

BUNGLING DIPLOMACY

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In 48 hours, what was a promising start ended in abject failure. Pakistan Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#)'s ill-tempered response to New Delhi calling off the meeting between External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi further vitiated an already hostile atmosphere. His tweet about "small men occupying big offices", who don't have "the vision" to see the "larger picture" was far removed from the measured letter Khan had sent Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) last Thursday, appealing for "constructive engagement" between the two countries. Now both sides are back to their corners, and it will take much political will and leadership to find a meeting point.

Indian diplomacy, and the country's decision makers have not come out well from this episode either. In his letter to Prime Minister Modi, Khan had suggested the bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the upcoming UN General Assembly session in New York as a first step to build on the "mutual desire for peace between our two countries". India did well to accept the invitation, but its about turn on the talks show Indian diplomacy, and the country's decision makers, in poor light. The reasons cited by MEA for calling off the meeting already existed when the government agreed to Pakistan prime minister's request. Pakistan had issued postage stamps honouring Hizbul Mujahideen's Burhan Wani and Kashmir pellet victims in July this year; the mutilated body of the Border Security Force jawan was found on September 19; and the abduction and killing of three policemen in Jammu & Kashmir on September 21 was of a pattern with similar incidents earlier. The MEA statement, with pejorative references to Khan was pure political rhetoric. It was not as if Khan was hiding his "true face" behind a veil all this time. That he and the Pakistan Army are not hostile to each other is well-known. Presenting this as a new disclosure, and a reason for not engaging with him, is pointless and self-defeating.

When Nawaz Sharif was the prime minister, it was fashionable to ask what the point was of talking to the civilians in Pakistan when it is the boots that make the decisions. Now that the military seems to be backing the civilians, the same people ask what is the point of talking to an elected leader in Pakistan who speaks the same language as the boots. Such dissembling will continue. Still, adults on both sides know that talk the two sides must, and they will need to, if not now, at some point, irrespective of who is in office on this side or that. Given this, it is best that both India and Pakistan now take a step back, and desist from statement-mongering that makes it more and more difficult for their respective leaderships to climb down from high rhetoric to the hard work of repairing the relationship.

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