

## Impact of Opening the Wagah-Attari Border for India and Pakistan

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South Asia is the least amicable geopolitical region globally. India and Pakistan exemplify this statement, as political tensions between the two nations have persisted since 1947. Trade has been irregular; however, it possesses significant potential if peace and commerce are established in this region. This study addresses the possible commercial advantages if India and Pakistan engage in mutual trade. The paper also provides suggestions and recommendations regarding the trade prospects. The present study relies on secondary data obtained from many reputable reports and journals from both countries.

The 1947 partition of the Punjab led to both tangible and intangible divisions between India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, after partition, formal commerce has hardly remained normal owing to political tensions between India and Pakistan. Trade between both the countries hit its peak at USD 2.7 billion in 2013-14 and according to report of World Bank, it has potential to reach to USD 37 billion. Both the nations once again suspended the trade after Pulwama (2019) and Pahalgam (2025) attacks, which significantly affected their economies, as evidenced by a sharp rise in prices of items imported from one another. The region of India and Pakistan, that includes the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush mountains, the fertile Indo-Gangetic Plain, and shared historical and socio-cultural connections, including common languages and customs, possesses significant potential to enhance their agricultural productivity, bolster their economies, create jobs, and reduce black market activities through collaboration. Grand Trunk Road had historical roots and revitalising it has the potential to foster genuine stability in South Central Asia, particularly in the relations among Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pak Relations, Geo-political Scenario, Trade, Potential Benefits, Punjab.

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### Introduction

International trade is regarded as a catalyst for growth in contemporary times. It results in optimal and efficient resource utilisation while expanding the array of options available to consumers. For the countries like India and Pakistan, particularly considering their large population, long-shared history, socio-cultural connections and geographical closeness, their mutual trade means much more than mere economic transactions. It holds the potential to significantly improve the economic conditions of both countries, and essential for preserving historical continuity. This exchange could facilitate access to broader markets, stabilise food prices, generate employment opportunities, and potentially mitigate political tensions through the development of economic interdependence.

The citizens of India and Pakistan lived together for generations until the separation and independence from British rule in 1947. The general elections in 1946 in British controlled undivided India were crucial in determining the future of India and Pakistan. This was an element of the British policy of divide and rule, systematically creating political differences between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in the delineation of constituencies as Hindu and Muslim (Chatterji, 2017). The Congress won (90 per cent) of the general Hindu seats while the Muslim League won most Muslim seats (87 per cent) in the states. The results clearly showed the societal splits in the fabric of India, which were in making for a long time. Leaders of Congress and Muslim League used religious identities to secure their wins in elections but failed to understand that this religious mobilization deepened communal splits between Hindus and Muslims. This contributed to the violent partition of India in 1947, which led to large-scale riots, displacement, and loss of lives (Ahmad, 2019).

There existed a hidden partition also. Friendships were crushed, families displaced, geography hacked, traditions denied, and hearts torn apart (Tharoor, 2017). The states of Punjab and Bengal were the most adversely affected, as the partition disrupted their socio-cultural and economic frameworks developed over centuries. Punjab, which shares an active international border with Pakistan, has endured the most significant consequences of the division. The division was so irrational that the people were forced to leave their homes and migrate overnight based on their religion. Around 18 million people displaced and 1 to 2 million people murdered during communal bloodletting (Talbot, 2008).

