

sundaysentiments

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WHY WERE THE INDO-PAK TALKS CALLED OFF?

There's no doubt India-Pakistan relations are accident-prone and when they go into a tailspin, they usually raise disturbing questions rather than provide meaningful answers. Yet, even by these standards, what happened last week defies belief. The government has a lot of explaining to do. But will it? Or will we be left befuddled?

To begin with, why at this time did the government agree to a meeting in New York between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers? The announcement came two days after the brutal killing of a BSF jawan, who was found with his throat slit. It also followed the announcement that September 29 would be observed as Surgical Strike Day. And let's not forget the steadily worsening cycle of violence in Kashmir, for which Pakistan-supported terrorist groups are responsible. So was this the right moment to schedule

a meeting of foreign ministers?

Second, the claim that this was just a meeting but not a dialogue is hair-splitting. Undoubtedly, the two ministers would have discussed terror, and that includes the situation in Kashmir. The MEA also confirmed that access to the Kartarpur Gurudwara would be raised. Would this not have been substantive talks? And doesn't that amount to a dialogue?

Yet, 24 hours after agreeing to a meeting, the Indian government called off the talks. The two reasons it gave are far from convincing. They only raise further questions.

First, it cited the killing of three special police officers at Shopian. However, as this newspaper has reported, already this year 37 Kashmiri policemen have fallen to militant bullets while 13 BSF jawans have been killed along the Line of Control or international border. If the earlier 50 deaths



■ The beating retreat ceremony at Wagah Border, Punjab

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did not preclude a meeting it's strange that three more should have scuppered it.

The government's second reason for calling off the talks is even more bizarre. It's the stamps issued by the Pakistani postal service which glorify Kashmiri terrorists, in particular, Burhan Wani. Whilst, no doubt, the stamps are offensive and provocative, they were issued in July and before the elections that brought the Imran Khan government to power. It hardly

makes sense to cite them two months later. That suggests the government was earlier unaware of them which, if true, would be perplexing.

Finally, the statement calling off the talks seems to deliberately break with the careful tone and moderate language India has used in the past. Instead, it spoke of Pakistan's "evil agenda" and the "true face of the new Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan". No doubt Mr Khan was equally intemperate and personal in his response, but India's former high commissioners to Pakistan have not withheld their criticism of the Indian statement.

So what exactly happened? Indeed, will we ever be told? This time, at least, our newspapers and television channels have raised the right questions but the government has retreated behind a wall of silence. Beyond the external affairs ministry spokesperson, no one has thought it fit to explain anything.

To say the least, this is strange behaviour in a democracy. Meanwhile, Pakistan has been left to look like the aggrieved party or, at least, the one interested in taking the first step to improve relations. What a strange, if not inexplicable, turn of events.

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The views expressed are personal*