

## THROUGH A BACKCHANNEL, STEPS FORWARD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

The absence of evidence, they say, is not the evidence of absence. More than a month after India-Pakistan border commanders [agreed to strictly observe all agreements between the two countries](#), the absence of official acceptance of a backchannel seems far outweighed by indicators that there is, in fact, such a channel in place, approved by the Prime Ministers of both countries.

For many, the statement issued by the Director Generals of Military Operations on February 25 was the first clue. The fact that it was a joint statement and employed terms like the resolution of “core issues” indicated both coordination at a diplomatic level and high-level political approval.

Also read | [Backchannel diplomacy played its part in India, Pakistan decision to cease fire along LoC](#)

The events that followed, including the scheduling of the much-delayed Indus Water Treaty talks, the granting of sports visas, and the salutary messages between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, strengthened rumours of a backchannel. These stand out after a particularly recriminatory period in India-Pakistan ties that followed the 2019 Pulwama attack, the Balakot strikes and capture of an Indian pilot thereafter, and the government’s decision on Jammu and Kashmir.

More recently, the lack of any references to Pakistan in electoral speeches by Mr. Modi and his Cabinet during the ongoing Assembly elections as well as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)’s decision not to criticise the obvious U-turn by Mr. Khan on trade are seen as more such clues. Nor has the MEA or Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) issued rebuttals or denials to news reports in credible international and national news organisations in the past few weeks that have said that talks overseen by National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa have been taking place for months, in different neighbouring countries, facilitated by foreign governments including the United Arab Emirates. Quite the reverse, in fact: the MEA and MoFA’s responses to specific questions in the past week about the existence of a backchannel have been carefully worded non-denials.

For those aghast at the prospect, a look at the history of backchannels, or officially sanctioned contacts between nominees from India and Pakistan, is instructional. They have operated in the worst of times, including wars, terror strikes and military action, and their existence brought to light only years later. For example, it was only when former Inter-Services Intelligence chief Hamid Gul, reviled for his role in building the Taliban and arming Kashmiri militants, died that former Research and Analysis Wing chief A.K. Verma wrote about their channel for peace talks that began in 1988. The talks had been initiated by General Zia-ul-Haq and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi through Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan. The leaders were close to an agreement when General Zia’s death in a plane crash ran the process aground, Mr. Verma wrote.

Also read | [India sidesteps Pakistani reports on back-channel dialogue](#)

Later, during the Kargil War, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee chose an unorthodox back-channel interlocutor, R.K. Mishra, journalist and founder of the Observer Research Foundation. Mishra met with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s envoy, diplomat Niaz Naik, to hammer out the contours of the ceasefire and Pakistan’s withdrawal, with both men shuttling between Islamabad and New Delhi on secret visits. Both Mishra and Naik died in 2009, and never spoke of their

work themselves, but their conversations were the beginning of an unbroken chain for the next decade, handed over on the Pakistani side from Tariq Aziz to Riaz Mohammad Khan and Shahryar Khan and on the Indian side from NSAs Brajesh Mishra and J.N. Dixit to Special Envoy Satinder K. Lambah.

Over the years, little has been said publicly, but stories abound of Indian and Pakistani diplomats scouring Delhi's Connaught Place for a proper map of the India-Pakistan Line of Control in order to work out their resolution — of one interlocutor arriving at the hotel room of another's past midnight to discuss some part of the plan, and of backchannel diplomats travelling across the border without visas or any official record. On one occasion, the Pakistani President did not even know about the arrival of the Indian interlocutor until he found the Indian plane parked next to his on the tarmac in Islamabad.

Also read | [We've never shied away from talks, says Pakistan](#)

Prime Minister Modi, by many accounts, initiated contacts even before he assumed office. In early 2014, a Washington-based Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh member, Jitendra Tuli, visited Pakistan and reportedly told the Pakistani NSA and other senior officials about a soon-to-be-sent invitation for Prime Minister Sharif from India. By his own account, he suggested that it would be advisable to hold off giving India 'Most Favoured Nation' status, something the Sharif government had already proposed to do, until after the elections in India. After Mr. Modi invited Mr. Sharif to his swearing-in, the two leaders were believed to have exchanged messages through steel magnate Sajjan Jindal, whose meeting with Mr. Sharif in Murree set off a controversy in Pakistan.

Even as official channels faltered, and Foreign Secretary-level talks in Islamabad and then NSA-EAM talks in Delhi were cancelled, other channels were activated. Mr. Doval's first contact with Pakistan Special Envoy Lt Gen Nasir Janjua in Bangkok as well as Mr. Modi's surprise visit to Lahore in December 2015 were clearly prefaced by some 'non-official' officially sanctioned contact. After the Pathankot attack in 2016, the Doval-Janjua backchannel worked to ease tensions and facilitate the visit of a Pakistani investigative team to the scene of the terrorist attack. After Kulbhushan Jadhav's arrest, the channel worked until the MEA confirmed publicly in January 2018 that the two officials had met in Bangkok on December 26, the day after Mr. Jadhav's family was allowed to meet him in Islamabad. "Terror and talks cannot go together but talks on terror can definitely go ahead," the MEA spokesperson had explained.

Also read | [Doval-Bajwa a good combination to oversee backchannel dialogue, says former special envoy to PM](#)

In 2016, six former Pakistani High Commissioners also travelled to Delhi for a Track-II consultation with nine former Indian High Commissioners, where they met NSA Doval and senior MEA officials, indicating that the present dispensation is not averse to learning from the successes and failures of past channels.

As a result, the latest revelations of a backchannel being in place since 2020 should not be received with much surprise and comes with several instructional messages. To begin with, what appears to be clear is that while friendship and trust between inimical neighbours with a bitter history, such as what India and Pakistan share, may seem impossible, engagement is inevitable.

Second, domestic constraints and challenges on other fronts often put the spotlight back on the need for a workable peace on the India-Pakistan front. Pakistan's dire economic condition and the mounting pressure from the Financial Action Task Force to shut down all terrorist safe

havens or face severe sanctions is clearly one imperative for Islamabad's willingness to engage via the backchannel even after India's decision on Jammu and Kashmir.

Also read | [UAE brokered India-Pakistan détente, says report](#)

For India, the stand-off with the People's Liberation Army at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh has made the possibility of a two-front war more real, and fuels the push to reduce tensions with Pakistan. For both Delhi and Islamabad, it is important to be mature parties in the regional engagement with Afghanistan as well, by not providing a conflagration at their boundaries. These reasons take precedence for the moment in the absence of a terror attack in India traceable to Pakistan.

Finally, the existence of a backchannel at this time, which would not be possible without support right from the top, could answer the question posed by [former Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri](#), who, in his memoir titled *Neither a Hawk Nor a Dove*, wrote that every leader he had ever interacted with had said privately, "Let's make history!" And he asked, "How could Prime Minister Modi, with a sense of destiny about himself,... be an exception to that?"

[suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in](mailto:suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in)

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