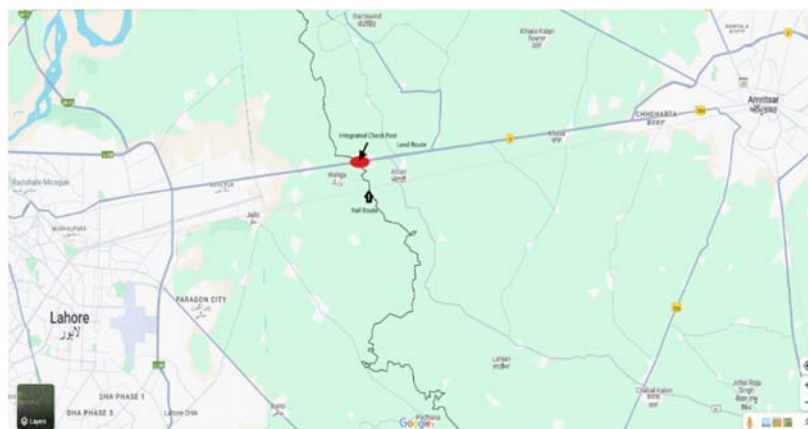
Figure 1(a) depicts present map of territorial division of India and Pakistan. Approximately equidistant from Lahore in Pakistan and Amritsar in India, the Grand Trunk Road crosses with the Radcliffe Line at Wagah in Pakistan and Attari in India, separating the Punjabi town between the two nations. Both Lahore and Amritsar are well connected via rail as well as land route. Figure 1(b) is the screenshot taken from google maps that shows the well-connected rail and land route between Amritsar and Lahore. In the year 2012, an Integrated Check Post was set up at the border to facilitate fast and cost-effective land route trade. The land route crossing the Wagah-Attari border is situated on the Grand Trunk Road, a comprehensive infrastructure that connects Teknaf, Bangladesh, at the eastern terminus bordering Myanmar, to Kabul, Afghanistan, at the western terminus, passing through Dhaka, Kolkata, Agra, Delhi, Amritsar, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar. It is very important land and trade route having historical roots which connected India to the silk route in the past and hence, connecting to the west of globe. Numerous conquerors and kings in the past battled for dominance over this route.

**Figure 1(a)**  
**Map of Territorial Division of India and Pakistan**



Source: Joe Burgess/*The New York Times*.

**Figure 1(b)**  
**Land and Rail Route between India and Pakistan**



*Source: Google Maps.*

When tensions escalate between the two nations, trade becomes the foremost victim, particularly the land trading along the Wagah border (Ghuman and Singh, 2020). Nevertheless, trade between India and Afghanistan continues through this route, whereas trade between India and Pakistan remains suspended for the time being.

The present study aims to provide a concise outline of India Pakistan trade at the Wagah border and to analyse its impact on stakeholders and the bilateral relations between the two countries. This study aims to give recommendations concerning future directions and trade prospects between the nations.

### **Database and Methodology**

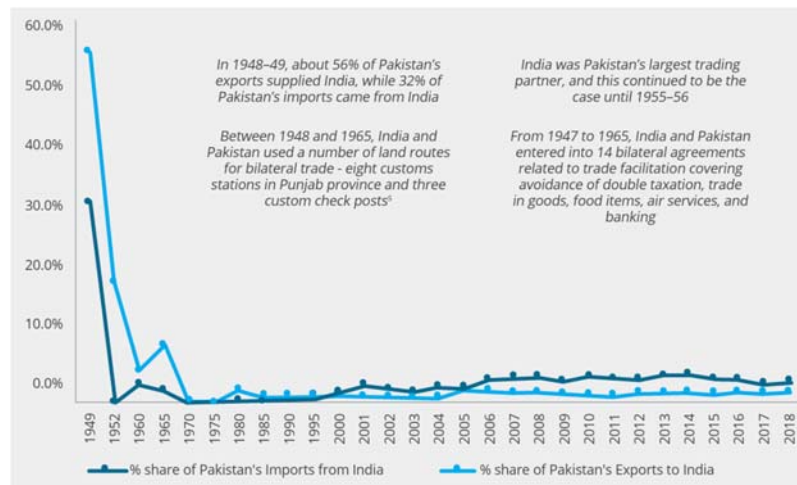
The present study is grounded on secondary sources of data. The secondary data has been explored from a range of reliable sources, including the reports of organisations such as Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals (BRIEF), New Delhi, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, PHD Chamber of Commerce & Industry, New Delhi, The Pakistan Business Council, Karachi, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC. Various journals and newspaper articles were also consulted.

## Discussions

### A Brief Bilateral Trade History between India & Pakistan

In 1948-49, over 70 per cent of Pakistan's trade occurred with India. In 1949, Pakistan (then West Pakistan) bought commodities valued at Rs. 777 lakhs from India and exported items worth Rs. 848 lakhs via land route, primarily through the Wagah border (Ghuman, 1998). Figure 2 illustrates the percentage share of Pakistan's trade with India from 1949 to 2018. From 1949 to 1955, India and Pakistan were the principal commercial partners, utilising several land routes for bilateral commerce.

**Figure 2**  
**India – Pakistan trade, 1949-2018 (in percentage)**



Source: Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals, New Delhi.

