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.

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.

By Kaswar Klasra
The Debate: Klasra

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THE PROSPECT OF armed conflict between Pakistan and India is once again looming over South Asia thanks to Narendra Modi, India’s powerful prime minister, whose controversial policies are pushing the region to the brink of war, a particularly frightening prospect given that both countries possess nuclear weapons.

The latest outbreak of tensions began on a bright Monday morning on Aug. 5, when an over-confident Modi surprised the region — and the world — by declaring that Indian-held Kashmir would no longer enjoy its special status. The move sent shock waves among millions of Kashmiris, who took to roads and streets in anger to protest the decision.

Unleashing a crackdown on innocent Kashmiris, the Indian government imposed a curfew on the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir, and suspended all means of communication, including the internet and cellular networks. The curfew remained in effect as this issue of Global Asia was going to press, with normal life in the state effectively paralyzed.

REMEMBERING PARTITION

Kashmir is the worst legacy of the fratricidal partition of the subcontinent in 1947. It was one of the hundreds of princely states in the subcontinent at the time that were supposed to join either India or Pakistan. Contrary to the wishes of the Muslim majority of Kashmir, its Hindu ruler cast his lot with India after tribal fighters from Pakistan attempted to overthrow him.

Since then, Kashmir has been a bone of contention between Pakistan and India. The two nations have fought three wars over the overwhelmingly Muslim territory. India controls 55 percent of the disputed territory of Kashmir, including the Kashmir Valley. Pakistan holds 30 percent while China controls 15 percent, including a part ceded to it by Pakistan.

It’s worth noting that generations of Pakistanis have grown up regarding Kashmir as unfinished business and an integral part of partition. Interestingly, Pakistan itself is an acronym in which the K stands for Kashmir (the full acronym combined the Muslim territories of Northern India in the 1930s: Punjabi, Afghani, Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Balochistan.)

As expected, Pakistan reacted sharply to Modi’s move to revoke the special status of Indian-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan’s parliament termed India’s move “illegal and unilateral” and asked the international community to take note of it.

Following an order from Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, the country’s armed forces have been put on alert as the dark clouds of another war between two underdeveloped nuclear-armed South Asian rivals gather over the horizon.

The revocation of Article 370 and 35a in the Indian Constitution, the formal act taken by Modi, was a move long contemplated as a step towards Modi’s vision of a Greater India. “He planned it well and executed it with alacrity,” Wajid Shamsul Hasan, Pakistan’s former High Commissioner to Great Britain, told Global Asia. “His whole agenda for the last elections was based on the execution of his plan. Unfortunately, Pakistan under Khan and his powerful army chief had no vision. Both lived in with a fool’s illusion that though Modi was a hawk, yet he was the leader India had that they could do business with.” Wajid said he believes the country was let down by its intelligence apparatus in providing its civil and military leadership with the right information on Modi’s well-calculated machinations.

Jammu and Kashmir is most important for India for two reasons. First, it’s a flashpoint for the world’s most dangerous nuclear rivalry, that between Pakistan and India. Bomb blasts and terrorist attacks there have repeatedly brought India and Pakistan to the edge of another war. Second, it’s also the only Muslim-majority state within Hindu-majority India. How India treats it can be regarded as an essential test of India’s diversity and tolerance.

Given all these circumstances, here comes the million-dollar question: Is Modi’s gambit in Kashmir a mistake? It is. Modi’s game in Jammu and Kashmir is costing India heavily. Without taking the people of Jammu and Kashmir into his confidence, India revoked Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which granted Kashmir a degree of autonomy, without warning, breaking up the state into two union territories.

DANGEROUS GAME

As expected, Kashmiris reacted angrily to the move. Indian law enforcement agencies resorted to violence, placing hundreds of local leaders under house arrest. Tourists have been evacuated. A curfew has been imposed, while communications links were cut. The parliamentary maneuvers the government used to ram through its decision were so dubious that they’ve already
landed before the Supreme Court. All of this shows that India has badly failed in its test of diversity and tolerance.

Secondly, changing Kashmir's status has escalated tensions between two arch rivals. It has further empowered the Pakistani military, which has been calling the shots more aggressively since Modi's decision.

Modi's mistake in revoking Article 370 has brought South Asia to the brink of a dangerous war. Pakistan's prime minister has made his position quite clear. “We don't want war with India. But, [we are] ready to fight if war is imposed on us,” Khan said last week, adding that a war could go nuclear.

Pakistan has already downgraded diplomatic relations with India, ended bilateral trade and suspended a train service between the two countries. Khan also announced that he would take his case to the United Nations in September. He has already appealed to US President Donald Trump to mediate.

Last month, at a media appearance with the visiting Khan, Trump offered to mediate the dispute, which New Delhi promptly rejected, arguing it’s contrary to India's policy of treating Kashmir as a bilateral dispute with Pakistan.

With a deteriorating economy that is in the midst of an International Monetary Fund bailout — the 13th in three decades — Pakistan is trying hard to avoid tensions with India over Kashmir. High inflation and unemployment, as well as corruption, are some of the factors prompting Khan and the powerful Pakistani army to show restraint. For decades, Pakistan has been trying to internationalize the Kashmir dispute. Poor lobbying by Pakistan's diplomats and strong Indian lobbying at the international level has been a hurdle in this regard.

Modi's Kashmir gambit has highlighted the issue of Kashmir globally, even drawing in the US president. The situation is not good for India, and not good for its US$2.7 trillion economy, more than eight times larger than Pakistan's.

Prem Shankar Jha, a noted Indian economist and journalist, believes Modi has put India's future at risk over Kashmir. “So great was the Kashmiris' trust in India's secularism that their faith in it was not shaken even by 20 years of Indian mistrust, and military rule,” he said. “As a result, a 2009 survey of public opinion in the Kashmir Valley, conducted by the London-based Royal Institute for International Affairs, found that even in the four worst-affected districts of the Valley, only 2.5-7.5 percent of Kashmiris said they would like to belong to Pakistan. By definition, this meant that the vast majority who wanted azadi (“independence”) did not want it at the cost of cutting their economic, educational and medical ties with India,” Prem wrote in one of his columns recently.

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