

SHALLOW DRAUGHTS: ON TRUMP'S KASHMIR REMARKS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

In the run-up to the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump, expected on the sidelines of the G7 summit, many in South Block would have hoped that the U.S. President would not make any of his characteristically controversial statements. The two leaders have a full bilateral agenda to discuss, including defence and strategic cooperation, and will need to resolve outstanding trade issues, as well as deal with possible U.S. sanctions on India for an upcoming purchase of the Russian S-400 anti missile systems and the future of Iran sanctions for oil purchases. It is clear that India's concerns over the U.S.-Taliban peace process will also be high on the agenda. However, Mr. Trump has made it clear, in at least three recent statements, that the situation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and resultant tensions between India and Pakistan will claim much of the conversation. For starters, Mr. Trump has repeated, despite several rejections from India, that he would like to "mediate" between the two countries. He has also called the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir a 'religious problem'. While Mr. Trump is free to make assertions, his views on the Kashmir dispute betray an ignorance of the nature of the conflict and the situation on the ground.

Since 1947, the view on the Indian side has been that Partition was not on the basis of a religious divide, but an ideological one: the 'idea of Pakistan' vs. the 'idea of India'. Pakistan was carved out of India because sections of Muslims believed that they could not live equitably with the majority Hindu community. India consisted of those who believed people of all religions could live together in a secular, pluralistic society; and it should be noted that more Muslims chose to live in India than in Pakistan. India's claim over J&K, a State that included Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists, stemmed from this very premise. The government has repeatedly stressed that its decision on J&K was mandated by a desire to provide better governance and development for the people there. Mr. Trump's assertion that the issue over Kashmir is a religious one unwittingly plays into the Pakistani narrative of a conflict that has defied such narrow definitions for more than 70 years. It is therefore necessary that the government firmly corrects Mr. Trump on the matter. While the government has decided wisely to ignore many of his quixotic comments, his assertion that Kashmir is essentially a communal problem is dangerous, and needs to be countered by New Delhi in the interest of bilateral relations, as well as the resolution of the problem itself.

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