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## Setback to India's Pak Policy and the China Factor

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By Bhaskar Roy

Pakistan's High Commissioner to India, Abdul Basit practically scuttled the progress of the bilateral peace process when he indicated (April 07) in New Delhi that the talks between India and Pakistan was suspended, and there was no reciprocal visit on agenda by an Indian investigation team to Pakistan.

A Pakistani Joint Intelligence Team (JIT) visited the Pathankot airbase in India which was attacked by Pakistan based terrorists. The Indian foreign office spokesman immediately responded, saying that on March 26 India had conveyed to Pakistan "reciprocity" through a Note Verbale.

Abdul Basit was speaking for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, for the Pakistani army and the Inter-services Intelligence (ISI). The army's hold on Pakistan's foreign policy is well known. It does not give an inch to policies regarding India, Afghanistan, the USA and terrorist assets.

Although a severe critic of Pakistan when he was in the opposition, Narendra Modi changed his track after becoming Prime Minister of India. He invited Nawaz Sharif for his inauguration, walked up to greet Sharif in Paris and dropped in on Sharif on December 25, 2015 without any previous announcement, drawing all round criticism from political opponents and foreign policy commentators in India. Despite the attack on the Pathankot airbase, within a week of his Christmas day visit, by Pakistan based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) allegedly under the guidance of the ISI, Modi persevered with a friendly policy towards Pakistan. A man with a strong mind and will, Modi ignored domestic criticism.

Prime Minister Modi invested significant political capital in trying to resolve issues with Pakistan. He is well aware that Pakistan is a

significant issue in Indian domestic politics, but took the risk.

Things appeared to look up when Pakistan agreed to send a JIT to India which was interpreted by Modi's party, the BJP, that the political investments were beginning to pay. Even if Nawaz Sharif had any intention to bring the Pathankot attackers to book and win some points from the international community on his efforts to counter terrorists, this was not to be.

Nawaz Sharif pulled out the Nuclear Security Summit in the USA at the last moment ostensibly because of a terrorist attack on a Christian gathering on Easter Sunday in Lahore where a suicide bomber blew himself up in a park where Christian groups had gathered. He was expected to meet Modi, and discuss how to take the peace process further.

Then there was the arrest of a retired Indian naval officer, Kulbhushan Jadav by the ISI. The Pakistani authorities claimed they had apprehended Yadav with incriminating documents and a brief case full of currency. Yadav was charged with the crime of attempting to destroy the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). A thoroughly amateurish video was shown of Yadav's interrogation.

The story spun was equally amateurish and even surpasses James Bond fantasies. If India had to fund saboteurs in Pakistan there are much better ways to do it. Third country money transfers is one way. Sending a middle aged retired naval officer with a bag full of money and incriminating documents into a target country is certainly not the way. The Indian High Commission in Islamabad has not been given consular access to Yadav, which would bring out the true story. A former German Ambassador to Pakistan has said Yadav was abducted by the Taliban from outside Pakistan and "sold" to the ISI. The Pakistani story has not found any takers in the international community.

With the Kulbhushan Yadav act, the Pakistani Army-intelligence complex tried to draw an India-Pakistan equivalence on terrorism, because the story has no legs to stand on. The story seems to have vanished from the Pakistani media. If Yadav was really a spy, the Pakistanis would have extracted all information about his contacts and mopped them up by now, larded them in front of the media and splashed a more credible story.

Pakistan's deep state has been trying to shift from terrorism and bring the focus back on Kashmir.

Pakistan's steadfast friend, China, has also contributed in keeping Rawalpindi's terrorist assets safe and secure. For a second time with a year China stopped the UN Security Council Committee on terrorism from designating Masood Azar as a terrorist. China's position is that it is against all forms of terrorism and is involved in international cooperation against terrorism. But in Azar's case it used a technical hold because of insufficient evidence. China should have noted that three of the five member security council, the US, UK and France had moved the resolution against Azar.

China has ensured that its Muslim Uighur separatists no longer enjoy sanctuary in Pakistan. But in the case of Masood Azar and other anti-

India terrorists, patronized by the Pak army, these groups indirectly serve China's interest, to keep India troubled. When India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval visits China this week or the next, he would be taking this issue up with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi.

Are there differences brewing within Pakistan on India? Abdul Basit's loaded statements in New Delhi were not endorsed by the Pakistani foreign ministry spokesperson. Most Pakistani newspapers like the *Dawn* and *Tribune* ignored leaks reported by *Pakistan Today* alleging that the JIT did not get full access to witnesses and areas in Pathankot. Previously, retired Pakistani diplomats, retired officials of other branch of the government, and media commentators were on the same page as the army. This appears to be changing. Of course, most retired military officers who come on Indian television debates hold on to the old line. They have a compulsion.

With Pakistan's army Chief Gen, Raheel Sharif slated to retire in about three months without seeking an extension, the scenario will be interesting. At end of the term Gen. Sharif appears to have been somewhat different from his hard-line predecessor Gen. Kayani. He was reported to have remarked that even if he wanted to change to Kashmir policy, his corps commanders would not agree. Gen. Sharif's successor and those army officers who would replace retiring Corps commanders would determine the direction of the army's foreign policy, especially with India and Afghanistan. The Pak army generally has a vested interest in keeping India as the main enemy.

There are hardliners on both sides of the border who have not been able to transit from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the anti-India indoctrination of common people in Pakistan fronted by the religious leaders and terrorist organisations, can only influence Indian hardliners and the right wing faction. Modi can leash in the BJP hardliners and their RSS supporters. And he has done so in his Pakistan policy. Can Nawaz Sharif do it? He has strong connections with the religious fringe in Pakistan. The ISI has egg on its face now. Can it be restrained?

There are many questions. The road ahead is arduous. Talks must go on through back channels and officially, but saboteurs must be exposed.

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