

India-Pakistan talks abruptly cancelled

Sampath Perera and Keith Jones
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The resumption of the long-stalled Indo-Pakistani peace process went off the rails without ever even leaving the station. On Sunday, August 23 and Monday, August 24 the national security advisers of South Asia's nuclear-armed states were to have met in New Delhi in what would have been the first substantive high-level bilateral talks in almost two years. But late on Saturday evening, Pakistan announced it was withdrawing from the talks.

The immediate reason for the talks' collapse was India's insistence on two conditions: first that the Kashmir dispute not figure on the meeting's agenda, and second that Pakistan National Security Advisor Sartaj Aziz cancel a meeting with leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of anti-Indian Kashmiri separatist groups.

Declaring these pre-conditions "unacceptable," Islamabad said the talks "would not serve any purpose."

The collapse of the talks has further enflamed relations between India and Pakistan. Born of the reactionary 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, the two states have already fought three declared and numerous undeclared wars.

Moreover, as a result of the US drive to build up India as a strategic counterweight to China, the Indo-Pakistani conflict has become increasingly entangled with the US-Chinese strategic rivalry, adding an explosive new dimension to both conflicts.

New Delhi has taken great exception to China's launch earlier this year of a \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. However, Beijing only pressed forward with the corridor project after India repeatedly rebuffed its overtures for closer ties and tilted still closer toward Washington and its key allies in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan and Australia.

The collapse of the talks between Ajiz and his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, was not entirely unexpected.

In the weeks preceding Islamabad's withdrawal announcement there was heavy cross-border firing over the Line of Control that separates Indian and Pakistani held Kashmir, with both sides reporting military and civilian fatalities. Over the course of the past two months, New Delhi and Islamabad have officially accused each other of more than 160 ceasefire violations.

The Aziz-Doval meeting was to have been the first of the five steps that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had agreed to take in the name of

promoting peace and development when they met briefly in Ufa, Russia on July 10 on the side lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Summit.

However, the ink was barely dry on the Ufa agreement before the two sides started verbally sniping at each other and new fatalities were reported from cross-border firing.

Weeks passed before a date could be set for the national security advisers' meeting, and with the approach of the meeting New Delhi made a show of insisting that it should focus on "terrorism"—that is to say, on its charges that Islamabad is facilitating terrorist attacks on India.

On August 20, Indian authorities briefly detained leaders of the Hurriyat Conference whom Aziz had invited to meet with him during his trip to New Delhi. Then on Saturday morning, New Delhi formally advised Islamabad that "it would not be appropriate" for Aziz to meet with the Hurriyat leaders as "it would not be in keeping with the spirit and intent of the Ufa understanding to jointly work to combat terrorism."

This provoked a fresh round of recriminating statements from both governments. Then, at a late Saturday afternoon press conference, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj issued an ultimatum. Islamabad, announced Swaraj, had until midnight to agree to confine the coming talks to terrorism and cancel Aziz's meeting with the Hurriyat Conference leaders; otherwise New Delhi would scuttle the national security advisers' talks.

Previous Indian governments, including previous government led by Modi's party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have routinely allowed Pakistani officials to meet with leaders of the Hurriyat Conference. But Modi has declared such contacts an unacceptable intrusion in India's internal affairs.

In August 2014 New Delhi abruptly called off a meeting between India's and Pakistan's foreign secretaries on the grounds that Pakistan's ambassador to India had recently met Hurriyat leaders. The following month, Modi flatly refused to meet Sharif while both were attending the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly.

The spat over the Hurriyat Conference is part of a highly provocative attempt on the part of the Modi government to change the "rules of the game" with Pakistan so as to assert India's regional dominance.

In keeping with this shift, the Modi government has

attempted to systematically isolate Pakistan, politically and economically, and justified this hardline stance with claims that Islamabad is a sponsor of terrorism and Pakistan the epicentre of world terrorism.

In its drive to decisively alter the regional balance of power, New Delhi is seeking to exploit the military-strategic strength it has acquired due to its burgeoning alliance with the US.