From 1948 to 1960, eleven India-Pakistan commerce and Payment Agreements were established; however, bilateral commerce dropped from Rs. 184.06 crore in 1948-49 to Rs. 13.63 crore in 1958 (PHD Research Bureau, 2013). Unfortunately, after partition, bilateral and political relations between the countries hardly remained normal. In 1965 and 1971, both the countries fought high intensity wars which led to trade embargo from 1965 and continued till 1974. The war of 1971 between India and Pakistan resulted in the partition of the East Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent state. It exacerbated their

already hostile ties. Nonetheless, a trade agreement (Shimla Agreement) was signed for lifting a trade curb in 1974.

In 1986, India and Pakistan signed the document of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In 1989, Pakistan increased the import for 322 commodities from India. The trade between India and Pakistan escalated to Rs. 522 crores in 1992-93 from Rs. 168 crores in 1990-91. India conferred Most Favoured Nation designation to Pakistan in 1996 and Pakistan reciprocated by expanded its positive list to 600 items eligible for lawful importation from India.

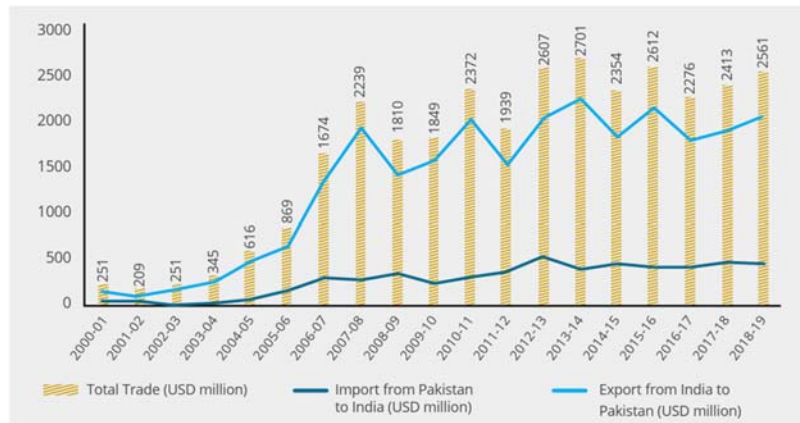
Although trade between both the nations resumed in 1975, the Wagah-Attari land route was inaugurated in 2005 (Gill and Madan, 2015). Furthermore, the Integrated Check Post was set up in 2012 at Attari, to facilitate rapid and economical land route trade. Nevertheless, the trading was restricted to a select number of commodities. It is pertinent to mention that Pakistan did not confer Most Favoured Nation status to India, despite having extended this status to all other nations participating in the WTO trade framework.

In 1998-99, the A.B. Vajpayee government in India supported a comprehensive diplomatic peace initiative, including the historic Delhi-Lahore bus service, and signed a bilateral accord known as the Lahore Declaration in February 1999. In May 1999, both countries fought the Kargil War over the Kashmir problem. In July 2001, Vajpayee once more commenced discussions and extended an invitation to his Pakistani counterpart, Parvez Musharraf, to participate in the Agra summit.

In 2004, Dr. Manmohan Singh's government formed in India and not only continued the peace initiative with Pakistan but brought the initiatives on fast track. During his tenure from 2004-2014, commerce between India and Pakistan experienced a significant increase, rising from 616 million USD in 2004-05 to a peak of 2701 million USD in 2013-14 (Figure 3). Numerous measures have encouraged the commerce communities of India and Pakistan to collaborate in enhancing bilateral economic relations during Dr. Singh's administration. In 2005, modifications to the maritime protocol and the inauguration of the Wagah-Attari border for bilateral trade stimulated both marine and land commerce. The trade between India and Pakistan, despite political deadlocks continued to flourish. In 2011, discussions on commercial and economic cooperation between the trade secretaries of both countries advocated for the quick normalisation of bilateral trade, the development of related infrastructure, and the removal of tariff barriers. Furthermore,

in 2012, officials from both nations agreed to issue an increased quantity of multiple-entry visas to each other's citizens.

**Figure 3**  
**India – Pakistan Trade, 2000-2019 (in USD million)**



Source: Department of Commerce, Government of India.

