

India-Pakistan Foreign Ministers Meeting: The Impasse Continues

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Abstract

This paper discusses the recent meeting between Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in Islamabad. Hopes of the meeting producing some fruitful outcomes have not materialised. The paper examines why India and Pakistan have failed to overcome their historic impediments to constructive dialogue.

Prelude to the Meeting

On 15 July 2010, foreign ministers of India and Pakistan, S.M Krishna and Shah Mehmood Qureshi respectively, held talks in Islamabad. This was part of the follow up to the recent resumption of dialogue between the two countries initiated by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani in April 2010. The talks on 15 July marked the third high-level contact in six months and were the first meeting of the foreign ministers since the Mumbai attacks in November 2008. Both the foreign ministers were tasked by their respective prime ministers to identify areas of trust deficit and develop a formula for renewal of future dialogue and confidence building between the two countries.

There was some optimism with regard to this latest meeting between the foreign ministers. During the foreign secretaries' meeting held earlier in June 2010, both sides appeared willing to take on a more pragmatic and accommodating approach. Significantly, India had signalled that it was willing to back down from its hard line posture of resolving terrorism issues before resuming dialogue on the broader concerns as it realised that the hard line approach had not been fruitful. In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, it was politically impossible for India to engage with Pakistan without taking a tough stance on terrorism; but the passage of time and

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appreciation of internal challenges faced by Pakistan as well as the progress made by Pakistan in investigating and prosecuting the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack were sufficient reasons for India to soften its stance and give diplomacy another chance.²

Similarly, Pakistan also indicated that it would not allow the Kashmir issue to undermine the dialogue process. Thus, while terrorism and Kashmir remained critical issues for India and Pakistan respectively, this time there was some hope that both countries would exercise restraint on these sensitive topics to allow discussion on other matters and achieve progress on critical concerns such as trade and commerce, tourism, water, culture and humanitarian issues.

The Meeting

Despite the show of pragmatism and positive attitude visible at earlier talks between the foreign secretaries and home ministers in June this year, the foreign ministers' talks did not yield anything substantive leading to continuation of the impasse. Terrorism, a highly critical and politically emotive issue for India, resurfaced as a major stumbling block, catalysed by the evidence gathered from the United States (US) terror suspect, David Coleman Headley who was charged with the planning and plotting of the Mumbai attacks. Headley had testified his links with the Pakistan-based terrorist organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and had alleged that the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was closely involved with the group.³ This clearest evidence linking a Pakistani terrorist group with the Mumbai attack provoked India into pressing Pakistan on concrete action with respect to terrorism.

In light of Headley's 'non-partisan' revelations on the LeT, the Indian Foreign Minister said that India had provided 'overwhelming' and 'irrefutable' evidence to Pakistan on the Mumbai attacks. He also submitted that in the face of such 'overwhelming evidence', there was a strong expectation that the 'government will have to act'.⁴ The Indian Foreign Minister also protested against the continued anti-India propaganda flowing from the LeT chief, Hafiz Saeed.⁵

Pakistan took umbrage at the Indian reliance on Headley's testimony to link ISI with LeT to bring pressure on Pakistan, saying that it was 'uncalled for' to do this on 'the eve of the

² For details, see Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna's interview in the Indian newspaper *Tribune* (20 May 2010), <http://meaindia.nic.in>. Accessed on 17 July 2010

³ According to Indian Home Secretary G.K Pillai, Headley's interrogation had revealed the complicity of both the ISI and the LeT Chief Hafiz Saeed in the Mumbai attacks and that the ISI were 'literally controlling and coordinating it (the attacks) from the beginning till the end', 'ISI behind 26/11, from start to end: Home Secy', *Indian Express* (14 July 2010), www.expressindia.com/latest-news/ISI-behind-26-11-from-start-to-end-Home-Secy/646108/. Accessed on 19 July 2010.

⁴ 'India, Pakistan to discuss resuming peace process', *The News International* (15 July 2010), www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=108516. Accessed on 16 July 2010.

