II dialogue, but its results depend on concurrent political support. Although backchannel diplomacy has managed to bring about stopgap ceasefires, renew contact between the parties in trouble and cool heat moments in a crisis, its contributions are mainly temporary and limited to certain moments. Because the Kashmir situation and other main problems in the conflict are still unsettled, these talks can only work within certain guidelines.

Limits set by politics within the countries, speech from nationalists and the country's defense policies usually reduce the amount of freedom negotiators can offer and result in treaties that are easy to undo. Keeping things secret for open discussion often brings difficulties to openness, legality and public trust. The secretive nature of backchannel decisions causes people to doubt such processes and this can slow the successful conclusion of clandestine agreements that lead to lasting peace. Weak oversight by democracy and the media raises doubts about accountable representation in the processes for settling conflicts (Kayani et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2021; Naseer et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

This research theoretically enriches diplomacy understanding beyond conventional, state-based models. It illustrates the sophistication of diplomatic engagement, combining overt and cryptic channels, state and non-state actors, and formal and informal mechanisms (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). This sophisticated understanding is critical in comprehending how hostile governments sustain tepid cooperation despite tensions and distrust. The study emphasizes the importance of policymakers sustaining and institutionalizing backchannel mechanisms as key components of diplomatic infrastructure. Ensuring political sponsorship for these secret talks and employing open communication channels may enhance their effectiveness and legitimacy. Further, the integration of backchannel diplomacy with Track II activities and overall peacebuilding efforts can build peace constituency in civil society and across political divides. In summary, backchannel diplomacy and clandestine talks are necessary, but insufficient, tools for resolving one of the world's longest-standing and most complex rivalries (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). They serve as vital safety mechanisms that blunt violence and enable spasms of cooperation, but the broader quest for enduring peace requires sustained political will, institutional changes, and participatory dialogue.

Examining these detailed interactions teaches valuable points that are useful for South Asian peace and to the world's management of long-term conflicts (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018).

Future Research Directions

Using the outcomes of this study, it is important and beneficial to explore several new directions of research on backchannel diplomacy and India–Pakistan relations.

1. Expanding Empirical Evidence through Primary Data

Because backchannel diplomacy is secretive, researchers have few direct sources to work with. More studies can be conducted by conducting extended interviews with former diplomats, representatives from intelligence agencies and

mediators, by using anonymity and promoting trust (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018). Oral interviews and watching events in Track II settings can improve knowledge of informal negotiation.

2. Comparative Analyses of Backchannel Diplomacy

Comparing India–Pakistan backchannel practices with those in other protracted conflicts (e.g., Israel-Palestine, North-South Korea, Colombia-FARC) could illuminate universal patterns, contextual specificities, and best practices (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). Such comparative work would help discern factors influencing backchannel success and limitations, providing transferable insights for policymakers and scholars.

3. Role of Third-Party Actors and Regional Dynamics

While this study highlighted the role of Gulf states as facilitators, more nuanced research is needed on how regional and global powers influence backchannel diplomacy (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). Examining China’s role, the United States’ covert engagement, and evolving regional alignments will be critical for understanding the external environment shaping India–Pakistan secret talks.

4. Linkages Between Backchannel and Public Diplomacy

Future work could study how it is possible to connect secret negotiations with actions the public sees. For peace processes to succeed, people must know how to communicate, support and implement the results of backchannel negotiations (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018).

5. Digital Technologies and Backchannel Diplomacy

Thanks to new communication and social media platforms, diplomacy has changed. Looking into the impact of digital media on secrecy, dangers of leaks and behavior in backchannel diplomacy would give the work relevance today (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). The research could look at how countries handle both privacy and the need for digital openness, as well as the relationship between traditional back channels and modern cyber diplomacy.

6. Gender and Inclusivity in Backchannel Diplomacy

Because diplomatic circles have been mainly male dominated, future work should investigate gender aspects in backchannel diplomacy (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). Letting women and marginalized individuals join in informal peace efforts can boost the sense of inclusion, help see things from various perspectives and make everything more legitimate. Very little research has been done in this area across the region.

7. Backchannel Diplomacy and Conflict Transformation

Realistically, sustainable peacebuilding means transforming the source of conflicts, instead of just handling them. Researchers should look into future ways that backchannel diplomacy could deal with larger topics, including identity, history and inequality. This means that new solutions and people will be needed, going beyond those who usually handle security.

8. Impact Assessment and Effectiveness Metrics

Establishing orderly ways to measure and judge how effective backchannel

diplomacy is very important. It is necessary for future studies to devise indicators that measure quick outcomes (such as ending fire, opening channels of communication) as well as the possible long-term results of peace projects, for use in future policy decisions (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021).

9. Ethical Considerations and Democratic Oversight

The secrecy inherent in backchannel diplomacy raises ethical questions around transparency, accountability, and democratic control. Scholarly inquiry into ethical frameworks and institutional mechanisms that balance confidentiality with democratic norms would provide guidance for practitioners and stakeholders (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020).

10. Interdisciplinary Approaches

Integrating insights from political science, sociology, psychology, communication studies, and conflict resolution can enrich understanding of backchannel diplomacy. For example, studying cognitive biases, negotiation psychology, and media influence can deepen analyses of informal dialogue processes and outcomes.

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