

People-to-people initiatives can help build goodwill between India and Pakistan.

At a time when most other India-Pakistan exchanges are suspended, even a simple proposal by the Pakistan Hindu Council, forwarded by Pakistan to India, to allow pilgrims of both countries to travel by air to avoid cumbersome journeys seems a leap.

Islamabad-Delhi ties now are possibly at their worst ever in peace times, with no political dialogue at a bilateral or multilateral level for over five years.

After many terror attacks, India has stopped normal communications and cultural exchanges, and after the Government's moves on Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan stopped all trade ties.

Both sides have downsized their diplomatic missions. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured that the borders have been virtually sealed for two years, with few direct routes operating between them. Even the movement of pilgrims may have been cancelled but for the conscious attempt by the two governments to make an exception for faith-based travel — as was done for the Kartarpur corridor that came up in 2019, the same year the two countries nearly went to war over the Pulwama attack.

Religious exchanges, of mainly Muslim pilgrims from Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs from India, are governed by a protocol signed in 1974, and allowed to continue.

While the routes for Sikh pilgrims, from Indian Punjab to the Pakistani Punjab province, are relatively easy, hundreds of Indian and Pakistani pilgrims crossing over at the Wagah/Atari border to travel further to the Hinglaj Mata Mandir in Balochistan, the Paramhans Mandir in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Ajmer Sharif dargah in Rajasthan, the Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi and other such shrines, face more circuitous routes.

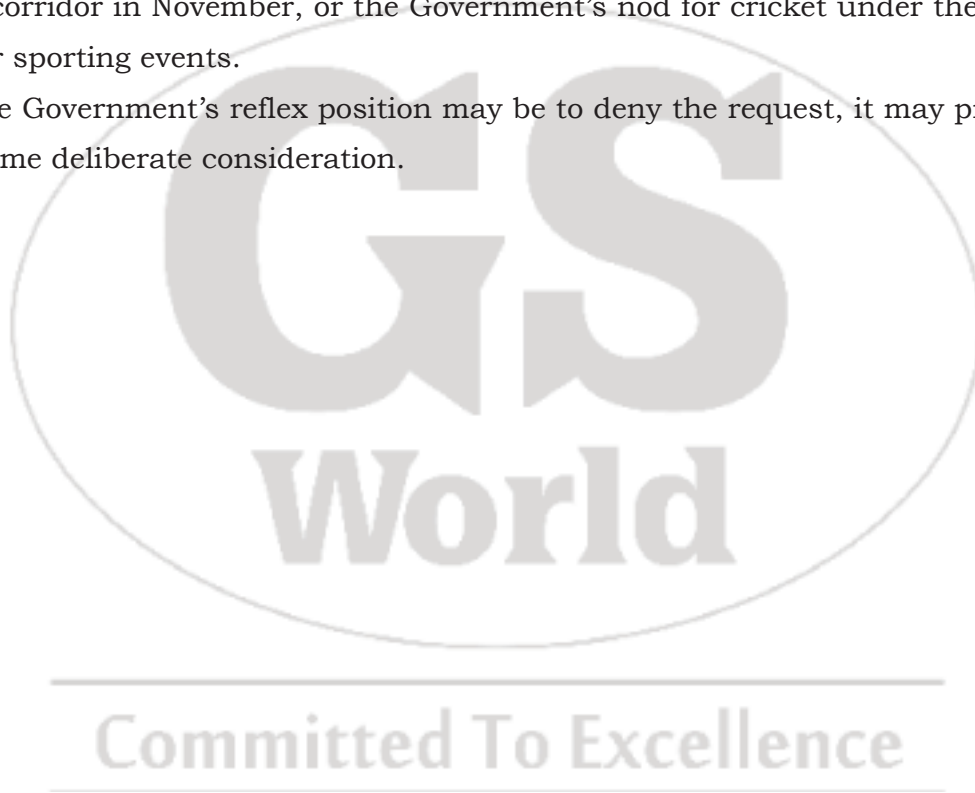
To avoid the extra time in travel, the Pakistan Hindu Council, which has now signed an MoU with Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to facilitate faith-based tour groups, has asked that PIA charters from Karachi and Lahore be allowed to fly direct to Indian cities this week, with a view to also allowing reciprocal air charters from India.

This would be the first time such air travel has taken place in years, and the first time ever that pilgrimages would be accorded this facility.

As pilgrim groups on both sides are vetted before being allowed to travel, the precedent is unlikely to pose any additional security threat. In an atmosphere fraught with tensions, such people-to-people initiatives can only help build some modicum of goodwill.

No evident harm to national interests has come from other such recent moves embarked on by the two governments, such as the LoC ceasefire announcement in February, or the decision to reopen the Kartarpur corridor in November, or the Government's nod for cricket under the T-20 World Cup as well as other sporting events.

While the Government's reflex position may be to deny the request, it may prove wiser to give the proposal some deliberate consideration.



Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Which of the following pilgrimage site is in Pakistan?

- (a) Hinglaj Mata Temple
- (b) Kartarpur Gurdwara
- (c) Paramhansa Temple
- (d) All of the above

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. At present Soft power diplomacy has become more important in Indo-Pak relations In the light of this statement, discuss the steps to be taken to improve relations between the two countries. (250 Words)

World

Committed To Excellence

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.