

# After Imran letter to PM, Foreign Ministers to meet in New York next

## MEA plays it down: Only a meeting, not talks or resumption of talks

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THE MODI government on Thursday said that Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan's newly elected government will meet in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly next week. The last formal engagement between the Foreign Ministers took place in December 2015 in Islamabad, which was followed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sudden visit to Lahore.

This meeting between External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in New York has been scheduled after Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Imran Khan proposed a meeting between the two ministers in a letter to Prime Minister Modi.

"I can confirm that on the request of the Pakistani side, a meeting between EAM and Pakistani foreign minister will take place on the sidelines of UNGA at a mutually convenient date and time," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) official spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said Thursday.

This will be the first ministerial-level engagement with Pakistan under the new Imran Khan-led government.

An informal meeting of

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By UNNY



SAARC foreign ministers will take place in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA session. It is expected to take place around September 26-27. Swaraj and Qureshi will head the delegations of their respective countries to the UNGA.

However, Kumar said the meeting doesn't signal a resumption of the bilateral dialogue. "This is just a meeting, not talks or resumption of dialogue... I want you to distinguish between a meeting and a dialogue," he said.

"*Is mulaqat ko sirf mulaqat ke tarah hi dekhiye* (See this meeting as just a meeting)", he told reporters.

Sources in New Delhi played down the meeting as the government is going to face general elections next year.

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## After Imran's letter

Swaraj and then Pakistan Foreign minister Sartaj Aziz had decided to resume the comprehensive bilateral dialogue process in December 2015, which was interrupted in January 2016 after the Pathankot terror attack.

The relationship, which had seen some bright prospects after Modi's visit to Lahore to wish then Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, nosedived after the Pathankot attack. And, while back-channel communication between National Security Advisors Ajit K Doval and Nasser Khan Janjua continued, the capture and subsequent death sentence of former Navy officer Kulbhushan Jadhav in March-April 2016 marred ties.

The chill deepened with Uri terror attack in September 2016 and retaliatory surgical strikes in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir by the Indian armed forces.

The MEA spokesperson remained firm on the issue of terrorism and said that "there is no change in India's stance" - responding to whether there is a shift in the position that

"talks and terror can't go together". He said that the agenda for discussions is yet to be decided.

However, the window of opportunity for a meeting has been created by Pakistan's PM's letter, where he says, "Pakistan remains ready to discuss terrorism".

In a letter to Modi, Khan has said the only way forward for the two countries is through "constructive engagement".

"Pakistan and India have an undeniably challenging relationship. We, however, owe it to our people, especially the future generations, to peacefully resolve all outstanding issues, including the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, to bridge differences and achieve a mutually beneficial outcome," said his letter dated September 14.

While the MEA spokesperson said that issues to be discussed are yet to be decided, he did confirm that the issue of Kartarpur corridor will be raised by Swaraj.

"Even now after so many years, we don't have any official communication from the Pakistani government that they are willing to consider this matter. The External Affairs

Minister will, therefore, raise this issue in her meeting with the Pakistan Foreign Minister," Kumar said.

It has been India's long-standing demand to allow pilgrims enter Pakistan and visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib at Kartarpur in Pakistan's Narowal district. The gurdwara is built at the resting place of Guru Nanak. The issue gained prominence recently after Punjab minister Navjot Singh Sidhu claimed he was told by Pakistan Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa that Islamabad would grant access to the gurdwara on the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 2019.

The government also said that Swaraj will participate in the SAARC foreign ministers' meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA. The first day of the high-level UNGA debate will begin on September 25 and will last for nine working days.

Whether there is a possibility of a SAARC summit, the MEA spokesperson made it clear that the atmosphere is not conducive, echoing India's position since the SAARC summit was cancelled in September 2016, after the Uri attack.