

IN KASHMIR, OPENING A PANDORA'S BOX

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Addressing a press conference on the first 100 days of the Modi 2.0 government, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said in late September that India expects to have physical jurisdiction over Pakistan-occupied Kashmir some day. How India proposes to do this is unclear, however. A few days later, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that if Islamabad did not mend its ways, PoK could go the Bangladesh way. He warned that the Indian Air Force took care not to attack the Pakistani Army during the Balakot strikes early this year, but that could change if terrorism continued.

And yet it was India that said at the United Nations General Assembly that Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's detailed perception of the way things could spin out of control between the two countries over Jammu and Kashmir was "brinkmanship, not statesmanship".

Mr. Khan's speech at the UN seems to have been received well in the various constituencies he was addressing. In Kashmir, it triggered 23 protests in 24 hours, incidents of stone pelting, and anti-India slogans. And Mr. Khan has had a chance to explain the Kashmir situation, as Pakistan sees it, not once but twice to U.S. President Donald Trump. Mr. Khan probably thinks he succeeded the second time round.

Consequently, Alice Wells, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State, stated: "Prime Minister Modi in August... sort of laid out a plan and objectives of returning Kashmir political life and restoration of — even of State status and engagement with a new generation of political leaders. And I think we are interested in knowing the next steps in engagement and encouraging that political dialogue to begin... We hope to see rapid action in the lifting of the restrictions and in the release of those who have been detained... Obviously, steps that would benefit the Kashmiri people we would welcome — I mean, economic benefits to the Kashmiri people. But right now, the focus I think has been on the return to political life and to a dialogue between the parties. This is a issue that members of Congress have raised in letters that they've sent to the administration and there will be — Congress has called for testimony on human rights in South Asia."

"Even of State status" seems to indicate that Jammu and Kashmir could once again be promoted to Statehood under certain conditions at some point in time. Does this then mean that the U.S. has signed on to India's preferences on Kashmir? It appears that Indian policymakers have concluded that a tipping point in the country's favour has been reached as far as Kashmir is concerned. Initial signs in Jammu and Kashmir have been taken as an endorsement of the government's decision.

While it is true that there have been no large-scale protests and deaths by police firing so far in Jammu and Kashmir, but only silence, that quietude could be deceptive. Even with such a massive deployment of troops and sketchy reporting of what is really going on in Kashmir, Mr. Khan's speech at the UN and what it triggered immediately indicates that Kashmir could be a Pandora's Box waiting to be opened. Given the expectations of the international community, can the Indian government hope to have so many forces deployed in Kashmir to keep the people confined for long? Is this the way Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "new Kashmir" will be formally off to a start as a Union Territory on October 31, with promised shiny economic packages, delimitation, elections and Lilliputian political activity, even as normal life remains affected? When P.V. Narasimha Rao was once asked how much autonomy Kashmiris should enjoy, he said, "the sky is the limit". Atal Bihari Vajpayee famously promised *insaniyat* (humanism),

jamhooriyat (democracy) and *kashmiriyat* (Kashmir's legacy of amity). Mr. Modi endorsed these promises and claimed they would be kept. Is this what he meant?

The government faces a serious crisis of credibility. The older mainstream politicians in Jammu and Kashmir, now sidelined as “anti-nationals”, will probably continue to languish as long as the Public Safety Act continues to apply on them. The ground has not been prepared for a new political crop. It will be nearly impossible to yank out of this poorly politically primed soil local messiahs to bear New Delhi's cross. Right now there seem to be no such pro-Delhi elements in Kashmir. The hurt and bottled up anger could grow exponentially under the curfew. An entire new generation is staying away from schools and colleges at the moment. They are hardly likely to embrace careers in the Indian civil service, or don uniforms to turn the gun on fellow Kashmiris. They are not going to warm up to the new dream sold by New Delhi. The Kashmiris are hardy people, furiously played all the time by all sides. Even as the rest of India, particularly the northern and central States, revel in the anticipation of the birth of this ‘new Kashmir’, the alienation of the Kashmiri Muslim will be complete, even as the schism between the rest of the country and Kashmir grows. Under this new curfew, Kashmiris are likely to close ranks, be more cohesive than before. The amount of time the National Security Adviser spends in Jammu and Kashmir is perhaps a good indicator that things are already tougher to work out than previously foreseen. It will be tougher now to prise away the potential collaborators.

There is also the effect of the prolonged deployment of the armed forces on the armed forces themselves. The deployment is to counter public disorder, and is centred round the urban areas. In rural Kashmir, the radicals have a freer run. The communications blockade has probably hampered both sides of the security equation, and is perhaps affecting counterinsurgency ops as well. In the “new Kashmir” that is taking shape, suicide bombings of the Pulwama kind could be difficult to prevent. Though New Delhi does not control that trigger, it is egging on those who do. Once someone reaches for it there will be great difficulty in closing the lid of the Pandora's Box.

sudarshan.v@thehindu.co.in

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