

# INDIA SILENT ON BACK-CHANNEL DIALOGUE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Peace patrol:BSF and Pakistani Rangers personnel stand face-to-face along the border in Jammu last week.PTI-

The Indian and Pakistani High Commissions in Islamabad and Delhi, respectively, are an “effective channel of communication”, the External Affairs Ministry said on said, sidestepping a slew of media reports on a “back-channel dialogue” between the two countries on a number of initiatives. Earlier in the day, two Pakistani news websites reported that the current round of negotiations date back to 2018, and among the issues discussed by Indian and Pakistani officials was the possibility of Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending a SAARC summit in Pakistan in October 2021.

“Our respective High Commissions exist and are functioning. That is a very effective channel of communication. Regarding speculation about SAARC summit, I have nothing to share with you at the moment,” Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told presspersons when asked about the reports by a number of Indian and international news media outlets quoting unnamed senior government officials that have suggested that the back-channel dialogue is being overseen by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Bajwa, and that they have been facilitated by other countries such as the UAE.

At a press conference on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who visited Islamabad after talks in New Delhi, “welcomed the recent steps taken by India and Pakistan to normalise bilateral ties”, further fuelling reports about the existence of a rapprochement process.

The latest report carried by Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper said the country’s U-turn last week on approving imports of cotton and sugar from India, and then putting off the decision after opposition within the Cabinet, was an “avoidable” mistake due to “haste” in announcing the decision too early, without preparing all stakeholders. The report said the Pakistan government had hoped for the Modi government to announce a restoration of “Statehood” for Jammu and Kashmir, and a visit by Mr. Modi to J&K as signs that India was willing to soften some of its moves made on August 5, 2019. According to the “insiders” quoted, Indian and Pakistani officials had met at a number of “secret locations” in a dialogue that began in 2018, broke off for a period of prolonged tensions in 2019, and was restarted some months ago in 2020.

“Indian officials raised the issue of what they call ‘cross-border terrorism’. Pakistani officials assured them that Islamabad was strictly following a policy of not allowing non-state actors to engage in any armed activity,” the *Dawn* news report added about the talks where the issue of terrorism and Kashmir were reportedly discussed.

In a separate report published on Thursday, a Pakistani website, *Global Village Space*, said more confidence-building measures had been proposed through the alleged back-channel dialogue, adding this was the “first time that Pakistani government sources have confirmed the existence of back-channel engagement with the Modi government”.

The Indian External Affairs Ministry did not respond to the specific details in either report, and has maintained silence over previous reports citing the dialogue.

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