Narendra Modi’s Kashmir Gambit: A Mistake or a New Beginning?

By Rupakjyoti Borah

Modi’s move to end the special status of Jammu and Kashmir has both domestic and international implications, but ultimately it ends an unequal situation and represents a new beginning for the residents of the former state and also for the rest of the country.

By Kaswar Klasra

The Indian prime minister’s controversial policies, including breaking Jammu and Kashmir into two areas without notice, are pushing South Asia to the brink of war, a particularly frightening prospect given that both countries possess nuclear weapons.
ON AUG. 5, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a landmark move to end the special powers enjoyed by the state of Jammu and Kashmir under Articles 370 and 35(A) of the Indian Constitution. Under Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir had its own constitution, flag and complete autonomy in local administration, with only defense, foreign policy and communications under the central government. In addition, under Article 35A, non-permanent residents of Jammu and Kashmir were not allowed to buy or own land in the state. All this is now history with the move by the Modi government, which has both domestic and international implications.

DOMESTIC REPERCUSSIONS
Abrogating Jammu and Kashmir’s special status had long been on the agenda of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has always vouched for “one country, one constitution.” One of the factors that may have pushed Modi’s hand was that US President Donald Trump was negotiating a hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan. If it had gone through as planned (the talks have been abandoned), Pakistan could have pushed Taliban terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir. In 1999, an Indian aircraft was hijacked to Kandahar in Afghanistan, and India had to release three terrorists in exchange for the hostages. Among the four security personnel from different parts of the country were killed in a suicide attack.

EXTERNAL RAMIFICATIONS
Pakistan has already upped the diplomatic ante in reaction to Modi’s move, though without much success. Trump had initially said he was “ready to assist” India and Pakistan over the Kashmir issue “if both sides ask for it,” but later backtracked after his meeting with Modi on the sidelines of the G7 Summit in Biarritz, France.

Russia has come out strongly in support of India. This has put Pakistan in a spot, because Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has gone public as the “self-styled spokesperson” for Kashmir. All this while, Pakistan has tried to push under the carpet its own human rights violations in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Initially, Beijing also raised some objections to Modi’s move, but was assured by New Delhi that this will not impact the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India. Meanwhile, as Trump has raised the pressure on Beijing on the trade front, it would be in no mood to engage in another round of tensions with India. Modi has made it clear that Kashmir is a domestic issue and there is absolutely no room for involvement by any foreign powers.

It is not as if Modi has not tried to improve ties with Pakistan. He invited neighboring heads of state to his inauguration in May 2014 and the then-prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, attended. In addition, Modi dropped in impromptu at the wedding of Sharif’s granddaughter. It is not as if Modi has not tried to improve ties with Pakistan. He invited the heads of state of all the neighboring South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to his inauguration (for his first term) in May 2014 and the then-prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, attended. In addition, Modi had dropped in impromptu at the wedding of Sharif’s granddaughter on his way back from Afghanistan in December 2015. However, soon after that, there was an audacious attack on the Pathankot air base in India by Pakistan-based terrorists.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?
Already, there is talk of holding an investment summit later in the year in Kashmir, while prominent Indian industrial groups have been asked to set up shop in the state. This will also help in weaning young boys away from militancy, because a lack of jobs has been one of the main factors leading some youth to join the ranks of militant organizations.

The Modi government has a huge majority in the lower house of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, and by also being able to pass the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019 successfully through the Rajya Sabha, or upper house, it has clearly shown that it has the political muscle and acumen to pass such tough measures. The former state of Jammu and Kashmir will now be reorganized into two “union territories,” Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh as of Oct. 31 this year. The creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh was a long-standing demand of the people of Ladakh, who have long felt neglected.

In late July, the Union Cabinet approved a bill to provide reservations to economically-weaker sections of Jammu and Kashmir in terms of government jobs and seats in educational institutions. The government also has plans to make Jammu and Kashmir world-class tourist destinations. Clearly, this is a new beginning for the residents of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir and also for the rest of the country.

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Thanks to Modi, a New Beginning in Kashmir
By Rupakjyoti Borah

The Debate: Borah

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