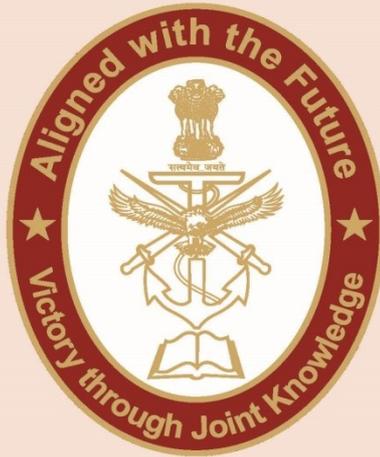


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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THE ON-OFF DIPLOMATIC TALKS

BY

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Post the receipt of the letter from Imran seeking a meeting between the two foreign ministers on the side lines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) session, the government initially agreed, cancelling it the next day, citing few incidents. The first was the brutal killing of the BSF Jawan, Head Constable Narinder Singh. The second was the kidnapping and killing of three J and K police personnel by terror groups supported by Pak. It also quoted the publication of stamps on Kashmir Solidarity day highlighting known terrorists including Burhan Wani. Pak claimed that these stamps were published in July even prior to the elections, well before the present government took office, thus a lame excuse.

The spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) clarified immediately after announcing the acceptance of the meeting that this was not recommencement of bilateral talks, but just a meeting, the agenda of which had yet to be finalized. Even this announcement was ill-timed as it happened on the same day that Narinder Singh was brutally killed. The opposition claimed the government was bending to Pak requests rather than avenging Pak's brutal actions.

Ironically, the incident of Narinder Singh occurred days after the defence minister admitted in a TV interview that India has also resorted to

similar actions but does not advertise. This comment was widely covered in the Pak media. Whether it was in retaliation or a challenge is anyone's guess. The killing of policemen by militants in the valley the next day was the crossing of the threshold of tolerance of the government.

The government was aware that Imran Khan and his benefactors, the Pak army are on the same page. Even the MoS MEA, General VK Singh, had stated in parliament that no change was expected from Pak solely due to this reason. It was expected that they would continuously push for talks while continuing their support to terror groups and keeping the border active. Thus, India should never have accepted the meeting in the first place.

The government is also aware that Pak is desperate to gain legitimacy by conducting the SAARC summit. It was stated in Pak media that one of the agenda points for discussion between the two foreign ministers was India's in principle acceptance of attending the SAARC summit. It was clear that till the elections, India would not desire any SAARC summit as a terrorist strike posts it could impact the elections.

The government knows of Pak's desperate economic status, where the polity is moving around with a begging bowl and the army chief is rushing to China seeking to convince the Chinese that the CPEC would not be impacted by change of government. Further, with Pak lacking funds, the army would only be able to survive on Chinese military largesse, which would flow only if their interest in the CPEC is secure. Thus, again maintaining pressure was a better option.

Hence, the government should have rejected the meeting outright. It should have been firm in its stance that no meeting can take place, unless Pak creates the right atmosphere. Just a comment on discussing terrorism should not have been the reason for India to consider. May be it was considering diplomatic nice ties that it accepted. This flip flop in foreign policy does not augur well for a stable and mature government with a well-oiled external affairs ministry.

The decision to call of talks was welcomed by every mainstream political party, except political parties from the valley. In their opinion India should have continued with the talks as they have always felt that Pak remains a major stakeholder in the future of the valley. This is expected as presently NC and PDP cannot adopt a view contrary to that of the separatists, in case they desire to remain an effective party in regions where the separatists hold sway.

Accepting talks at this stage and in the present scenario was also a high-risk option for the government, which it would have been aware of. Pak has realized that India's outreach across the globe has changed its

international stature in the past four years. The diplomatic push by India has never been so effective. Its economic progress has had nations rushing to sign deals with India, while few have even dared to visit Islamabad. Pak has begun feeling isolated, left with almost no supporters other than China, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. International pressure on Pak has never been greater.

Thus, Pak would desire to create a scenario which could impact the existing political climate within the country, leading to the creation of a fractured or politically weak government at the centre, post 2019. One of the easiest methods would be to commence talks followed by a terrorist strike, putting pressure on the present government to act. An erroneous or hurried decision to regain the initiative could be disastrous so would be a no decision syndrome.

Pak is equally aware that India would hesitate to formally talk prior to elections in 2019. India may have considered Pak's offer provided it created conditions which could be indicative of genuineness. Calls for talks alongside simultaneous terrorist actions indicated that Pak was fulfilling a formality. Sadly, the government neither saw the Pak game nor was initially be fooled. In either case, its subsequent action may have satisfied internal audiences but diplomatically, this action indicates lack of consistency.

The MEA should have realized that an error even done once, especially in the international domain would have an impact on the standing of the nation. It could have waited, studied the environment, sought assurances from Pak and then acted. Announcing in haste and then withdrawing its statement on lame excuses indicates lack of vision, statesmanship and maturity. It is hoped that this lesson has been learnt for the future and the MEA prepares the Foreign Minister's statement in UNGA with utmost care.

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