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To cite this article: Claude Rakisits (2020): Diplomacy in South Asia: a four-step grand plan for Kashmir, Australian Journal of International Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/10357718.2020.1787334](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1787334)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1787334>



Published online: 07 Jul 2020.



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# Diplomacy in South Asia: a four-step grand plan for Kashmir

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## ABSTRACT

In this Commentary, I propose a bold, four-step plan which would address the question of self-determination for Kashmiris and hopefully resolve permanently the 70-year-old Kashmir issue which has poisoned Indo-Pakistan relations since Partition. Two important elements of this plan would be: first, the involvement of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group to assist Kashmiris, Pakistan and India in the mediation of the plan; and, second, the holding of four UN-supervised referenda which would be held simultaneously but counted separately: Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir; Kashmir valley; Jammu; and Ladakh. All Kashmiris would have three options: Join Pakistan, Join India or independence. As an incentive to India and Pakistan, the international community would deliver substantial economic assistance for the development of all parts of Kashmir. But as a quid pro quo for the economic aid package, there would have to be guaranteed free movement of people, capital and goods between all parts of Kashmir after the referenda, regardless as to which option had been chosen by the Kashmiris.

## KEYWORDS

Kashmir; Pakistan; India; referendum

## Introduction

Bearing in mind the long history of political tension in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), compounded by recent developments, it's obvious the present situation in Kashmir cannot continue and will quite possibly get worse. Accordingly, this Commentary puts forward a bold, 4-step plan for the peaceful and permanent resolution of the Kashmir problem. It's a plan principally to help Kashmiris which, hopefully, would also help improve bilateral relations in general between Pakistan and India.

India has always argued that Kashmir is a domestic issue and external interference will not be accepted. But however much the Indian government would like it to be the case, Kashmir is today very much in the international public domain.

This Commentary is divided into four parts. First, I will briefly summarise the recent developments in J&K then discuss the five reasons why a circuit-breaker is critical to break the 70-year-old Kashmir issue. I will then outline my four-step grand plan to resolve the situation in Kashmir. Finally, I will discuss how this plan could be started cautiously.

## Recent developments

On 5 August 2019, the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided by presidential order to scrap Article 370 of the constitution which guaranteed J&K's special autonomous status within India. This status allowed J&K to make its own laws, except in matters dealing with foreign affairs, defence, and communications. The Indian government also cancelled Article 35A, which gave the J&K legislature the power to determine who is a permanent resident of the territory. Under Art 35A only permanent residents of J&K were legally allowed to own land and apply for government jobs, scholarships, and financial assistance (Dagia 2019). Both these articles enshrined the 1952 Delhi Agreement between the Nehru government and the then-chief minister of J&K, Sheikh Abdullah.

A direct consequence of this action is that J&K as a state was abolished and replaced by two Union Territories (Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh), which are now governed directly from New Delhi. This came into effect on 31 October 2019.

The scrapping of the special status for J&K had been on Modi's party's manifesto for the national election held in April and May 2019, which returned his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power with an increased majority in parliament (Rampal 2019). So there was no real surprise to this move. However, what surprised the J&K residents was the heavy-handedness of Modi's tactics in the lead-up to the announcement. Almost 40,000 additional troops were brought into the territory (Sandhu 2019)—already the most militarised zone on earth (Singh 2016)—to deal with the inevitable negative reaction to this unilateral decision. In addition to the increase in the security force presence, a curfew was imposed; schools and universities were closed; the internet was shut down; thousands of tourists and pilgrims were told to leave; and politicians, including former chief ministers Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah, were put under house arrest (Fareed 2019).

While the massive clampdown has eased somewhat for the people of Jammu and Ladakh, the situation remains significantly different for the roughly seven million people living in the Kashmir Valley (about the size of Timor Leste). This is the Muslim-majority area of J&K, which has been getting special attention from the security forces whose approach to crowd control has been brutally heavy-handed. There's only limited mobile phone connectivity and the internet is limited to 2G, making it very difficult for people and medical staff alike to access internet-based medical assistance to combat Covid-19 (Hussain 2020). Needless to say, such collective punishment is in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which India is a party to (ICRC 2005; France24 2019).

