

India's Kashmir Strategy under the Afghan Shadow

C. Raja Mohan

India's bold and controversial decision to dispense with the special status enjoyed by Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcate the part of the state under Indian control has been driven by a number of factors, including the ruling BJP's long standing ideological commitment to alter the nature of the relationship between Delhi and Kashmir.

That the BJP has returned to power with a huge mandate has created the basis for pursuing its traditional political goals in Kashmir. Even in the first term, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had demonstrated the political will to stop being defensive about India's persistent challenges in Kashmir. He has now gone for broke in reordering the politics of the province.

One of the more immediate factors, however, is the rapid reorientation of the geopolitics of India's north-western frontiers. The prospect of an early peace settlement in Afghanistan, brokered by Pakistan and a withdrawal of US forces from the country, appears to have lent an urgency to the root and branch overhaul of India's national position on Kashmir.

Contrary to the widespread scepticism about a political breakthrough in the Afghan peace process, there is a new momentum since Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan and army chief, Qamar Jawed Bajwa, travelled to Washington at the end of July and met with US President Donald Trump and his top national security officials.

The Trump-Imran talks appear to have arrived at a broad understanding that the Pakistani army will help extricate the US from its longest war and Washington will reset the relationship with Islamabad that had gone south in recent years. Besides renewed economic cooperation and military assistance, Pakistan pitched for a US mediation on the Kashmir question that Islamabad considers is the core issue in its troubled relationship with India.

In the public appearance with Imran at the White House on 22 July 2019, Trump claimed that Modi had sought US mediation in the conflict with Pakistan and that he is happy to take on that role. India was quick to deny that any such request had been made. Before the political uproar in India could subside, Trump once again affirmed that he is happy to mediate between Modi and Imran if both of them ask for it.

India's concern was less about the danger of a Trump mediation, but the prospect of US relying on Pakistan for an early, safe and honourable exit from Afghanistan where America has been locked in its longest foreign war ever. There is concern in Delhi that this would expand Islamabad's leverage with Washington, lend a significant role for the Taliban in Afghanistan's political future and an opportunity for Pakistan to direct the full force of the extremist organisations based on its soil at Kashmir and India.

In tune with his repeated criticism of America's endless wars, Trump has been eager to pull out most of the US troops currently deployed (around 14,000) before the campaign begins

in earnest for the second presidential term. Reports from the US say that Trump has set a deadline of September 2019 for a broad framework agreement on Afghanistan.

His special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, appears to be making major progress in the talks with the Taliban, especially after Imran's Washington visit. An agreement on a phased withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and assurances from the Taliban that it will not allow international terror groups to operate on Afghan soil. This is expected to be accompanied by the first ever direct talks between the Taliban and the representatives of the Afghan government. These talks are expected to focus on a permanent ceasefire and the future political arrangements in which the Taliban is likely to have a big say.

If all goes well, a big IF indeed, and a peace agreement is ready for signature by September, Trump might be willing to visit Afghanistan to preside over a ceremony that ends nearly two decades of American military role in Afghanistan. Pakistan certainly understands that an Afghan peace deal would be a huge personal and political triumph for President Trump as he approaches his election campaign next year. Pakistan's decisive role in bringing the war to a close is also likely to enhance its standing with other major powers like China and Russia in the region.

The biggest concern for India though is the impact of the tectonic shift in Afghanistan on the nature of extremism and terrorism in the region. Delhi fears the return of the Taliban will embolden the extremist forces in the region. It is also concerned that there might be a repeat of 1989 when the Soviet Union ended its occupation of Afghanistan and Pakistan stepped up the offensive against India in Kashmir. An American withdrawal and a reset in US-Pakistan relations, Delhi worries, might lend renewed impunity to Pakistan in destabilising Kashmir.

Asserting full authority over Jammu and Kashmir by dividing it and bringing it under the direct control of the central government can be seen as a pre-emptive move to foil potential negative consequences from the developments in Afghanistan and US-Pakistan relations.

The success of this historic rupture in India's approach to Kashmir will rest on Delhi's ability to reassure the people of the province that the changes are not directed at undermining their identity. Delhi will also need to demonstrate high levels of diplomatic skill to cope with hostile reaction from Pakistan and the potential criticism from the international community.

.....

C. Raja Mohan is Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, and contributing editor on international affairs for *The Indian Express*. He can be contacted at isascrm@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.