

Avoiding Disaster in Kashmir

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Since mid-June, over 50 civilians, many of them teenagers, have been killed in clashes between stone-pelting protesters and police in the streets of Srinagar and other towns in Kashmir. This could pose a serious threat to peace in South Asia. India needs to address both the domestic alienation in Kashmir and its 60-year-old dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir's future, issues it has rarely before tried to deal with at the same time. The United States can play a useful but very limited role in this dangerous drama.

Reports out of Kashmir have focused on the novel features of this latest episode in a problem that goes back to the 1947 partition of India. The angry and alienated young protesters have no apparent leaders. Politicians heading the groups that have called for Kashmir's secession from India have for the most part been sidelined. The youths in the streets have been radicalized politically. This is a different phenomenon from the two-decades-long religious radicalization of Kashmiris alienated from India, but the two kinds of intensity reinforce each other. Many of these young men have an education but despair of finding jobs. They see in the continued heavy-handed presence of Indian security forces, ineffective government, and dismal economic and political prospects the frustration of their hopes for a normal future.

In contrast to past outbursts, there is as yet little clear evidence of a significant Pakistani hand in the violence, though Islamabad's intelligence agencies will surely be tempted to fish once again in troubled Kashmiri waters. The protesters' violence has been largely confined to stone throwing. It has not included the deadly terrorist attacks by armed and trained militants that have been features of earlier Kashmiri confrontations.

The danger in this situation is all too familiar. The street clashes could easily lead again to the destructive cycle of action and reaction that has made Kashmir one of the world's most threatening "frozen conflicts" and has led repeatedly to armed confrontations between two nuclear-armed neighbors.

What today's crisis calls for starts with a major Indian push to create a healthy relationship between India and the badly alienated Kashmiris. An eloquent August 10 speech by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh could be the first step in such a campaign. Singh spoke with a sympathy and candor unusual for an Indian leader about the "anger and frustration that is bringing young people out on the streets of Kashmir." He promised a "new beginning," including both political dialogue and a major push for jobs and economic development that would address the emotional needs of the people of Kashmir. He asked them "to give peace a chance."

Singh's remarks were constructive, but most Kashmiris gave them a frosty reception. Hence the second element in a serious initiative: speedy implementation of his promises for economic development and political openness. Implementation has been the Achilles' heel of previous initiatives. The Indian government will need to act with unprecedented urgency if it is to have any hope of moving forward. Its task will not be easy. Kashmiris are mindful of the "Catch 22" that has often shaped New Delhi's policy. When the state is in an uproar, India refuses to make concessions under pressure of violence; when the agitation subsides, it contends that there is no longer a problem that requires solving. And public opinion in Kashmir is not running in India's favor: a May 2010 Chatham House poll confirmed that a large majority of the population in the areas affected by the protests prefer independence to continuing Indian rule. (Almost none wanted to join Pakistan.)

A third ingredient is also essential: to make it worth Pakistan's while to refrain from sabotaging India's domestic initiative. This would be a tall order under any circumstances. With Pakistan beset by floods, as well as underlying political and security problems, a peacemaking breakthrough is probably out of reach. But neither Kashmir's politicians nor its young protesters will take seriously an Indian initiative that does not include some kind of engagement with Pakistan.

The short-term objective, then, would be a formula for preventing escalation, both within Kashmir and between India and Pakistan. To work out the details, India and Pakistan should resume back-channel talks like those that were interrupted by the Mumbai attacks in 2008. Such a setting, insulated from the glare of publicity, has in the past had the best chance of results. India has been reluctant to restart the talks, but given the importance of the stakes, it should look on them as a means of accomplishing the prime minister's goals.

The Obama administration should avoid any major diplomatic engagement on the Kashmir issue at this point. New Delhi has consistently opposed any outside intervention on Kashmir, and it would particularly resent a U.S. initiative at a time when developments in the state have caused it serious political embarrassment. But Washington should quietly encourage the Indians

to implement the sensible approach Prime Minister Singh has announced. More importantly, it should reassert strongly to the Pakistanis the importance of their avoiding meddling in the troubles Kashmir now faces. Pakistani involvement in the street protests would make the situation worse, not least for the people of Kashmir itself. Pakistan's restraint now is an essential step toward the longer-term resolution of its chronic insecurity vis-à-vis India.

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