

Here's How a "Slip of the Tongue" Strengthened Russian-Pakistani Relations

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Global Research, February 01, 2019

Region: [Asia, Russia and FSU](#)

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A faux pas, especially when committed in the realm of international diplomacy and erroneously implying that a country's new partner supports terrorism, usually has the effect of weakening bilateral relations between those two states, but a Russian official's "slip of the tongue" paradoxically strengthened relations with Pakistan after Islamabad displayed political maturity by not overreacting and instead patiently waiting for an official clarification.

Something very confusing happened earlier this week when RIA Novosti reported (in the [original Russian](#) then [republished in English](#) by Sputnik) the words of Deputy Interior Minister Igor Zubov, who claimed that "Daesh fighters in massive quantities were transported from Pakistani territory to the border with Tajikistan". This was such an unexpected statement because Russia and Pakistan have carried out joint anti-terrorist drills on one another's territory and are closely cooperating in the context of the Moscow peace process for Afghanistan. Worse still, this claim was made [on the same day](#) that Russia's Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov arrived in Islamabad on an unannounced visit to [discuss the latest events](#) in the war-torn country in light of the news that the US might reach a deal with the Taliban to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2020.

Mr. Zubov's words could have therefore ruined the occasion if an influential figure in Pakistan would have overreacted to them, but to the South Asian state's supreme credit, its representatives displayed political maturity by patiently waiting for an official clarification from Russia before issuing a response. Had any other country implied that the Pakistani state supports Daesh – and worse still, in a possible operation to provoke a security crisis along the borders of Russia's CSTO ally – there would have surely been an immediate response from the highest levels of the state, but the very fact that one wasn't forthcoming in this instance speaks to the very deep trust that was recently developed between Islamabad and Moscow over the past few years which gave Pakistan's representatives a reason to wait and officially find out what Mr. Zubov's remark was really all about.

They didn't have to wait long, however, since a journalist from RIA Novosti and another one from Pakistani media asked Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova to comment on Mr. Zubov's report. What follows are brief excerpts of these journalists' [relevant interactions](#) with the spokeswoman:

"RIA Novosti: Good afternoon, RIA Novosti, and the question is the following about the comment of Vice-Minister Zubov on the helicopters carrying ISIS combatants to the border of Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Mrs. Zakharova: We saw those statements, those quotes. I think they're just a slip of the tongue because the ISIS combatants are being carried to the borderline between Afghanistan and Tajikistan from the Afghan territory, and we cooperate closely with Pakistan in fighting terrorism as well as on the Afghan agenda, and we share common concerns regarding ISIS gaining momentum on the territory there and the extent and full expansion of that terrorist group."

[Pak-Rus Media](#): The Pakistani media. I would like to specify a few points. During your briefings, you said that NATO is responsible for the airspace over Afghanistan. Are those helicopters indeed there, and who's responsible for those helicopters, and who's deployed in Afghanistan?

Mrs. Zakharova: Who for many years has been carrying out its military operation in accordance with the UN mandate and at the same time they do not report to the UN Security Council, those people are responsible. There are certain movements taking place and we've talked about them and we understand that there's a link to militants and nobody is saying what this helicopter is for, why is it unmarked, this again is a fact, but this is not a question to pose to Russia.

It can be seen from the above that Mrs. Zakharova attributed Mr. Zubov's remark about Pakistan to a "slip of the tongue" and emphasized that the unmarked helicopter originated on Afghan territory, which therefore makes it the full responsibility of the collection of countries that control Afghanistan's airspace.

Not only did Pakistan have nothing to do with this terrorist operation, but she also proudly reaffirmed that "we cooperate closely with Pakistan in fighting terrorism as well as on the Afghan agenda, and we share common concerns regarding the ISIS gaining momentum on the territory there and the extent and full expansion of that terrorist group." As such, instead of this faux pas worsening relations between these two new partners, it actually resulted in strengthening them after Pakistan's political maturity impressed the Russians and proved each party's deep trust in one another.

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This article was originally published on [Eurasia Future](#).

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