Despite numerous obstacles, trade was occurring over the Wagah-Attari route by both road and rail. The 2019 Pulwama Attack on Indian soldiers resulted in the imposition of a 200 per cent customs tariff on all products imported from Pakistan. India revoked the Most Favoured Nation title granted to Pakistan. In response to the Indian government's termination of Article 370 concerning Jammu & Kashmir, Pakistan imposed a total ban on commerce with India. Consequently, land route commerce via the Wagah-Attari border was halted, attaining an all-time low since 2019. Following the recent attack on tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir, in April 2025, bilateral relations between the two nations deteriorated to an unprecedented low, significantly impacting trade and diplomatic engagement.

#### **Impact of Trade Restrictions: Before and After 2019**

Prior to 2019, commerce between Pakistan and India occurred through three routes. The legitimate trade conducted by land and maritime routes, also the most economical mode; illicit trade facilitated by smuggling across the Indo-Pakistani land borders and across Afghanistan; and trade done through third country. Primarily, these consist of Dubai and

Singapore, which function as free ports and host legal representatives of traders from both India and Pakistan (State Bank of Pakistan, 2007). Though the formal trading was suspended after 2019, still the other two routes remain operational. Both the nations have taken efforts to mitigate illegal commerce but it remains challenging due to larger border area between the two republics. The third channel, which operates through a third country, incurs significant shipping costs.

The major items that India imports from Pakistan is Dry Dates, Cement, Gypsum and Rock Salt. Table 1 presents the data regarding the impact of trade restrictions on consumers in India. Most dry fruits in India, such as cashews and almonds, are priced between INR 700 and 1000 per kilogram. Nevertheless, dry dates, priced at INR 60-70 a kilogramme, represented one of the few affordable alternatives and were referred to as poor individual's dry fruit. Subsequent to trade curbs, the costs of dried dates have surged by around 300-350 per cent, rendering them unaffordable for impoverished individuals in India.

**Table 1**  
**Impact of Trade Curbs on Indian Prices**

India's Major Imports (Items)	Pakistan's Share out of total (2018-19)	Consumer Impact	
		Prices in India before 2019 (in INR)	Prices after 2019 (in INR)
Dry Dates	99%	60-70 per kg	240-260 per kg
Cement & Gypsum	86%	250 per bag (50 kg)	375 per bag (50 kg)
Rock Salt (Piece)	99.7%	5 per kg	13 per kg
Rock Salt (Crushed)		10-12 per kg	18-20 per kg

*Source: Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals, New Delhi.*

Similarly, the 50 kg bag of cement which was around INR 250 before 2019, surged to INR 375 after the trade curbs. Rock salt is another commodity which India imports primarily from Pakistan. After the restrictions, price of crushed rock salt increased from rupees 12 per kilogram to rupees 20 per kilogram (Hussain and Singla, 2020). Despite the 200 per cent tariff, rock salt remains the sole commodity to have withstood the trade restrictions and continues to be traded, primarily to the absence of substitutes in India and being a low-cost commodity.

The 2020 study by the Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals, New Delhi, indicates that 9,354 families in Amritsar were impacted by trade restrictions, including agents, traders, labourers, and transporters. In the neighbourhood of the Attari border, there were 4 petrol pumps, 8 truck parking spaces, 7 mechanic shops, 10 tyre puncture businesses, 27 dhabas, and 4 weighing bridges, most of which closed after the trade embargo.

These trade curbs not only affected Indians and surged prices of particular commodities in India but also proved damaging for Pakistan's Economy. Soon after trade curbs by Pakistan on India in 2019, food inflation skyrocketed in Pakistan. Minister of Economic Affairs in Imran Khan's government in December, 2019 blamed the suspension of trade with India for the surging prices (PTI, 2019). Wheat flour crisis in Pakistan that started in November, 2019 and got worse in the year 2020. In the year 2019, wheat flour price was around PKR 50 per kg which surged to PKR 70 per kg in 2020, and further increased to PKR 150 per kg in August 2023. Sugar prices also increased by 50 per cent during these years (Das, 2023).

