

Following Mumbai terror attack

India indefinitely postpones peace talks with Pakistan

M. Nessian, Keith Jones
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India has indefinitely postponed peace talks with Pakistan, after accusing “elements from across the border” of having a hand in last week’s terrorist atrocity in Mumbai and demanding Pakistan do more to suppress armed, anti-Indian Islamicist and Kashmiri nationalist groups.

At the conclusion of a brief tour of Mumbai, where more than 180 people were killed in the July 11th bombing of seven commuter trains, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told reporters, “Terrorists responsible for the blasts were supported by elements from across the border. This could not have taken place or they could not have hit with such an effect without the help of sympathisers. Pakistan has to stop helping terrorism to take the peace process forward.”

The next day, India’s foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, confirmed press reports that a meeting he was to have with his Pakistani counterpart as part of the ongoing Indo-Pakistani “composite [peace] dialogue” has been postponed at India’s initiative and that the postponement is indefinite. Pakistani officials have said that the meeting was scheduled for this Friday, but Saran and his aides deny India ever agreed to that date.

Indian authorities have provided no evidence to support their charges of a Pakistani connection to the Mumbai bombings. Indeed, the police investigation, which has included police sweeps of predominantly Muslim Mumbai slums and indiscriminate arrests, appears to be making slow progress at best.

That did not prevent police and intelligence officials, in the days preceding the prime minister’s swipe at Pakistan, from feeding the media with stories alleging that the terror attack was masterminded by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamicist terrorist organisation known in the past to have had links to sections of Pakistan’s security establishment, and of otherwise promoting the notion of Pakistani complicity in the Mumbai terror attack.

As was to be expected, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the entire Hindu-supremacist right enthusiastically

joined in the denunciations of Pakistan, although these were coupled with no less vociferous attacks on the Congress Party-led UPA government for being “soft” on terrorism.

The leader of the BJP and the Official Opposition in the Lok Sabha, L.K. Advani, had warm praise, however, for the UPA government’s decisions to suspend the next step in the peace dialogue with Pakistan. “Dr. Manmohan Singh took a brave and the right decision by saying peace talks between foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan have to be stopped,” Advani told a BJP “anti-terrorism rally” in Bhopal last Saturday.

Accusing Pakistan of failing to check terrorism from its soil against India, Advani said, “[Pakistani] President [General Pervez] Musharraf had declared in January 2004 that he would dismantle terrorist infrastructure against India but he has not done so.”

Pakistan, which previously offered to cooperate with India in the Mumbai investigation, has angrily denied the Indian claims of complicity. At a press conference Monday, Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammed Khan demanded New Delhi share any evidence of his country’s involvement, while affirming that Pakistan is part of an “international coalition against terrorism” and is committed to preventing its territory from being used to mount terrorist attacks.

Khan termed India’s decision to cancel the secretary-level talks a “negative development.” “The linkage,” he added, “between the postponement and the terrorist attacks in Mumbai is incongruous, a bit out of place.”

Khan urged early resumption of the composite dialogue, adding that Pakistan would not reverse any of the “confidence building measures” it has taken to promote rapprochement with India.

Manmohan Singh, in a further exchange with reporters Monday while en route to Moscow, where he was to meet with leaders of the G-8, tied the future progress of the Indo-Pakistani composite dialogue to the readiness of the

Musharraf regime to crack down on Kashmiri insurgents and other armed, anti-Indian groups.

While saying India would not break off its dialogue with Pakistan, Singh said the peace process “cannot move forward if terrorism, aided and abetted from outside, continues to take a heavy toll of lives of innocent citizens of India.”

Singh’s aides, meanwhile, said that he would raise India’s complaints against Pakistan and the need for a stronger international stand against terrorism in all the meetings he had with government leaders while in Moscow.

Like the BJP-led government that preceded it, the Congress-led UPA has sought to promote closer relations with Washington by touting India and the US as twin democracies and victims of international terrorism, thereby giving the Bush administration a propaganda boost in its attempts to use a purported “war on terror” to legitimise the conquests of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Some press reports cited Indian government sources as saying India would try to have Pakistan branded a “terrorist state.” Whatever the truth of those reports, the Bush administration—which has been highly critical of the Musharraf regime of late for failing to mount a more vigorous military campaign to crush Taliban elements who have found refuge in Pakistan’s remote and historically autonomous South Waziristan region—has, thus far, shown no inclination to take such a step, which, within the lexicon of the US foreign policy establishment, would effectively threaten Islamabad with pariah status.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher said Monday that the Bush administration has seen no evidence suggesting Pakistan or Pakistan-based groups were responsible for the Mumbai attack. Boucher also denied suggestions that US-Pakistani relations have become increasingly strained and that the Bush administration believes Pakistan is not doing enough to support its “war on terror.” “Terrorism is a tough [problem],” said Boucher, “and we are all in that fight together.” The UPA government’s declaration that Pakistan shares responsibility for the Mumbai attack comes in response to pressure from the intelligence-security apparatus, the Hindu chauvinist right, and the corporate media. These elements want to use the Mumbai tragedy not only to ratchet up pressure on Pakistan, India’s traditional geo-political rival, but to press for a more general shift to the right.

The UPA has cemented an Indo-US strategic alliance with a civilian nuclear energy accord and opened up new sections of the economy to foreign investment. Nonetheless, important sections of big business fear that if the pace of neo-liberal reform is not accelerated, India will be unable to

maintain an 8 percent annual growth rate and will fall further behind China in the race for investment.

Long before the events of the past week, the Indo-Pakistani peace process had slowed if not outright stalled. Last fall, there was much discussion in the press that the Kashmir earthquake would reinvigorate the peace process. Yet, despite the enormity of that tragedy, mutual fears and animosities made it impossible for New Delhi and Islamabad to cooperate in any significant way.

Pakistan fears that as India grows stronger economically and its economic, military, and geo-political ties with the US blossom, it will become less and less inclined to make any concessions to Pakistan. Hence the alarm in Islamabad over India’s refusal to entertain any substantive concessions over Kashmir, which Islamabad has long insisted is the “core” of its dispute with India.

The Indo-Pakistani peace process was only launched in early 2003 under heavy pressure from the US, which saw the conflict between Islamabad and New Delhi as cutting across its aim to make India an economic and geo-political counterweight to China, and after the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government failed to coerce Islamabad into making concessions through a 10-month war crisis. The pretext for that crisis, it should be recalled, was a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament buildings that India blamed on Pakistan.

While in 2002-2003, the Bush administration acted to defuse the tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi, the US’s predatory ambitions have added an explosive new dimension to the historic Indo-Pakistani rivalry. Washington has intervened aggressively to try to scuttle the plans for an Iranian-Indian-Pakistani natural gas pipeline, although it has been promoted by both Islamabad and New Delhi as among the most important of all possible “confidence-building measures.” Pakistan, to no avail, has warned that the Indo-US nuclear accord will have a major impact on the strategic balance in South Asia, forcing Pakistan into an arms race.

The Indian elite’s response to the Mumbai atrocity underscores that it is eager to exploit its new “global” partnership with Washington to pressure a weakened Pakistan, with destabilising and potentially explosive consequences for South Asia and the world.



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