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A RESET IN KASHMIR POLICY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

Jul 03, 2020-Friday
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Earlier this week, the hardline Kashmiri secessionist leader, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, quit the All Party Hurriyat Conference, the umbrella formation of separatist organisations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). His resignation is being widely seen as a function of both his old age (he is 91) and internal factional differences — he also attacked the Hurriyat leaders based on the other side of the border in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Many in New Delhi have viewed it as a setback for separatist politics in the Valley. It is true that Mr Geelani has been a staunch pro-Pakistan and Islamist figure; he has justified the violence and terror that has been wreaked on Kashmir for decades; and if he is forced to retreat from the political sphere — for whatever reason — this is good news.

But it is important to recognise that Mr Geelani is not just an individual — but a thought. He represents a mindset that sees India as an “occupation force” and there are many other emerging figures, belonging to the same strand, such as Masarat Alam Bhat, who will seek to lead this school of thought. Delhi has to adopt a two-pronged approach. There can be no dialogue with those who advocate secession and violence. The might of the intelligence-security machinery must be used to deal with all such elements and a clear message that there can be no compromise on India’s territorial integrity and constitutional values must be sent out.

At the same time, this is also a ripe moment to re-examine the Kashmir policy. The constitutional changes of August 5, 2019 — effective nullification of Article 370, re-organisation of the state, and its dilution into a Union Territory — and measures such as a crackdown on political activity and detention of leaders has alienated a large segment of moderates and pro-India people. Given the external situation — the stand-off at the India-China border, and the fragile situation on the Line of Control — it is crucial for India to get its house in order. For this, New Delhi must release democratic leaders still under detention (including Mehbooba Mufti); begin a process of political engagement with mainstream leaders, and, while making it clear that Article 370 is history, offer eventual restoration of statehood to J&K as a mechanism for bringing all pro-India forces on board; and pave the way for elections. To take on external adversaries, India must cover its domestic bases. And given its strategic location, Kashmir must rank at the top of this domestic reset.

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