

Under US pressure

India and Pakistan to resume long-stalled talks

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India and Pakistan have agreed to hold high-level talks for the first time in fourteen months. The two countries' top foreign ministry officials, Nirupama Rao for India and Salman Bashir for Pakistan, will meet in New Delhi on February 25.

Pakistan has long been pressing for resumption of a "composite dialogue" with its historic rival, but India, which suspended the dialogue after the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, refused. It insisted that talks would resume only after Pakistan took what it termed serious steps to dismantle anti-Indian terrorist groups active in Pakistan, including depriving Kashmiri insurgents of any and all logistical support.

Pakistan claims sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, and for more than two decades has supported an anti-Indian insurgency there.

India's Congress Party-led coalition government continues to insist that it is unsatisfied with the steps Pakistan has taken. Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram and other senior Indian officials have repeatedly declared, including as recently as last month, that Pakistani authorities will be held responsible in the event of any further terrorist attacks and have made veiled and not so veiled threats of retaliatory cross-border strikes.

India's offer to unfreeze high-level talks indicates that New Delhi concluded this hardline stance was no longer paying satisfactory dividends.

Undoubtedly, a pivotal factor in this shift was pressure from the United States.

Welcoming India's offer to re-engage with Pakistan, US Assistant Secretary of State P.J. Crowley said, "We certainly have been encouraging steps that both Pakistan and India could take to address mutual concerns and to take appropriate steps so that tensions can be reduced."

US government and Pentagon officials have repeatedly warned that the explosive geo-political rivalry between India

and Pakistan is undermining the US war in Afghanistan.

Crowley made an oblique reference to this when he said, "We are supportive of dialogue among India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan as a key component of moving ahead and achieving a stable region."

The Obama administration, which has dramatically escalated the war in Afghanistan, is crucially dependent on Islamabad's logistical and military support in fighting the Taliban and other Islamic groups resisting the US occupation of Afghanistan. With a policy of carrots and sticks, Washington has sought to draw Pakistan ever more deeply into the Afghan war, now re-christened the AfPak War, demanding that Islamabad crush Taliban-aligned militias active among the Pashtun living next to Afghanistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province.

Washington calculates that a reduction of tensions between India and Pakistan would bolster the US-NATO war effort, for it would strengthen the US's hand when it argues that Islamabad should shift troops from its eastern border with India to the Afghan borderland, where they can assist the anti-Taliban war. Washington also recognizes that Islamabad's fears about India's intentions and in particular its growing influence in Kabul contribute to the Pakistan's military-security establishment's reluctance to completely sever their ties with the Afghan resistance.

During his campaign for the US presidency, Barack Obama and several of his top aides suggested that one way of prodding Pakistan to assume an even greater role in the Afghan War would be to assist Islamabad in resolving its six decade-old dispute with New Delhi over Kashmir. This provoked a furious response from the Indian government and did much to frame India's reaction to the Mumbai terrorist attack.

In response to that attack, New Delhi not only ratcheted up pressure on Pakistan, suspending the "composite dialogue," but pushed back against any possible US intervention in the

Indo-Pakistan conflict. Employing “war on terrorism” rhetoric akin to that coined by the Bush administration, New Delhi proclaimed Pakistan the center of world terrorism.

The Obama administration lost little time in pulling back and making it known that it has no intention of seeking to mediate a resolution to the Kashmir conflict.

But India’s government and military-foreign policy establishments continued to worry that the new administration was not attaching as great importance to the Indo-US “global, strategic partnership” as had that of George W. Bush. Under the second Bush, Washington declared that it wanted to assist India in becoming a world power and, as proof, negotiated a civilian nuclear deal that gives India unique status in the world nuclear regulatory regime and allows it to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on its nuclear weapons arsenal, thereby upsetting the balance of military power between India and Pakistan.

Although India’s offer to resume talks with Pakistan was made public only at the beginning of this month, it was apparently first made around the time that US Defence Secretary Robert Gates visited New Delhi.

Gates made a series of pronouncements that were clearly meant to reassure New Delhi that the Obama administration views India as a major player and partner in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, including Afghanistan, and beyond. “We obviously view India as a regional and an emerging world power,” a senior US Defence official told reporters.

Gates also suggested the US would not oppose New Delhi should it take military action inside Pakistan in the event of a further Pakistani-based terrorist attack in India. “I think,” said Gates, “it’s not unreasonable to assume Indian patience would be limited were there to be further attacks.”

Having won such backing from Washington, New Delhi may have calculated that it needed to reciprocate by making a goodwill gesture toward Islamabad.

A further consideration is that India does not want to give Pakistan a pretext to exclude it from discussions about the future of Afghanistan. At Islamabad’s insistence, India was excluded from a government conference on Afghanistan hosted by Turkey last month.

While India has said that it is ready to talk with Islamabad, it has stipulated that this should not be construed as resumption of the “composite dialogue” first set in place in the shadow of the 2001-2002 war crisis. While New Delhi has not refused to discuss other issues, it has bluntly stated that it intends to focus almost exclusively on the “terror” issue. *The Hindu* quoted an Indian official as saying, “Dialogue is the bottom line. Composite dialogue had a certain format. There was involvement of many arms of the government. The coming talks are not part of that.”

This is a concession to pressure from the Hindu supremacist right. The Official Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has denounced the talks, throwing back in the government’s face its own previous declamations that talks were suspended until Islamabad gave India satisfaction on the terrorism issue.

Islamabad initially pressed for resumption of the “composite dialogue” but backed off in the face of Indian intransigence. It intends to present New Delhi a long list of grievances. These include India’s control of Kashmir and its brutal counter-insurgency war, charges that India has violated its treaty obligations by building dams that are having a dramatic adverse impact on the volume of water in the Indus Valley, and claims that India is backing anti-government insurgents in Baluchistan.

Whatever the immediate outcome of this month’s talks, the depth of the geo-political rivalry between the ruling elites of India and Pakistan, the destabilizing impact of the US push into Central and South Asia and of its attempt to build up India as a counterweight to a rising China, and the increasing extent to which the India-Pakistani rivalry has become entangled with Sino-US relations all but guarantee that tensions will flare up anew, threatening the people of South Asia with catastrophe.

In late December, India’s Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor proclaimed that India was ready to meet the challenge of “a two front war” with Pakistan and China and touted a new “Cold Start” strategy for the mobilization of India’s military for a quick, “limited-war.”

The “Cold Start” strategy was developed in response to the manifest failure of Operation Parakram. In December 2001, India’s government ordered the mobilization of a million men for a possible war with Pakistan, but New Delhi lost the initiative due to the slow deployment of its forces.

In response to Kapoor’s remarks, the head of Pakistan’s armed forces, General Kayani, warned of consequences “which could be both unintended and uncontrollable.” A meeting of Pakistan’s top government and military leaders, the so-called National Command Authority, issued a statement saying “Pakistan cannot be oblivious to these developments.”



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