In the year 2024, Pakistan faced its worst food inflation, economic woes, and financial crisis, which led to large-scale unrest there. In the month of April-May, 2024, price of wheat flour surged to PKR 800 per kg in Karachi from its former price of PKR 230 per kg and essentials like rice, vegetables, pulses, fruits, cereals, and milk got out of reach to many Pakistani people (Singh, 2024). The reasons were many and trade embargo with India was one of the reasons. This could be better understood by the statement of Pakistan's foreign affair minister, Ishaq Dar in March, 2024 and reiterated in May, 2024 that Pakistan should seriously examine resuming trade with India (The Indian Express, 2024; The Economic Times, 2024). Fuel prices in Pakistan also increased by 50 per cent during these years. It is pertinent to mention that vegetables and fruits constituted major import by Pakistan from India before 2019 (Ghuman and Singh, 2020).

#### **Economic Potential in Reopening the Wagah-Attari Trade Route**

The geographical proximity, cultural similarity, common languages make India and Pakistan a natural trade partners. Moreover, traders from both nations have consistently shown an urge for engaging in business with one another in recent times. In 2012, both nations envisaged a target of USD 6 billion in bilateral trade. During the meeting in January 2014, the trade ministers of both nations concurred that fostering trade links would

facilitate the reduction of political tensions and projected a trade potential of USD 10 billion. The flagship World Bank South Asia Report (2018) estimates that the full trade potential between India and Pakistan is USD 37 billion annually.

For Pakistan, formal trade with India may assist in stabilising a crisis in their economy. Trade with India could assist in stabilising Pakistan's crisis. Commodity-centric commerce with India may assist in easing their high food and fuel inflation. For instance, Indian imports may have substantially helped the rising prices of flour in Pakistan. In fact, the distinct crop harvesting seasons of India and Pakistan may mitigate seasonal food shortages in both nations.

The economic advantages for India are also considerable. In October 2024, during the rice harvesting season in Indian Punjab, a huge unrest occurred during grain procurement due to a fullness of warehouses. Approximately 65 million tonnes of food are wasted each year in India prior to consumer access, incurring an economic loss of around \$15 billion, equivalent to 1 per cent of GDP (Jha et al., 2015). Wheat alone contributes a total of 21 million tonnes. This wastage primarily occurs during the storage phase owing to insufficient and unsuitable facilities (The Tribune, 2023). Trade may mitigate this issue in India by exporting food grains to Pakistan, creating a mutually beneficial scenario for both countries, particularly for India covering the economic loss due to wastages and Pakistan facing high food grain costs.

The substantial population of Pakistan has the potential to evolve into a more significant commercial market for India. The export potential is evident from significant indirect trade levels, with India's products exports to Pakistan exceeding USD 1 billion despite numerous obstacles (Kathuria, 2024). If formal trade is established, it presents an enticing opportunity for India to reach Afghanistan and Central Asian markets via Pakistan, reminding of the Silk Roads.

Today, both India and Pakistan faced border issues that surpass the current conditions along their shared borderline. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have deteriorated significantly over the past three years, often resulting in violent combat. Likewise, Pakistan's relationship with Iran is strained. Relationship between India and China have also deteriorated since the clashes in the Galvan Valley, and more expenditure is going into deploying military on China border. The political tensions have been rising between Bangladesh and India as well and Sheikh Hasina (former PM of Bangladesh) fled to India after the fall

of her government. Hindu minorities were targeted in Bangladesh which led to anger in India (House of Commons Library UK, 2025). Hence, in this scenario, neither India nor Pakistan desires the development of more conflicts along their shared border. It is evident that the benefits of bilateral commerce extend beyond financial profits; both countries possess significant potential to reduce their defence expenditures, which they consistently incur to match each other's military capabilities (Ghuman, 2007).

#### **The Way Forward: How to get the Restart (Recommendations)**

This is not the first instance of India and Pakistan suspending bilateral commerce. In the past, a trade embargo went on for approximately nine years, resulting in two nations losing the opportunity to capitalise on cost advantages and low transports. The establishment of peace, confidence, and mutual trust is essential for the resumption of bilateral trade and vice-versa is also true. It is most important that Pakistan takes concrete steps to stop promoting terrorism, as this remains a fundamental prerequisite for India to develop trust in bilateral relations. The way forward lies in the backdrop of past successful practices and the agreements primarily envisaged during the September 2012 meeting of the commerce secretaries of both nations. India being a more developed and industrialised country should be more generous and reduce their trade barriers without expecting much from Pakistan and export the necessary food grains to control the food shortages in Pakistan. This will allow Pakistan to adjust with their crisis and imports. The same approach was used between 1996 to 2019 where India gave Most Favoured Nation status to Pakistan but Pakistan did not reciprocate. In 2013 also, Pakistan was granted an additional five years to implement comparable trade concessions as those provided by India.

