

Sushma, Qureshi to meet in US for Saarc lunch but no formal talks yet

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NEWDELHI: External affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and her Pakistani counterpart Shah Mehmood Qureshi are expected to attend the Saarc foreign ministers' lunch on September 27 in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in what will be the first political contact between two countries after the Imran Khan-led PTI government came to power, two persons familiar with the matter said, asking not to be identified.

Both sides said there is no proposal yet from the other side for a formal meeting between the two leaders.

Swaraj and Qureshi are leading the delegations of their respective countries to the 73rd

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session of the UNGA that begins on September 18.

Swaraj will address the UNGA on September 29. "There is a lunch planned for the Saarc (South Asian Association of Regional Countries) foreign ministers on September 27", said one of the two people, a senior official in Delhi.

"There is no proposal yet for any formal talks. We expect Paki-

stan to move on addressing our concerns of terrorism," added this person. "They should at least show keenness on bringing to justice those who were behind the Mumbai terrorist attack," said the second official.

The Mumbai terrorist attack masterminded by terrorists based in Pakistan killed 166 people in 2008.

Still, analysts say that the lunch would provide at least a photo-op, and perhaps the exchange of pleasantries even if a meeting or a so-called pull-aside did not materialise between the two foreign ministers.

"If there is an opening, we must use it for at least an exchange views.

But I remain skeptical about the two sides initiating a formal dialogue at this stage", former foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh

said. He pointed out that there is little that has changed on the ground and the Pakistan's India policy along with few other issues remain under the control of the country's army.

"I think nothing has changed on the ground. Also don't forget India is heading for an election soon. So any move that is laden with political risk is something the Indian government will be averse to take in an election year," he explained.

The issue of terrorism came in the way of Pakistan holding the Saarc summit in 2016. Bhutan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India walked out on the summit citing the atmosphere was not conducive for the summit of the South Asian grouping.

Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan are the other members of Saarc.