

India rebuffs Pakistan's "peace" overtures

By Keith Jones
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India has demonstrably rebuffed Pakistan's attempts to initiate a dialogue aimed at defusing the almost three-month-long war crisis between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states.

This crisis has already resulted in weeks of artillery and gunfire barrages across the Line of Control that separates Indian- and Pakistan-held Kashmir and scores of military and civilian casualties. But Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) appear determined to continue their push to rewrite the rules of New Delhi's relations with Islamabad, even though this entails an ever-escalating danger of triggering all-out war.

Islamabad had repeatedly signaled that it wanted New Delhi to use the visit of its de facto foreign minister to Amritsar, India for last weekend's "Heart of Asia" (HoA) international conference on Afghanistan as the opportunity to resume high-level talks.

But India went out of its way to snub Sartaj Aziz, while using the HoA meeting to intensify its campaign to diplomatically isolate Pakistan.

Aziz was granted only a brief audience Saturday evening with Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, who was standing in for India's ailing foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj.

The Pakistan Foreign Office circulated a photo of Aziz and Doval in conversation and Radio Pakistan claimed that the two had spoken for more than 30 minutes, but this was angrily denied by India. Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Vikas Swarup "categorically" denied there had been any "pull aside or bilateral meeting" between Aziz and Doval. Earlier an unnamed Indian official accused Pakistan of "leveraging a joint, 100-foot stroll."

Speaking to the Pakistani press, Aziz later admitted, "my so-called interaction...was not really substantial." Doval and Jaitley "sort of welcomed my presence," continued Aziz. "That's all we should take notice of right now."

Adding insult to injury, India did not allow Aziz to hold a press conference or even leave his hotel. Islamabad called this a violation of diplomatic protocol, while India cited, not very convincingly, security concerns.

At the HoA conference, India mounted a coordinated attack on Pakistan in tandem with Afghanistan, whose government has taken an increasingly antagonistic attitude toward its southeastern neighbor.

In his opening address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi insisted that terrorism constitutes "the gravest threat to Afghanistan's peace, stability and prosperity" and went on to denounce those in the region "who support, shelter, train and finance" terrorists—a remark that was universally interpreted as aimed at Pakistan.

Rattled by this summer's resurgence of mass anti-Indian government protests in Indian-held Kashmir and angered by Pakistan's attempts to use the protests to bolster its reactionary, communally based claim to Kashmir, the BJP government has been mounting a diplomatic offensive to label Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism since August.

Afghani President Ashraf Ghani was even more explicit than Modi in attacking Pakistan. He accused Pakistan of waging an "undeclared war" against Afghanistan, charging that the military campaign Islamabad has mounted since 2014 against the Taliban and allied groups in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas has been "selective," thereby allowing the "displacement of the Pakistani extremist networks and their allies onto Afghanistan."

Ghani further charged that Pakistan's "undeclared war" has intensified "during 2016" and especially following the October 5, European Union-Afghan government-sponsored Brussels Conference on Afghanistan.

While denouncing Pakistan, Ghani heaped praise on its archrival India, saying New Delhi's "impressive" support for Afghanistan was "aimed at improving people's lives" and was "transparent and without strings attached."

Modi and Ghani had coordinated their attack on Islamabad during the bilateral talks that they held Sunday morning, just hours before the ministerial session of the HoA conference. During those talks, India agreed to "operationalize" US \$1 billion in bilateral "cooperation" aid, including for the establishment of an air cargo corridor. For decades, Pakistan has used its geographic position between the two countries to frustrate Indo-Afghan trade ties. Ghani also reportedly pressed India, which has provided training for Afghan

security forces and recently gifted it four attack helicopters, for increased military hardware.

In his comments to the HoA conference, Aziz rejected Ghani's accusations as "baseless." He said that "to blame only one country for the recent upsurge in violence in Afghanistan"—which has seen the Taliban secure control over more of the country than any time since the 2001 US invasion—"is simplistic."

Aziz claimed that his participation in the conference, despite the military "escalation on the Line of Control," is "testimony to Pakistan's unflinching commitment" to peace in Afghanistan and the region.

The statement issued by the Amritsar conference labeled a series of groups as terrorist threats to the region. Over Pakistan's objections, India was able to place on the list two Pakistan-based groups that had, and New Delhi claims continue to have, ties to sections of Pakistan's intelligence apparatus: the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad. In return, New Delhi had to concede Pakistan's demand that the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan or TTP also be included.

Islamabad has charged both New Delhi and Kabul with providing covert support to the TTP. As the *New York Times* admitted several years ago, there is definite evidence that Afghan intelligence has assisted the TTP in order to pressure Islamabad, and that this stratagem was initially supported by "rogue" elements in the US military-intelligence apparatus.

Islamabad became deeply involved in Afghanistan as a result of its frontline role in the CIA-orchestrated mujahedeen insurgency against the Soviet-backed government in Kabul. Post-1991, it sought to use the war-ravaged Afghan state to give it "strategic depth" against India, ultimately backing the Taliban in their rise to power.

Two decades on, and under conditions where India's strategic position has been enormously strengthened by its having supplanted Pakistan as Washington's chief South Asia ally, Islamabad is increasingly apprehensive about the growing Kabul-New Delhi axis. The joint attack Modi and Ghani mounted on Pakistan at last weekend's conference will only have increased these fears.

So as to secure Pakistan's logistical support for the US occupation of Afghanistan, Washington, while encouraging New Delhi's role in Afghanistan also put definite limits on it.

But as part of a broader recalibration of its strategy in South Asia, Washington now appears prepared to give India greater latitude in Afghanistan and with Pakistan more generally.

A critical factor in the Modi government's hardline stance against Pakistan is the encouragement it has received from Washington. The Obama administration first gave tacit and then explicit support to the illegal and highly provocative

Special Forces' commando raids India mounted inside Pakistan on Sept. 28-29 in supposed retaliation for an attack by Islamist, pro-Kashmir separatists on an Indian military base in Kashmir.

India's "surgical strikes" were the first military action New Delhi has admitted to carrying out inside Pakistan in more than four decades. Previous governments, including that led by the BJP from 1998-2004, refrained from publicizing attacks inside Pakistan so as to avoid sparking an escalating series of retaliatory actions that could rapidly end in war.

The Modi government, by contrast, is boasting that it has thrown off the "shackles of restraint" and that it is ready to keep attacking Pakistan unless and until Islamabad demonstratively bends to its demand that Pakistan cease all logistical support to the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

The US is well aware that events in South Asia could easily spin out of control, resulting in the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states. All the more so, since Modi is shamelessly using claims of India's newly proven military prowess to whip up a foul bellicose atmosphere, calculating that this will both facilitate his government's ramming through of unpopular pro-big business reforms and bring big electoral dividends in the coming elections in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh.

But Washington is also anxious to demonstrate to India that there are "rewards" for the Modi government having integrated India ever more completely into the US military-strategic offensive against China, including by throwing open its military bases and ports to US warplanes and battleships.

Thus, as the war clouds grow ever thicker over South Asia, Washington is recklessly combining muted calls for New Delhi and Islamabad to show restraint with celebratory statements about the strength of Indo-US military ties. On Sunday, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter boasted, "The US-India defense relationship is the closest it's ever been. Through our strategic handshake—with America reaching west in the rebalance [i.e. Washington's anti-China Pivot], and India reaching east in what Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls his Act East policy—our two nations are exercising together by air, land and sea like never before."

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