Pakistan categorised certain commodities into positive and negative lists for imports from India. Additionally, Pakistan imposed restrictions on products that could be efficiently traded through the Wagah-Attari corridor. Certain things that may be transported by land route were not permitted for rail transport. These types of limits must be lifted, and a common statement should be issued, similar to what was envisaged during the commerce secretaries' meeting in New Delhi in September 2012.

Additionally, the World Bank report (2018) revealed that trading between India and Pakistan was costlier than trading between India and

Brazil. This indicates that additional customs, charges, and taxes imposed by both nations make trade between them a costly affair. Mutual agreements may be established to eliminate these obstacles and address the trade problems. Both the nations should accompany trade with easy and liberal visa formalities so that there could be connectedness between the people of both the nation. The relaxation of visa regulations was also planned in 2012, and that agreements should be revived. Both nations may think of establishing a market along their border, similar to the successful India-Bangladesh border haats, where citizens of both countries can engage in the exchange of commodities. A potential bazaar may be established at the Wagah-Attari border in Amritsar or the Hussaini Wala border in Ferozpur. The successful Kartarpur corridor project also includes a small bazaar where Indians can acquire indigenous items made of Pakistan.

In view of the fact that ban on trade affects many families across the border and incurs significant costs, trade should not be halted unless it is entirely unavoidable. Both nations should establish a robust financial network to mitigate illegal payment methods. Collaborative research, conferences, technology transfer, and teaching can enhance their socio-economic ties. Last but not least, governments and leaders on both sides must remain vigilant against internal and external organisations that purposefully promote hate, provoking individuals through communal propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between India and Pakistan has consistently resembled the game of snakes and ladders. Whenever it appears that constructive efforts were undertaken to enhance the relations and business between the nations, and is reaching new heights, a setback occurs, damaging all efforts and optimism to an all-time low. Nonetheless, it is an opportunity for both nations to overcome the past and leave the burdens of enmity and tensed trading relations. They must use the opportunity to move forward with renewed hope in order to construct an economically robust nation that was once united. Particularly during a period when India's relations with Bangladesh and China are becoming hostile, and Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan and Iran are similarly deteriorating. Furthermore, trade with India might significantly enhance Pakistan's economic stability, and India may witness the development of a market comparable to, if not

exceeding, that of Bangladesh in Pakistan. The primary beneficiaries of the positive relationships will be the consumers, resulting in favourable outcomes for social indices including education, health, and nutrition. The alternative is an enmity and war that involves a significant expense for both nations. Not only the economic loss, but the harsh relations between India and Pakistan are also detrimental to their legacy and long historic social ties.

Trade between India and Pakistan has been inconsistent since partition due to political conflicts. During 1948-49, more than 70 per cent of Pakistan's trade was conducted with India. International trade between nations was halted for nearly nine years following the 1965 conflict. In the late 1990s, numerous attempts were made for the diplomatic peace process. From 2004 to 2014, trade between India and Pakistan experienced a substantial growth, peaking at 2.7 billion US dollars in 2013-14. Trade persisted until 2018 and has been stopped since 2019. The trade ban severely impacted the economies and families on both sides of the border, as the prices of imported commodities surged in the marketplaces of both regions. The World Bank South Asia report (2018) indicated that the complete trade potential between the nations is USD 37 billion yearly, presenting a significant opportunity for both countries. A robust political commitment is necessary, and it will also promote peace in the region.

The Grand Trunk Road, owing to the geographical proximity of both countries, presents significant potential for cost-effective land trade, which will subsequently facilitate job creation on both sides. The particular route possesses a historic legacy, with rulers and invaders frequently contending for dominance over this trading road that also links the Silk Roads. Three major cities situated along the Grand Trunk Road – Lahore, Delhi, and Dhaka – are currently located in three distinct countries; yet, revitalising this path and integrating the three sources of production, namely, land, labour, and capital has the potential to cultivate true stability in South Asia, much greater than the sum of its underdeveloped components.

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