



# Cutting through the white noise

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## **Highlights**

- After a sudden and brief moment of clear signal, the 'India-Pakistan channel' has gone back to static, with the cancellation of talks between the two Foreign Ministers in New York this week.
- The Foreign Ministers will, no doubt, spar at the UN General Assembly, with a host of diplomats backing them up by exercising their right of reply to the comments made by either side.
- And ruling party and government spokespersons will bring up the rear in Delhi and Islamabad.

## **The road travelled**

- Amidst all this, however, there is space to reconsider developments of the last few months, and recast, if desired, a new way of imagining the relationship.
- The two leaders would have gone into the talks with an eye over their shoulders anyway, to gauge the domestic political impact of each gesture, smile and word during the meeting.
- Second, the announcement of the talks may have been the destination, but the distance the two governments traversed in the past few weeks was equally important.
- Ever since Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan won the elections, New Delhi had followed a measured but consistent path of engagement with the new government, at the highest levels.
- Mr. Modi sent Mr. Khan a letter on the day of swearing in ceremony, expressing India's commitment to pursuing "meaningful and constructive engagement".
- In his reply a month later, Mr. Khan went a step further, making a concrete proposal for a meeting between the two Foreign Ministers at the UN, which was accepted by the government a few days later, before it was abruptly cancelled.

## **Grim backdrop**

- There is also the situation at the International Border (IB) and Line of Control (LoC) to be considered, before such talks can be feasible.
- Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's shocking disclosure last week that "heads of Pakistani soldiers are being cut off, but not being displayed" by the Indian Army, followed by the discovery of a Border Security Force jawan's brutally mutilated body on the Pakistani side of the IB, shows the normalisation of barbarity on both sides.
- Army Chief General Bipin Rawat may have tempered equally incendiary remarks on the need for a "second surgical strike to which the Pakistan military spokesperson's response to General Rawat, invoking Pakistan's status as a "nuclear-armed" power, also

does nothing to make anyone in the subcontinent feel safer.

- It is heartening that despite all the hot words in public, the two sides are thinking rationally about improving communication at the border, with the operationalisation of a new hotline last week in Delhi between the BSF and Pakistan Rangers.
- The one channel on the Modi government's watch that has proven resilient is that of National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval with his former Pakistani counterpart, Nasser Khan Janjua.

### **Low-hanging fruit**

- If the two countries can again decide on interlocutors, the points for discussion are many, beginning with the proposal initiated by Pakistan ahead of the UN talks, of a visa-free Kartarpur corridor for Sikh pilgrims to travel to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib for the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in November 2019.
- Mr. Khan has spoken about trade ties being a good opener for substantive talks, and any move to consider granting India the long pending most favoured nation status would reap very rich rewards.
- Another long-pending discussion on visas for journalists on both sides has been raised again by Pakistan's new Information Minister, and it is essential to build an understanding of developments on both sides of the border.
- When it comes to protecting the 2003 ceasefire, it is possible for this channel to consider reinforcing the fencing at the IB and LoC with a second fence on both sides, or a demilitarised zone of the sort that has withstood the Korean conflict.
- On the "core issues" of terrorism and Jammu and Kashmir, it is unclear if any serious talks are possible at this juncture, but both sides know exactly what they need to do to, should they wish to listen to each other's concerns, and not just fall quiet amid the static that currently envelops the relationship.

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