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The Kashmir Conflict Through A Realist Lens

The Kashmir conflict - a long-running territorial dispute between India, Pakistan, and China (to a lesser extent) over the Kashmir region - is a complex one, and has been a source of tension between the three countries for over 50 years. Today, the region includes Indian territories Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, the Pakistani territories Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, and the Chinese territories Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract. Which of these lands belongs to which countries has been a point of contention since 1947, when both Pakistan and India gained independence from Britain in an event known as the Partition of India. Since then, the area has been the battlegrounds for multiple wars between the two former British colonies, and has struggled with terrorism and extremism, tragically leading to the loss of many lives, and the uprooting and displacement of many families. Despite the tragedy, these events have been an interesting case study on the role of national self-interest in foreign affairs, and a striking example supporting the theory of realism in the context of international relations.

In 2019, India scrapped the special status of Jammu & Kashmir (henceforth J&K) - known as Article 370 - which essentially revoked all of the autonomy the region has held since the partitioning in 1947. The Indian parliament defended this decision, citing a desire to fully integrate the territory with the Indian union in an effort to control the terrorism and poverty which historically plagued the territory. However, liberal thinkers and Pakistani critics have maintained that India's decision to revoke the autonomy of J&K was one of self-interest, and was made without regard for the civil rights and liberties of the area’s people. For context, realists purport that states should act in accordance with their own self-interest, and use any and all means necessary to achieve an outcome that aligns with their goals, whereas liberals emphasize cooperation between states and the use of international organizations to maintain peace and stability. While the fight to end violent extremism and poor living conditions is a noble one, it is not clear that is the fight India has taken up. Nearly all of the violent conflicts which have occurred and continue to occur in J&K are the cause of secessionist sentiments among its Muslim-majority people, many of whom believe the occupation of their land by a secularist Indian government creates a loss of national and religious identity. Similarly, much of the poverty in the territory is due to predatory extraction of the landscape’s lush natural resources by Indian-based corporate entities, which has furthered the cries for independence for Kashmir. In fact, “A sample survey conducted by Gautam Nair and Nicholas Sambanis (2019) indicates that over 65% of Indian Kashmiris still desire independence over annexing to Pakistan or India” (Shivamurthy, p. 258). Thus, for India to reduce terrorism and poverty as they claim to hope to do, they would require little more action than to pull their troops and impose restrictions on companies sourcing materials from the region. However, it is clearly in their own self-interest - for these various economic and geopolitical incentives - to maintain control of the area. Thus, the realist perspective on this recent development is a valid one.

Originally, many of the citizens of the Jammu & Kashmir territory had preferred to be under Pakistani rule, where Islam is the national religion, and Sharia law exists to protect their religious and cultural identity from erosion. Ignoring an existing UN council recommendation to keep further conflict confined to peaceful diplomacy, Pakistan seized upon this opportunity by covertly sponsoring secessionist groups and anti-Indian extremists within the area, who hoped to drive the Indians out of their homeland. Despite also staking claim to the region in hopes of annexation, “Pakistan has limited a significant challenge to its administration with a de-facto control of the region under the guise and narrative of ‘championing the Kashmiri cause’” (Shivamurthy, p. 258). Essentially, by aligning with their religious values, arming and supporting local militant groups with Pakistani weapons and troops, and denying Indian claim to the region, Pakistan was able to “fly under the radar” so to speak. As the situation worsened, and more time passed moving no closer to peace or stability, the people of J&K soon realized the fallacy of Pakistan-sponsored anti-Indian terrorism: “The targets are Muslims in Kashmir, belying Pakistan's argument that it is concerned about the welfare of Muslims in Kashmir” (Hussain p. 1009) and the disguise masking their self-interests as different than those of India’s collapsed, with similar self-enriching intentions soon becoming clear, and the theory of realism becoming ever more evident.

Finally, it is important to consider the counterargument to the realist explanation of the unfolding of the Kashmir conflict: the liberal one. Some might argue that Pakistan and India have had many conflicts with their respective neighboring countries since their split into separate entities, and many of them have been resolved through peaceful diplomacy. Indeed, “Both India and Pakistan have solved their territorial disputes peacefully and diplomatically with their other neighbors. Pakistan has given up its territories in Kashmir to China, and India has given up its other territories to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh (Gilani, 2020), while they refuse to do the same to each other” (Shivamurthy p. 261). However, the peaceful resolve to land-ownership claims in those regions was due to their relative unimportance compared to J&K. Far more than the aforementioned territories which the countries forfeited, the J&K territory is populated and well-developed. This makes it indispensable as a trade route, with infrastructure and paths to carry goods safely between Pakistan, India, and China, all of which border it. Perhaps most importantly as of recently is its large store of freshwater running off of the Himalayan mountainside, which has become a resource both countries desperately need. In discussing the water scarcity which has grown worse in recent years, Hussain explains “Due to increase in water stress in India and Pakistan, the 1960s Indus Water Treaty has come under strain. The looming crisis of water scarcity in the subcontinent necessitates finding viable resource distribution principles” (Hussain p. 1029). Here, the author provides another attempt at liberal explanation of a conflict between the two countries that fell apart in the context of the J&K region. Thus, shifting our perspective on the situation to one of realism explains much more.

Overall, it is clear that efforts from the UN, scholars in the world of international relations, and India and Pakistan themselves have failed to come to an understanding of the conflict that supports a liberal approach to state conflict. Instead, national self-interest has made itself evident as the driving factor in this conflict for its entire 75 year duration, and realism more adequately explains the dynamics at hand. Due to the massive role realism has played in its unfolding, I believe it’s clear that any attempt at a diplomatic resolution of this conflict is little more than a dream, and the conflict will continue to worsen until it results in yet another war between India and Pakistan over the region. Given how populated those countries are, and that they both have nuclear capabilities in the modern age, we can only hope that the war remains below the nuclear threshold, and the innocent civilians living in the region don’t have to continue losing their lives.

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I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System. - *Peter Rauscher*