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India cancels talks with Pakistan, threatens military action

Indian Army Chief Bipin Rawat threatened military action against Pakistan Saturday, while applauding the Indian government's sudden about-face on accepting a Pakistani offer for their respective foreign ministers to meet on the sidelines of this week's UN General Assembly.

"I think our government's policy has been quite clear and concise," General Rawat told reporters. "We've made no bones about the fact that talks and terrorism can't go hand in hand. Pakistan needs to curb (the) menace of terrorism."

On Thursday, India's government, which is led by Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had accepted an offer of talks from Pakistan's newly-minted prime minister, Imran Khan. But less than 24 hours later, New Delhi scuttled the planned meeting between India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and her Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

As justification, India cited the killing of three policemen, who had been abducted by anti-Indian Kashmiri insurgents from their homes in Jammu and Kashmir Thursday evening, and the alleged mutilation of the corpse of an Indian soldier killed earlier in the week in firing across the Line of Control (LoC) that separates Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir. A third reason cited by India was the Pakistani post office's publication of a series of stamps commemorating Burhan Wani, the 21-year-old commander of an Islamist Kashmiri insurgent group whose July 2016 killing sparked mass protests in Indian-held Kashmir.

In his remarks Saturday, General Rawat, who was reportedly promoted over more senior officers because of his readiness to pursue an aggressive policy against India's nuclear-armed rival, went beyond supporting the government's hardline and declared India should inflict "pain" on Pakistan. "We need to take stern action to avenge the barbarism that terrorists and the Pakistan Army have been carrying out. Yes, it's time to give it back to them in the same coin, not resorting to [a] similar kind of barbarism. But I think the other side must also feel the same pain."

Peace talks between India and Pakistan, the arch-rivals born from the 1947 communal partition of South Asia, have been in limbo for more than a decade.

Beginning in late September 2016, India and Pakistan exchanged bloodcurdling threats of all-out war and heavy artillery and gun fire across the LoC on virtually a daily basis, causing scores of military and civilian casualties on both sides.

Nevertheless, both New Delhi and Islamabad claimed the coming to power of a new government in Pakistan last month provided an opportunity to ratchet down tensions.

Pakistan has responded to Friday's announcement from New Delhi and Rawat's threats by both repeating its offer of talks and declaring its readiness for war. Warning that India should not misconstrue Pakistan's offer of "friendship" as "weakness," Prime Minister Imran Khan said, "Our people are ready, our tanks are also ready."

Islamabad has charged that India's about-face was a sham, that it never wanted the foreign ministers' meeting to go ahead. It chose to make a show of accepting the offer only to pull-out a day later, so as to highlight its hardline stance against Pakistan in the run-up to the flurry of diplomatic activity that will surround this week's UN General Assembly.

What is clear is that India's ruling elite, emboldened by its emergence as Washington's principal ally in South Asia, is determined to bully Pakistan into demonstratively accepting New Delhi's preeminence. Specifically, it is demanding that Islamabad ensure no logistical support is provided to the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir. This goes hand in hand with a narrative that reduces the alienation of the population of India's lone Muslim-majority province to Pakistan's machinations.

In reality, the Indian government has repeatedly and systematically violated Jammu and Kashmir's constitutionally guaranteed autonomy and rigged its elections. For the past three decades, Indian security forces have waged a "dirty" counter-insurgency war in Jammu and Kashmir, subjecting the state's population to armed-occupation, torture, disappearances and summary executions.

The Pakistan bourgeoisie is no less hostile to the democratic and social aspirations of Kashmir's workers and toilers. It has manipulated the insurgency, promoting reactionary Islamist forces, so as to use them to pursue its own reactionary geo-strategic interests.

The cancellation of the foreign ministers' talks fits well with the political calculations of the BJP government in the run-up next year's general election. It has proclaimed September 29 "Surgical Strikes" day to mark the second anniversary of the provocative raid that Indian forces carried out inside Pakistan on September 28–29, 2016. It has also "suggested" the country's universities organize parades to be addressed by Indian military personnel and cajole students to write letters and emails pledging support to the armed forces.

But there is strong support across the Indian political establishment for a belligerent stance against Pakistan. The country's main opposition party, the Congress Party, denounced the BJP government for its short-lived acceptance of the Pakistani offer of talks, and when it cancelled them complained that the BJP should never have agreed to talks.

In the brief interim between New Delhi's acceptance and cancellation of the foreign ministers' meeting, the US State Department declared the planned talks to be "terrific news."

For the past decade, Washington has showered India with strategic favours, with the aim of transforming it into a frontline state in its military-strategic offensive against China, while dramatically downgrading ties with Pakistan. This has included explicit threats from Trump and his top aides that the US could repudiate Islamabad's designation as a major non-NATO ally, and block an IMF emergency loan to Islamabad. However, the US still hopes to bully Pakistan, which has turned much of the country into a killing zone in support of the Afghan war, to eliminate all Taliban "safe-havens" in Pakistan, and calculates a lessening of tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad would help.

Under the four-year-old BJP government, India has dramatically increased its integration into the US drive against China, including throwing open its airbases and ports to routine use by Pentagon warplanes and warships and developing trilateral and quadrilateral ties with Washington's closest allies in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia.

New Delhi is also preparing, albeit reluctantly, to abide by the US sanctions against Iran, although India is heavily dependent on imported oil and Iran is one of its largest suppliers. However, when it comes to Pakistan, India is ready to ignore Washington, as it seeks the greatest room and leverage to ruthlessly pursue what it deems its core strategic interests.

India's corporate media has responded to the scuttling of the Indo-Pakistani foreign ministers' meeting by saying that it indicates there will be no meaningful steps to revive the so-called "comprehensive peace progress" until after India's general elections next May.

Such statements are based on an enormous underestimation of the combustibility of the Indo-Pakistani conflict and the extent to which it has become intertwined with the maelstrom of world geo-politics, above all the US-China divide. Pakistan has repeatedly warned that Washington's drive to harness India to its predatory strategic ambitions has overturned the balance of power in the region. It is forcing Islamabad to both deepen its longtime strategic alliance with Beijing, leading to the crystallization of South Asia into rival blocs—the US and India versus China and Pakistan—and to deploy tactical, i.e., battlefield, nuclear weapons.