⁵ Rajeev Deshpande, 'Time for Pak to act on 26/11 Proof: Krishna', *The Times of India* (15 July 2010), <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/6169428.cms?prtpage=1>. Accessed on 16 July 2010.

dialogue.’⁶ It also upped the ante by placing Kashmir and Siachen on top of its agenda and insisting that a clear time line be established for resolution of these outstanding issues.⁷ This was rejected by India on the ground that timelines were unrealistic for these territorial disputes, which were highly complex with long histories. While Pakistan denied charges that it supported cross-border infiltration⁸, it reaffirmed that it would ‘continue extending full diplomatic and moral support to [the people of Jammu and Kashmir] legitimate cause and struggle for self-determination.’⁹ At the same time, when Pakistan raised the issue of Baluchistan, the Indian Foreign Minister said there was no credible evidence presented by Pakistan of any Indian involvement in Baluchistan.

The meeting, instead of assuming constructive proportions, degenerated into an exchange of accusations on sensitive issues. While Pakistan felt that India was being ‘selective’ in its approach, India felt that there was a ‘hiatus’ in expectations on both sides.¹⁰ The talks failed to yield anything fruitful because of three reasons: the underlying mistrust between the two countries, different agendas on both sides and the fear of backlash from respective domestic constituencies. Both sides were found retreating to their intractable positions.

Retreating to the Status Quo

India’s main focus was terrorism. Pakistan, for a variety of reasons, has not been able to deliver to India’s satisfaction on the subject.¹¹ Pakistan’s demands on Siachen and Kashmir were equally firm, with a refusal to discuss terrorism unless its concerns were concurrently addressed.¹² While India’s demands on greater Pakistani action on terrorism are entirely legitimate, two points should be borne in mind. One, some degree of compromise is necessary in any process of dialogue and India needs to moderate its emphasis on terrorism. Two, while the Mumbai attacks might have originated from the Pakistani soil and Pakistan

⁶ ‘No Progress reported,’ *The News International* (16 July 2010), www.thenews.com.pk/print3.asp?id=30069. Accessed on 18 July 2010.

⁷ Siddharth Varadarajan, ‘Timeline on Siachen, Kashmir talks was deal-breaker’, *The Hindu* (18 July 2010), www.hindu.com/2010/07/18/stories/2010071861830800.htm. Accessed on 18 July 2010.

⁸ The Pakistani Foreign Minister Mehmood Qureshi said that ‘Infiltration is not the policy of the government of Pakistan or any intelligence agency of Pakistan, period’ and ‘If there are individuals who have crossed over, deal with them firmly and Pakistan will cooperate’, www1.voanews.com/english/news/asia/Pakistan-and-India-End-Talks-On-Mumbai-Terrorist-Attack--98550164.html. Accessed on 18 July 2010.

⁹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, ‘Record of Press Briefing held on 8 July 2010’, www.mofa.gov.pk/Spokesperson/2010/Spokes_08_07_2010.htm. Accessed on 18 July 2010.

¹⁰ See Interview of Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, Ministry of External Affairs, ‘<http://meaindia.nic.in/>’. Accessed 19 July 2010.

¹¹ While assuring India that the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks will be brought to justice, Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi added that ‘we should allow the judicial process to take its time in undertaking the due course.’ See ‘India, Pakistan to take trust building process forward’, *The News International* (15 July 2010), www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=108567. Accessed 15 July 2010.

¹² Mariana Baabar, ‘India selective in approach: Qureshi’, *The News International* (17 July 2010), www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=30106. Accessed 18 July 2010.

might have had control over some of the actors, there is a broader terrorist agenda over which Pakistan has little control and is itself a victim of.

By reverting to the traditional intractable positions for appeasing domestic constituencies, the dialogue process has hit a major stumbling block. India and Pakistan need to come out of their traditional mindsets and search for bold and innovative solutions to achieve breakthroughs. India needs to be mindful of the fact that Pakistan's civilian democracy is still finding its feet and the government cannot be pushed too far on certain issues. Some accommodation and willingness to engage Pakistan on its issues of concern, particularly with less emphasis on terrorism, is perhaps necessary. Pakistan has the greater responsibility in this partnership to take active measures for dismantling the terrorist infrastructure within Pakistan and prevent elements operating from its soil for supporting terrorist activities abroad. Otherwise, any potential meeting of the two foreign ministers on the sidelines of the Afghanistan international conference on 20 July will be a futile exercise.

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