

India-Pakistan talks may be derailed even before they begin

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A scheduled meeting between the Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries this Friday remains in doubt. As a condition for the talks proceeding, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has demanded that Pakistan take action against those allegedly responsible for the January 2 terrorist attack on the Pathankot Air Force Base in the northern Indian state of Punjab.

Indian officials allege that the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) or Army of the Prophet Mohammed, carried out the attack, in which a heavily-armed group, believed to have been six-man strong, infiltrated the air base. According to Indian officials, it ultimately took four days to ferret out and kill all the attackers. Meanwhile, seven Indian soldiers were killed and another 20 injured.

The air base is located 25 kilometres from the Pakistan border in Punjab, which was divided between the two countries as part of the reactionary 1947 communal partition of the Indian subcontinent. The Pathankot base is considered a key forward base for Indian military operations against Pakistan in the event of war. It hosts MiG-21 Bison fighter jets, MI-25 and MI-35 attack helicopters, missiles, including surface-to-air missiles, and surveillance radar.

The base also provides logistical support for security forces operations in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir, which is in perpetual turmoil due to popular opposition to India's repressive rule.

India has refused to confirm whether it will participate in Friday's meeting. Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval denied a *Dainik Bhaskar* report that quoted him as saying the talks were cancelled, but he told NDTV: "We will talk only if Pakistan takes action."

The meeting between the foreign secretaries was announced when Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj met Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Islamabad on the sidelines of a multilateral meeting on Afghanistan in early December. Indian Foreign Secretary

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was expected to visit Islamabad to meet his Pakistani counterpart, Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, to set a schedule for resumption of the long-stalled "comprehensive peace process" between the two countries, which in its latest iteration is called the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue (CAD).

Modi boosted the CAD when he made an unscheduled visit to Lahore to meet Sharif on December 25, prompting press claims, both in South Asia and the west, of a major breakthrough.

Until recently, Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government had systematically snubbed Pakistan, refusing to relaunch the "peace dialogue" until Pakistan "stops supporting" terrorist groups and authorising Indian military-security forces to take more aggressive action in border skirmishes. Islamabad responded to this, by charging that Indian intelligence is supporting various anti-Pakistan groups, including the Pakistan Taliban and Baluchistan separatist insurgents.

The Obama administration has been pressing both countries to talk behind the scenes. It is concerned that any conflict between the nuclear-armed rivals would disrupt its broader geo-strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Washington is seeking to stabilise the US-installed government in Afghanistan with the help of Pakistani-sponsored talks with the Taliban. At the same time, the US is backing India's regional power ambitions in order to integrate India ever-more fully into its anti-China military and strategic "pivot to Asia."

After the Pathankot incident, Modi's government demanded strong "action" by Islamabad against the attackers, although, at least initially, in terms less strident than in the past. According to an Indian External Affairs Ministry statement, when Sharif telephoned Modi last week, Modi "strongly emphasised the need for Pakistan to take firm and immediate action against the organisations

and individuals” allegedly responsible for the attack.

The *Hindustan Times* later reported that Modi had told a meeting of his cabinet ministers “bilateral talks would not resume until Islamabad took action against the terror group.” It reported Modi as saying: “Action is a must. We are going to be very strict about it.”

Analysts pointed out that the BJP government did not directly blame Islamabad for the attack and seemed reluctant to withdraw from talks, not wanting to be seen to be scuttling the “dialogue” even before it effectively began. However, Modi was also intent on demonstrating a hard line and backing the military. He visited Pathankot last Saturday to praise the military’s response to the attack.

It remains unclear who mounted the assault. Though Indian officials blamed JeM, the group has not claimed responsibility. Some officials and the media also accused the Pakistani military’s Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency of involvement. Three days after the attack, the United Jihad Council, a coalition of groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, said it was responsible, but New Delhi brushed the claim aside.

India says it has provided Islamabad with intelligence information, including intercepted messages said to be from the attackers, who allegedly came from Pakistan, to their handlers in Pakistan. The Indian media also reported that Indian security agencies identified five key JeM figures, including its leader, Maulana Masood Azhar, as implicated in the attack.

Other reports, however, have pointed to serious Indian “security lapses,” saying the Indian Intelligence Bureau had earlier warned of “terrorist infiltration” from Pakistan and indeed knew, as of January 1, that attackers were in the vicinity of the airbase.

At the very least, the lengthy attack on such a high-profile and heavily-defended target would indicate a serious breakdown in the Indian military-security apparatus.

The *Hindu* quoted an “Army colonel who had known Lieutenant Colonel Niranjana Kumar, who was killed in the operation,” as saying: “It looked as if someone desperately wanted the terrorists to attack Pathankot airbase. Otherwise, how could they fail to nab the terrorists when they knew their location, had so much of time and had so many military resources in the area to hunt them down?”

Whoever was involved, the transparent aim of the attack was to scuttle the resumption of bilateral talks between the two countries. Such elements are present in both

countries and have repeatedly acted to stoke bilateral tensions. In India, Hindu supremacist groups associated with the BJP have organised provocations, including terrorist attacks, to whip up animosity against India’s Muslim minority and Pakistan. Similarly, Pakistani Islamist groups, long patronised by sections of the military-security apparatus, have launched terror attacks inside India.

For its part, Sharif’s government condemned the assault and is scrambling to save the talks in order to placate Washington and its domestic critics. After a top-level meeting involving Sharif, Army Chief Raheel Sharif, ISI head Rizwan Akhtar, other senior military officials and cabinet ministers, the prime minister’s office “expressed condemnation of this incident, and reiterated the country’s commitment to cooperate with India to completely eradicate the menace of terrorism afflicting our region.”

Last Saturday, US Secretary of State John Kerry phoned Sharif to “highlight the need to stay the course for dialogue,” the media reported. According to Sharif’s office, Kerry said the India-Pakistan talks were “needed in the interest of regional stability.” Earlier State Department spokesman John Kirby had called on the two countries to continue their dialogue and address their “mutual concerns” about terrorism.

To put pressure on Pakistan, more than 20 US Republican and Democratic legislators condemned the January 2 attack, expressed support for India, and urged Islamabad to act against those responsible. The BJP government is also seeking to exploit the incident for its own advantage against Pakistan in the conflict over Kashmir, as well as to advance its influence in Afghanistan.

It is the US, however, that has been the main destabilising factor in the region by mounting its neo-colonial invasion of Afghanistan, extending the Afghan war to and across the Pakistani border, and promoting India’s regional ambitions militarily and politically.



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