The security forces continue to use, as they have for ten years, shotgun pellets for crowd control, injuring and blinding hundreds of civilians, including women and children (Fareed 2018). Whilst there was a partial lifting of some of the more draconian restrictions after seven months, the nation-wide lockdown as a result of the Coronavirus means that the residents of Kashmir Valley are effectively living in complete lockdown mode. This has severely affected their daily lives, including in generating widespread psychological trauma (Yasir 2020). Media reporting remains severely restricted and controlled (Amnesty International 2020).

Modi stated the situation would be back to normal after four months, but almost a year later normality—such as it is in Kashmir—is far from being close to being restored. In

addition to the human cost of the massive clampdown which accompanied Modi's dictate, the economic consequences of effectively shutting down Kashmir have been catastrophic (Bukhari 2019).

### Why a circuit-breaker?

First, Kashmiris are hurting, and their human rights are being trampled daily. This must stop. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has been scathing about the post-5 August situation and has demanded that the Indian authorities 'fully restore the rights that are currently being denied (OHCHR 2019b).' This has not been the first time that OHCHR has been critical of India's governance approach to the territory. In July 2019, OHCHR released its second report on the situation in Kashmir, which called for an international commission of inquiry to investigate the allegations of human rights violations (OHCHR 2019a). Put differently, the routine violation of human rights in Indian-administered Kashmir (IAK) has been known to the international community for a very long time.

Second, India aspires to great nation status, but Kashmir—a self-inflicted wound—is making it bleed on the world stage. The behaviour of its security forces in Kashmir is appalling, and the lack of accountability is staggering. This is unacceptable for a country that prides itself as being the largest democracy in the world. The (Jammu & Kashmir) Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have been used ruthlessly against political opposition and militants, allowing the detention of someone without trial for up to two years. These laws have effectively given the Indian security forces *carte blanche* against all opposition and feed much of the anti-Delhi sentiments among the Muslims of J&K (Wani 2019). As noted above, the OHCHR has been particularly scathing about Indian security's behaviour in Kashmir (OHCHR 2019a). The situation in Kashmir is aggravated further with numerous reports of Indian forces using civilians as shields, whether when firing into Pakistan across the Line of Control (LoC) which separates Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir (Essa 2020), or when security forces are engaging with militants (Sofi 2019). Such practices are considered war crimes under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and specifically violate the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War. IHL is applicable in this instance because with the Indian government's decision to abolish unilaterally Kashmir's autonomy—a status which was the condition upon which Kashmir acceded to India in 1947—India has become an occupation power under international law (Anwar 2019; John 2017).

Needless to say, India's security forces' roughshod behaviour in Kashmir is an international public relations disaster for the Modi government. It's becoming increasingly difficult for world leaders to ignore what is happening in Kashmir. Accordingly, they are beginning to denounce it publicly. For example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (NDTV 2019) and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Sonwalkar 2019) have condemned the security forces' unacceptable tactics. In October 2019, the U.S. Congress held a public hearing on the situation in Kashmir, during which the lawmakers were highly critical of India's approach to Kashmir (The Wire 2019). U.S. newspapers such as *The Washington Post* (Ayyub 2019) and *The New York Times* (Goel and Gettleman 2020), which are

generally sympathetic to the Indian government, have begun to run stories much less favourable to New Delhi's position. India needs to heal this public relations wound.

Third, India's heavy security presence in Jammu & Kashmir, particularly in the Kashmir Valley, for the past 30 years in an attempt to maintain control over a restive Muslim population has been a drain on the national budget. Not surprisingly, this presence has not only not won the hearts and minds of the local Muslim Kashmiri population, but it has created further opposition to the Indian presence in Kashmir (Hooda 2020). Moreover, New Delhi's policy towards Kashmir, along with PM Modi's outwardly anti-Muslim bias, have contributed to Indian Muslim's growing opposition to BJP rule at the Centre (Yasir and Raj 2020). Together, these developments threaten the secular fabric of Indian society.

Fourth, the decades-long Kashmir situation has been the *raison d'être* of Kashmir-focussed Pakistan-based non-state actors which have been getting direct and indirect support from the Pakistan military. A number of these actors have been proscribed by the Pakistan government, and some have been placed on the US State Department's 'Foreign Terrorist Organizations' list (US State Department 2021). Pakistan is on the 'Grey List' of the Paris-based intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and just managed to avoid being placed on the 'Black List' at the last meeting in October 2019 for failing to crack down on terrorist groups and their activities (Rakisits 2019). Only Iran and North Korea are on the 'Black List.' Needless to say, the existence of these groups has damaged the Pakistan brand. The basis for their existence and their material support must be removed.

