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Jihadis set to spill over into Kashmir

By Zahid U Kramet
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LAHORE - There was hope but no great expectations for the dialogue between India's External Affairs Minister S M Krishna and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Quereshi on July 15. And so the headline of a major English-language Pakistan daily read, "They talked but said nothing" - an outcome which proved pessimists' predictions.

Pakistan's bottom line had always been for progress on the disputed Kashmir region and the Siachen Glacier dispute, with the reduced flow of downstream water in the Indus River connected to the overall equation. The Indian side declined to take up these major issues, saying it did not have the mandate. Khrishna instead remained fixated on blaming Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) for terror activities in India, bringing the talks to a virtual standstill, according to people with direct knowledge of the discussions.

The Siachen Glacier lies just east of the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, it has been the scene of an ongoing battle between the two countries since 1984. The glacier's melting waters are the source of the Nubra River in Indian-controlled Ladakh, which drains into the Shyok River and in turn joins the Indus, Pakistan's main water source. India abandoned plans to withdraw from Siachen after Pakistan's incursion into Kargil in Indian-administered Kashmir in 1999.

The larger Kashmir dispute encompasses much more than water rights. It is an emotive issue stretching back to 1947, when Pakistan was carved out of British India on the understanding that the sub-continent's Muslims constituted a separate nation. Religion

alone determined the territorial demarcation of the two states. Kashmir was made an exception, which set the stage for two of the three wars between the two countries in 1947 and 1965. Whether this was contrived or accidental is moot, and both India and Pakistan suffer the consequences.

India's ruling elites were reluctant to admit that "a nation of converts" constitutes a nation, while Pakistan has always seen Kashmir as "the unfinished business of partition". The two countries stay eyeball-to-eyeball on the issue, despite numerous efforts for the neighbors engage in dialogue, and both countries have acquired nuclear capability.

In the postscript to the talks, Quereshi announced there had been some deliberation on the Kashmir dispute, despite Krishna's initial show of reluctance to address the issue. He also said he had drawn attention to the human-rights violations in the valley with the recent Indian troop deployment in the state's summer capital, Srinagar, that resulted in the killing of 15 civilians, following weeks of protests against Indian rule. Krishna drew attention to a 40% increase in infiltration across the Line of Control, insinuating that the violence was a result of this.

A complaint was then lodged by the Indian side against the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (believed a front for the militant group, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, or LeT) accusing its chief, Hafiz Saeed, of inciting the violence in Kashmir with inflammatory statements. Quereshi wondered out loud why India's home secretary had issued press statements on the eve of the foreign minister's talks reproaching Pakistan's ISI for being instrumental in the Mumbai attacks of 2008.

And so the blame game went on until Krishna closed the joint address on the hollow note of "starting this journey while being cognizant of the complexities of the challenges", a statement which likely left the talks' American sponsors baffled over what it will take for the two countries to work in tandem to address the terrorist threat emanating from the northwestern mountain ranges of South Asia, which has been playing havoc with North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces in Afghanistan.

In the South Asian smoke and mirrors game, encouraging India and Pakistan to work together will clearly take much more than the Americans bargained for. The LeT, the organization India accuses of masterminding the Mumbai carnage, has long been identified as a Pakistan proxy, bred to boost the independence struggle in Kashmir yet reportedly bending only to Pakistan's military establishment.

The LeT was given free rein to collect funds and recruit members in Pakistan before the 9/11 attacks in the US. Post-9/11, however, a large number of LeT "strays", or breakaways, were found in the company of al-Qaeda-linked jihadi groups that had adopted an anti-American position. This drew another picture and the organization was banned. But it was not disbanded: its leaders simply advised LeT members to keep a low profile in Pakistan, with the doors to India purportedly left open.

Inevitably, the LeT was seen by the Indian ruling elite as complicit in terror attacks that

rained down on India. These include the December 2001 assault on the Indian parliament that killed 12; the October 2005 Delhi bombings that killed 62; the September 2008 Delhi bombings that killed 30; the November 2008 Mumbai assault which left 175 dead after a three-day rampage; and the February 2010 Pune blasts that killed nine. However, the organization denied any connections to the assaults, claiming that targeting civilians went against its religious principles.

Pakistan meantime was confronted by a vicious campaign of terror, beginning in 2001. This ran all the way up from Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi to the Khyber Pass in the north. The restiveness in Pakistan's Balochistan province was an added problem. Bomb blasts from 2007 through 2009 alone accounted for 5,500 civilian deaths, and nearly every Pakistani was convinced that India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) was behind the killings.

This notwithstanding, most looked towards a new beginning. A sea-change in perceptions seemed to surface when the prime minister of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Raja Farooq Haider, asked in early July that Pakistan not link the negotiations with India to the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, and advised Pakistan to give up its "Kashmirfirst" policies "because of its internal vulnerabilities". That story, however, was short-lived.

Just two days before the scheduled talks, Haider capitulated. At a political conference in Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistan-administered zone, he announced the "talks could only be meaningful" if Kashmiris were included in the negotiations. There was very little chance of that materializing this early, given India had repeatedly rejected any form of dialogue that might include the Kashmiri separatist factions Pakistan had in tow.

And these factions were there in earnest - as many as 17 groupings - including the conference's organizer, Hizbul Mujahideen, led by Syed Salahudin. Tellingly, they gathered under the United Jihad Council (UJC) banner and Haider could not help being intimidated by them. But even if not, any thoughts on reconciliation would have been quickly discarded when the Salahudin thundered "the red carpet reception to Indian ministers in Islamabad has added insult to Kashmiri injury".

The "clear and present danger" spelled out from the failure of the Indian-Pakistan talks and the conference episodes, is that the jihadis are gathering momentum and set to spill over into Kashmir. From there, or so the region's political pundits have it, al-Qaeda had planned to move on into India to secure "strategic depth" with heightened terror tactics. Then it can trek onto Central Asia to forward the jihadi movement for the liberation of Palestine.

Ahmed Rashid, author of *Taliban*, in the introduction of his new offering *Descent into Chaos*, described the support system of al-Qaeda's human resources succinctly when he wrote, "to a handful of Muslims, al-Qaeda posed a civilizational solution - albeit an extreme one - to the justice denied to Muslims in Palestine [and] Kashmir". The failure of India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute will provide the international jihadi movement with all the space it needs.