Under India's previous Congress Party-led government, New Delhi forged a "global strategic partnership" with the US—a partnership cemented by the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord, which gives India access to advanced nuclear technology and fuel, enabling it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development. The US has also encouraged India to become an Indian Ocean power and offered to partner with it in the development and production of advanced weaponry.

Under Modi, who came to power in May 2014, India has drawn still closer to Washington and its anti-China "Pivot to Asia." In January, US President Barack Obama and Modi issued a "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean" that parroted the US-line on the territorial disputes between China and its South China Sea neighbours. New Delhi also worked closely with Washington in the "regime change" operation in Sri Lanka that targeted former President Mahinda Rajapakse because he had developed extensive economic and political ties to Beijing.

Beijing's principal motivation for the Pakistan economic corridor project is to develop a mechanism to counteract US plans to impose an economic blockade on China through its military-strategic dominance of the Straits of Malacca and a series of other Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints. The corridor project would provide China with an alternate land supply route connecting western China to Pakistan's newly-constructed Arabian Sea port, in Gwadar, Balochistan.

India bitterly resents the huge economic boost the corridor will provide its arch-rival Pakistan, and all the more so because it has long viewed the growing economic gap between India and Pakistan as a huge strategic advantage.

Islamabad has repeatedly accused India of seeking to disrupt the corridor project by supporting anti-Pakistan terrorism, including the insurgency in Balochistan. These claims were given credence by India's defence minister when he publicly boasted last May that New Delhi is using terrorism to fight terrorism. Doval, for his part, in a speech that he gave in 2014 just three months before joining the government, said India should tell Pakistan that if there is a major terrorist attack on Indian soil akin to that in Mumbai in November 2008, "you may lose Balochistan."

Following last weekend's events, Aziz brandished the nuclear threat, while repeating Islamabad's charges that India is supporting terrorism in Pakistan.

"Modi's India," said Pakistan's national security advisor, "acts as if they are a regional superpower. We are a nuclear-armed country and we know how to defend ourselves."

"We," continued Aziz, "also have evidence of Indian (spy) agency RAW's involvement in fuelling terrorism in Pakistan." Aziz said he had intended to present the evidence at his cancelled meeting with Doval, then added that Islamabad will now raise the issue in international fora, including the United Nations.

A further major destabilizing factor is the political crisis facing Pakistan, a state mired in economic crisis and torn by elite-fomented sectarian and ethnic conflicts. Sections of the ruling establishment openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the short joint statement Modi and Sharif issued after their meeting in Ufa because it made no mention of the Kashmir dispute. According to the *News*, a prominent Pakistani daily, a meeting of top government and military leaders just two days prior to Aziz's scheduled departure for New Delhi decided, "Pakistan will never enter into negotiations with India *sans* the Kashmir issue since most of outstanding issues between the two countries are linked to the Kashmir dispute."

Pakistan's military, which justifies its huge role in the country's political and economic life on the grounds that it is the only rampart against Indian aggression, no doubt played the principal role at this meeting. The military retains the final say over Pakistan's national security and foreign policies, especially in respect to India.

Over the past year and a half, Pakistan's military has reasserted its power over the civilian government, exploiting a renewal of its longstanding close ties with the Pentagon and Washington's national-security establishment as a whole. At the Obama administration's behest, the Pakistan military has been conducting its largest-ever operation against the Pakistan Taliban since June 2014. Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus also played an important role in assisting the US in reconfiguring Afghanistan's government after Hamid Karzai was forced to retire as president.

There is much evidence to suggest that Washington pressed Modi to agree to a resumption of dialogue with Islamabad earlier this summer. It did so because it viewed the continuing high-level tension between India and Pakistan as disruptive to both its efforts to pacify Afghanistan and to integrate India more fully into its "Asia pivot."

At least in public, the US response to the cancellation of the Aziz-Doval talks has been low-key. State Department spokesman John Kirby said the Obama administration was "disappointed" and urged both countries "to resume formal dialogue soon."



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