Fifth, since Partition Kashmir has been a festering issue which has poisoned relations between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan; has led to billions of rupees squandered on defence spending by both countries; has caused three wars; and has utterly stunted normal economic and trade relations between the two countries which could have helped lift millions of Indians and Pakistanis from abject poverty (Nawaz and Guruswamy 2014). This absurdity must stop.

The circuit-breaker I'm suggesting would be a four-step sequential, multi-layered agreement between India and Pakistan. While it would cost a lot of political capital for the Pakistani and Indian prime ministers, the massive reward down the road would be worth it.

## The Grand Plan

First, Pakistan and India would co-sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution to refer the Kashmir question to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for an advisory opinion as allowed under Article 96 of the UN Charter to determine the legal status of Kashmir. While an ICJ advisory opinion is non-binding, it would assist in informing and framing the subsequent negotiations, whether it's on the UN Security Council or in other international fora. As the ICJ's decision is non-binding, this approach would be the least politically costly for the two parties involved.

There are two alternative approaches. One is to seek the 'compulsory jurisdiction' of the ICJ, under Article 36 (2) of the Statute. However, that would require Pakistan and India agreeing to the ICJ's involvement and, more importantly, abiding by its judgment which is final and without appeal (Pillai 2019). This is unlikely to happen. The other one is for

Pakistan to approach the ICJ under Article 36 (1) of the Statute to seek a determination on the violation of a specific international treaty to which India and Pakistan are parties, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Pakistan is considering taking that approach (Sanklecha 2019). However, even if Pakistan was successful with this approach, it would not address the issue of self-determination for Kashmiris.

Second, Pakistan would permanently and irrevocably shut down all Kashmir-focussed non-state actors based in Pakistan, in particular Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Pakistan's 30-year-old business model of supporting these groups is now outdated if ever it was effective. The LeT and JeM have become a very serious liability for Pakistan. In a positive development LeT founder, Hafiz Saeed, accused of masterminding the 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, was handed an 11-year jail sentence in February 2020 (Khan 2020).

Third, India would revoke the 5 August 2019 presidential order and reinstate J&K's autonomy status. Put differently, New Delhi would cancel its annexation of J&K. It would also revoke the draconian laws applied in Kashmir, notably the notorious Special Powers Act. The Indian government would release all political prisoners.

For too long Kashmir was all about who did the territory belong to, Pakistan or India. Or to put it differently, it was about real estate. But over the last 70 years many things have happened, and the world is a very different place since Partition. Accordingly, the issue now is about the self-determination of all Kashmiris, those in J&K and those in Pakistan, i.e. Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. The only valid and credible means for fulfilling this act of self-determination would be through a referendum, as originally agreed to in 1948 (UN Security Council Resolution 47). This would be the fourth step. However, as opposed to the originally planned referendum, this one would have two distinct differences:

First, in order to take into account the religious mix of Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, instead of treating all of Kashmir as one electoral cum political unit, four UN-supervised referenda would be held simultaneously but counted separately: Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir; Kashmir valley; Jammu; and Ladakh.

The second big difference with the original 1948 referendum plan which only had two options—India or Pakistan, is that the people of the four electoral units would be given the same three options: Join Pakistan; Join India; or Independence.

My suggested referendum is a variation of the 1950 Dixon Plan, named after the Australian jurist Sir Owen Dixon, the UN Security Council-appointed representative to Pakistan and India (Schofield 2010, 83).

In order to facilitate this intrinsically difficult four-step plan, the Indian and Pakistani leaders would agree to the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (CEPG) mediating between the two countries. The CEPG has a soundtrack record in resolving difficult issues. Importantly, both countries are members of the Commonwealth and CEPG would not have a bias towards one or the other of the parties involved.

The role of the CEPG would be to negotiate and manage this four-step process, including which Kashmiri political groups and members of civil society from both sides of the Line of Control (LOC) would participate in the negotiations. Importantly, the CEPG would assist with the formulation of the modalities for the holding of the referenda and the implementation of the results. A critical element for the success of this process

would be to put in place systems which would prevent one or the other party from going back on its commitments. Critically, this would include the demilitarisation of all of Kashmir, the Indian and Pakistani-administered parts, (or at least that the military presence be reduced to a minimum needed for the support of civil power) prior to the holding of the referenda. A UN peacekeeping force would need to be deployed to monitor the demilitarisation process, supervise the holding of the referenda and the implementation of the results. All parts of Kashmir would remain demilitarised after the referenda had been held. This UN force would remain for an agreed period of time—which could be renewed—after the referenda in order to guarantee the inviolability of all borders. The UNSC would be the ultimate guarantor of the sanctity of all Kashmiri borders.

