

Article 370: A Chinese Perspective

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Summary

Beginning 5 August 2019, India's parliament passed a bill proposing the state of Jammu and Kashmir – which includes the Kashmir Valley and the Ladakh area – be split into two federal territories. Jammu and Kashmir will have a state legislature, and Ladakh – which includes Aksai Chin, a Chinese-claimed and disputed territory – will be ruled directly by New Delhi.

China's Reaction

Given the events surrounding Article 370 in India, it took quite a while before China released its official position on the development. On 6 August 2019, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson addressed the issue separately and called India's move to abolish Kashmir's special status as "not acceptable". He added that it was not binding, following condemnation from Pakistan.

"We urge India to be cautious in its words and deeds on the border issue, strictly abide by the relevant agreements reached between the two sides, and avoid taking actions that further complicate the border issue," said a statement published on the Chinese foreign ministry's website, referring to protracted negotiations between the two sides on the disputed border.

"China has always opposed India's inclusion of Chinese territory in India's administrative jurisdiction in the western part of the Sino-Indian border. This position is firm, consistent and has never changed," the statement added, in reference to the area in Ladakh that New Delhi claims but is controlled by Beijing.

"In recent days, the Indian side has continued to undermine China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally amending its domestic laws. This practice is unacceptable and will not produce any effect," the statement said.

When asking about the recent crossfire and shelling of each other near the Line of Actual Control in Jammu Kashmir, and India's movement of sending a large number of additional paramilitary troops to India-controlled Kashmir and intensified security measures, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said: "China is seriously concerned about the current situation in Kashmir. China's position on the Kashmir issue is clear and consistent. This issue is a legacy of history between India and Pakistan, which is also the consensus of the international community."

She added: "The parties concerned should exercise restraint and act with caution, especially to avoid actions that unilaterally change the status quo and exacerbate the tension. We call

on the two sides to peacefully resolve relevant disputes through dialogue and consultation and safeguard regional peace and stability.”

Bilateral Territorial Disputes

Territorial disputes have been a critical part of China-India relations. Periodically in history, it has cast a shadow over the important bilateral relationship. The latest eruption was the tense stand-off two years ago at the Doklam plateau. Since then, Beijing and New Delhi have made great efforts to repair their relations and achieved a lot of progress.

The China-India territorial disputes mainly lie on the western section and eastern section of the 3,500 km long Himalayan border. In the west, [Ladakh is an arid, mountainous area of around 59,146 square kilometers \(22,836 square miles\)](#). Much of it is uninhabitable, which only has 274,000 residents. The rest of Jammu and Kashmir is roughly 163,090 square kilometers (62,969 square miles) with a population of some 12.2 million. Aksai Chin, a territory in Ladakh, is one of the disputed borders on the western section. India claims parts of Aksai Chin – which is administered by China’s Xinjiang autonomous region.

This time the Chinese opposition against the Indian movement is unlikely to escalate to another Doklam-type standoff. According to most analysts, China’s reaction is quite restrained and prudent, which is not surprising. China firmly and equitably defends its sovereignty and territorial integrity, but at the same time plays a responsible role to urge India and Pakistan to keep self-restraint, not to escalate tensions and get back to the negotiating table as soon as possible.

What China worries about most is that the situation in Kashmir will become more complicated and uncontrollable in the future. The India-Pakistan relationship may slip to the brink of conflict and even war. One reason behind New Delhi’s decision is to divide the two prickly disputes and to aim for settling the Kashmir dispute first and unilaterally. However, in reality, the converse may happen breaking New Delhi’s wishful thinking.

Currently, local political leaders in Jammu and Kashmir are under house arrest to ensure there is no disruption or violence against Delhi’s decision. However, it cannot last long or forever. Winning peoples’ hearts in the region is more difficult and durable and cannot bear temporary measures. With Islamabad unveiling strong countermeasures, the relationship between the two nuclear countries will be at the risk of derailment. The possible catastrophe could easily hinder South Asia from the fast economic development in recent years and jeopardize the promising rise of the subcontinent in the global landscape. More importantly, the state of Jammu and Kashmir comprises three distinct geographical areas with diverse religious communities - Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. New Delhi’s decision could possibly open the Pandora’s Box to usher in a new round of conflict among different religions.

From the Chinese perspective, dialogue is the only way to prevent further conflict and rebuild trust. Over the past decade, China and India have established many channels for dialogue and communication, which have helped stabilize and improve the bilateral relationship, and contribute to the maintenance of peace and tranquility on the border area.

For example, in May 2019, Indian and Chinese armies held functional-level dialogues in the eastern Ladakh sector, which was cordial and productive. At this critical moment, such a gesture of goodwill is sincerely required. Not only should China and India strengthen exchanges and find a way out that both agree on, India and Pakistan as primary parties of the Kashmir issue should also resume dialogue channels to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding and build up trust gradually.

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