

India and Pakistan talk, but “composite dialogue” not resumed

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3 March 2010

The foreign-secretary level talks held between India and Pakistan last Thursday ended with no more than a promise by the rival South Asian powers to “keep in touch.”

Not only did the two countries fail to resume the “composite dialogue” that they initiated following a 10-month long war crisis in 2001-2002, they did not even announce plans for a future meeting.

The talks between Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and her Pakistani counterpart, Salman Bashir, were held in New Delhi February 25, 14 months after the Indian government suspended the “composite dialogue” to protest what it characterized as Pakistan’s responsibility for the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai.

Going into the talks, the two countries advanced radically different agendas for them. India said it would make the issue of “terrorism”—by which it means its demand that Islamabad halt all logistical support for anti-Indian insurgents including in the disputed Indian-held state of Jammu and Kashmir—the focus of the meeting. Pakistan, meanwhile, said it wanted to discuss alleged Indian violations of the 1960 Indus Valley water treaty, Indian human rights violations in Kashmir, greater economic cooperation, and the need to address various territorial disputes including Pakistan’s claim to all of Muslim-majority Kashmir.

Speaking at a conference at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London in the run-up to last week’s talks, India’s Rao said New Delhi is determined to put an end to a situation where anti-Indian “terror groups...continue to recruit, train and plot attacks from safe havens across our borders.”

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi responded to Rao’s comments while on a visit to China early last week. He rejected India’s suggestions that Pakistan had not done enough to bring “to justice the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks” and accused India of trying to narrow the agenda for the talks to serve its immediate needs.

Qureshi told the China Institute of International Studies that Pakistan would welcome Chinese mediation of the India-Pakistan conflict, which is rooted in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent. “It is for the Indians to decide,” said Qureshi, “if they would be comfortable to have China talking as a third party to bridge the gap. As far as Pakistan is concerned, they (China) have a blank cheque.”

Qureshi’s statement was not meant as a serious proposal. India, which fought a border war with China in 1962, views its northern neighbour as a major strategic rival and threat. Last year the Indian government formally protested a US-Chinese communiqué, issued at the end of Obama’s trip to Beijing, that made mention of China working with the US to help ensure stability in South Asia.

The purpose of Qureshi’s “suggestion” was to signal to New Delhi

and Washington the depth and strength of Pakistan’s alliance with China.

During last Thursday’s talks, Rao handed over to her Pakistani counterpart three dossiers naming 33 people whom New Delhi claims have been involved in terrorist attacks in India and whom it is demanding Pakistani authorities turn over for prosecution by India. In what was certain to rile Pakistan, India included among the 33 the names of a retired Pakistani officer, Major Samir Ali, and a serving officer, Major Iqbal.

It is customary for diplomatic meetings to conclude with joint press conferences. But following the conclusion of their meeting, the two foreign secretaries met with reporters separately, sparred over the value of the India dossiers, and even disagreed over the subjects taken up at their meeting.

Addressing her press conference, Rao said India went into the talks “with an open mind...fully conscious of the limitations imposed by the large trust deficit” between the two states. “I spelt out forthrightly our concerns on terrorism emanating from Pakistan against India.” Rao said the time was not ripe to resume the suspended “composite dialogue, but “we will keep this channel of communication open”—that is the possibility of future foreign secretary parleys.

At a press conference held at the Pakistani High Commission, Bashir placed little credence in the Indian dossiers, saying the Indian evidence against Jamaat-ud-Dawa leader and Lashkar-e-Taiba founder Hafiz Mohammed Saeed was “mere literature.” “Pakistan,” said Bashir, “does not believe that India should lecture us and demand that Pakistan should do this or that.”

Answering an oft-made Indian denunciation of Pakistan, Bashir declared, “Pakistan is not the epicentre of terrorism, but is a victim... India has had one 26/11 (Mumbai attack). We have had a thousand Mumbais.” Bashir insisted that Pakistan is taking action against “terrorists”—a reference to its counterinsurgency war against Taliban and pro-Taliban militia in northwestern Pakistan—and the “international community has hailed its efforts in this regard.”

Bashir disputed Rao’s claim that Kashmir had been only briefly discussed and that Afghanistan hadn’t been mentioned during the foreign secretaries’ meeting. “Kashmir,” said the Pakistani diplomat, “was discussed extensively not briefly... One cannot be really dismissive about the issue of Kashmir; any effort to be dismissive on the issue will not be helpful.”

