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## US orchestrates Pakistan-India talks

By Syed Saleem Shahzad  
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NEW YORK - The foreign ministers of Pakistan and India, meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York at the weekend, did not agree on the resumption of formal talks between the countries.

However, their meeting - the first high-level contact between the countries since July - sets the stage for Washington-mediated backchannel talks for which Pakistan has already appointed a senior envoy, Riaz Mohammad Khan.

The central issues in this dialogue will be the regional "war on terror" and the establishment of a "fair bargain" between India and Pakistan over their respective interests in Afghanistan.

Indian External Affairs Minister S M Krishna and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi met for over 100 minutes, while their foreign secretaries had met earlier for even longer. The [countries](#) - which have fought several wars and which still differ over divided Kashmir - revived a peace initiative in 2004, but it stalled after Pakistan-based militants carried out a deadly raid on the [Indian](#) city of Mumbai in November last year.

Speaking after the meeting, Krishna said he rejected a Pakistani proposal to conduct informal talks while they waited for official dialogue to begin. Qureshi described the talks as "frank, positive and honest", saying he had not "minced any words" and that "[negotiations](#) are the only way for peaceful resolution of [outstanding] issues between the two countries".

Qureshi continued, "Now the situation in Pakistan is ... against the militants and in favor of peace and dialogue with India. We expect our Indian counterparts to take advantage of this situation and they should also mold public opinion in favor of dialogue."

Despite Krishna ruling out informal talks, the intervention of Washington is making this

happen, with Pakistan already assigning Khan as a special envoy. He is a former foreign secretary and a current Pakistan Scholar of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington.

Asia Times Online has learned that American officials will directly mediate and oversee the process of backchannel negotiations.

Like the billions of dollars annually the United States is giving to Pakistan in non-military and military aid and loans, the negotiations are primarily meant to provide support in the fight against terror.

In a recent report by General Stanley A McChrystal, parts of which were leaked to the press, the top US commander in [Afghanistan](#) said that India's political and economic influence in Afghanistan was increasing, including significant [development projects](#) and financial [investment](#).

The report said the Afghan government was perceived by Islamabad to be pro-Indian. "While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani counter-measures in Afghanistan or India."

A diplomat involved in the backchannel negotiations told Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity, "The US mediation is aimed to settle Pakistan grievances over Indian interests in Afghanistan so that both countries can work together for the mutual cause of defeating terrorism in the region."

The groundwork is already being laid for the talks, which will include scholars, journalists and academics from Pakistan, India and the US to support diplomats from those countries, as well as from Afghanistan.

The initial model for reconciliation between India and Pakistan has been drawn from that of post-World War II United States and Soviet relations, in which those two countries agreed not to meddle in Finland and Yugoslavia.

Under a similar model, India would reduce its presence in the southern Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan. In return, India could consolidate its activities around Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of the northern province of Balkh, where Pakistan would not interfere.

However, in this process, which is expected to begin after Afghan President Hamid Karzai is confirmed for a second term in the coming months, the problem remains the Taliban.

Players involved in the backchannel process told Asia Times Online that if the US withdrew from Afghanistan and handed over power to the Taliban, regional politics would return to square one. The old alliance of Russia, Tajikistan, Iran and India would form against Pakistan and its Taliban allies, and the elimination of militancy in areas like Kashmir would remain a dream.

"This is the big challenge in the backchannel talks, to find a force in the Pashtun regions of Afghanistan that would be acceptable to the Western powers, as well as to forces like India, Russia and Pakistan," said a diplomatic source.

The administration of US President [Barack Obama](#) places much stock in Pakistan's undivided support in the battle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. By facilitating better relations between Islamabad and Delhi, it is helping make this happen.