In an editorial titled “The smallest of steps,” the *Hindu*, a liberal newspaper that supports dialogue with Pakistan, argued that whilst “to the untrained eye” the talks had “produced no perceptible movement,” if put “under a microscope” there is “evidence of a small step

forward.” Even if the “official and background statements made by Islamabad and New Delhi” have not been “particularly encouraging, Rao is likely to travel to Pakistan later this month for another meeting with her counterpart, Salman Bashir” and “Bashir, though lamenting the lack of ‘structure’ in the engagement that has begun, is not averse to pushing the process along.”

Beset by economic and political crisis and fearful of India’s growing geopolitical strength, Islamabad has long been pressing for a resumption of the suspended composite dialogue. India, however, is determined to extract significant concessions from Pakistan first. It is especially concerned that Islamabad not succeed in leveraging the US’s dependence on Pakistani support for the Afghan war to exclude India from any political settlement in Afghanistan and/or to prod Washington into pressing India to make concessions to Pakistan in regards to their rival claims to Kashmir.

Speaking in the Indian parliament following last Thursday’s meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna reiterated that “India’s engagement with Pakistan will be predicated, as it has been since the Mumbai terrorist attack, on the response of Pakistan to our core concerns on terrorism.”

India’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government has been criticized by significant sections of India’s ruling elite for even agreeing to last week’s meeting.

The official opposition, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, condemned the talks when they were first announced and seized on a terrorist attack in Pune to amplify its denunciations. (See “Amid preparations for India-Pakistan talks, deadly bomb blast in west India”)

The BJP has been joined by sections of the military-geo-political establishment and the corporate elite in accusing the UPA of pussyfooting with Pakistan and being overly reliant on Washington in its dealings with Islamabad.

Typical was an op-ed piece written by an unnamed “chairman of a media group” and published by the *Times of India* March 2. It complains that New Delhi has been timid and defeatist in its dealings with Pakistan and argues the India’s government should model its actions after those of George W. Bush post-9/11. This means using “coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions and covert operations” to bring Islamabad to heel.

“Washington,” declares the writer, “must be told firmly that the era of tea and sympathy is over. No longer will we script our Pakistan policy to suit America’s self-interest. India is vital to America’s long-term geopolitical strategy to counter superpower China and that gives us more leverage over Washington than we think. Pakistan may have short-term advantages as a hired gun. But it is India, already the world’s third largest economy after the US and China with a GDP of \$4.9 trillion (by purchasing power parity norms), which really matters. Pakistan has one-tenth of India’s GDP.”

Washington played a major role in bringing about last week’s talks. It views Indo-Pakistani tensions as an obstacle to the prosecution of the AfPak war and the securing of a US beachhead in oil-rich Central Asia. A key US objective is to persuade Islamabad to transfer troops from its eastern border with India to its northwestern border with Afghanistan, where they can bolster the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Although last week’s talks saw no breakthrough, the Obama administration has lauded them as a “courageous step.” State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said “the very fact that the top officials of the two countries met in itself is very encouraging.”

Indicating US interests in the region, Crowley added, “[T]o the degree that India and Pakistan can cooperate, can have peaceful dialogue...that can only help in the broader regional context, including our joint efforts on security in South Asia.”

However, under conditions where the US is pouring men and material into Afghanistan, sections of the US elite believe the Obama administration should be doing even more to facilitate an easing of tensions between India and Pakistan. In a February 26 editorial, the *New York Times* declared, “That [promise to keep in touch] is not enough. Not for the United States, which needs tensions eased so Pakistan can focus more on fighting the Taliban and other extremists. And especially not for India and Pakistan.”

“The [Obama] administration,” continued the *Times*, “knows how important it is for India and Pakistan to lower tensions. At India’s insistence, it has decided to take a low profile role, nudging the two sides discreetly back to the table. It should nudge harder.”

The reality is US imperialism’s military and geopolitical offensive in South and Central Asia has greatly exacerbated Indo-Pakistani tensions. Islamabad fears the growing “global” Indo-US “strategic partnership”—a partnership which was cemented by a civilian nuclear accord that gives India a huge boost to its nuclear weapons program and access to purchases of advanced US weapons and weapons-systems. Meanwhile, New Delhi resents and fears the US’s dependence on Islamabad in the Afghan war.

As part of its campaign to bully and weaken Iran, the US has pressured India and Pakistan not to proceed with a planned Iran-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline, one of whose principal purposes is to underpin a rapprochement between New Delhi and Islamabad.

The bitter rivalry between the two South Asian countries was again in evidence Friday following an attack on two guesthouses in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed 16 people including 10 Indian nationals.

The Taliban was quick to claim responsibility for the attack. However, the Indian media immediately pointed fingers at the ISI, Pakistan’s principal intelligence agency, noting that the targeting of Indians served Islamabad’s efforts to limit India’s presence and influence in Afghanistan. Sections of the Indian media even went so far as to say that the “Kabul attack may derail” Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s “Pakistan talks agenda.”



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