Whichever of the four political units decided to go for the independence option would be a demilitarised country, with only a police force for maintaining law and order. All residual Pakistani and Indian military forces would be withdrawn immediately.

The unknown would be the attitude of China towards this plan. While China is not a player in the critical aspect of the dispute—the self-determination of the Kashmiris, it nevertheless has a stake in the game. The recent Indo-Chinese flare-up at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh attests to this (Ayoob 2020). China occupies sparsely populated Aksai Chin (about the size of Taiwan) as spoils of the 1962 China–India War and Shaks-gam Valley (about the size of Brunei) ceded to it by Pakistan in 1963. Moreover, it has major economic assets in Gilgit–Baltistan as part of the US\$60 billion China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project which it will want to ensure are not threatened. Accordingly, it will eventually need to be involved in the negotiations.

As a critical incentive to ensure the principal parties stayed the course, including countering potential disgruntled spoilers, would be the promise of substantial international economic assistance for the development of all parts of Kashmir, Pakistan- and Indian-administered. But as a quid pro quo for the economic aid package, there would have to be guaranteed free movement of people, capital and goods between all parts of Kashmir after the referendum, regardless as to which option had been chosen by each part of Kashmir.

## Starting the process

Given that this grand plan would be a very, big gamble for the leaders of Pakistan and India to take, it would be critical to first test the political waters before embarking on such a long and difficult political journey. I would suggest two pre-plan steps.

First, using one or two credible and trustworthy back-channel contacts, PM Khan and PM Modi would need to be approached discreetly and separately to get their respective reactions to the basic thrust of this 4-step plan. If they agree to it *in principle*, then the second step would be to have a 1½ track dialogue between Pakistan and India, which could include, *inter alia*, academics, members of civil society, retired military officers and civilian officials, to explore and further develop the elements of the plan. This meeting would need to take place secretly, away from the media, so that the participants could discuss the plan frankly without trying to score points publicly and fear of leaks to the media. Such a meeting would preferably take place in a third country. Having good relations with both countries, Australia could potentially chair such a dialogue. There are a number of Australian think tanks and tertiary institutions which could very

effectively host such a meeting. The aim of the 1½ track dialogue would be to come up with an agreed roadmap document which the participants would present to their respective governments. If both prime ministers agreed *in principle* with the document and the suggested way forward, then both governments could officially begin implementing the four-step grand plan.

## Conclusion

Needless to say, there would be many sceptics trying to scuttle this plan. And while the political risks would be very high for both leaders, the win for all parties—Kashmiris, Pakistanis and Indians—of finally achieving peace in Kashmir after so many years wasted would be huge and therefore absolutely worth the risk. Significantly, nothing in the 1972 Simla Agreement—the almost 50-year-old key Indo-Pakistan bilateral agreement—precludes the involvement of a third party, in this case the CEPG, if both countries agree to it (Simla Agreement, Art. 1. ii).

Only PM Khan and PM Modi, who both have strong personalities and large followings in their respective countries, would be able to pull off such a bold, out-of-the-box move. So, this may well be the grand bargain we've all been waiting for. And while a resolution of Kashmir may not bring permanent peace between Pakistan and India, it would nevertheless greatly improve bilateral relations, diminish the chance of another military clash between Pakistan and India, and set a precedent for the resolution of other pressing bilateral issues between the two countries. Put differently, everything else having failed, there is nothing to lose in trying to cut the 70-year-old gordian knot, except peace.

## Notes on contributors

*Dr Rakisits* is an Honorary Associate Professor at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the ANU where he has taught two masters courses: Case studies in Diplomacy, and Negotiation and Conflict Resolution. Dr Rakisits has had almost 20 years of experience in the Australian public sector, mainly in defence, foreign affairs and intelligence. He has been an advisor to a shadow federal minister for foreign affairs and to a deputy prime minister. In 1995–1998, while at the Australia Mission to the UN in New York, he was responsible for reporting on Security Council issues. In 2006–2009 he taught international affairs at tertiary institutions in Switzerland. In 2010–2013 he was the academic adviser at the Australian War College. Dr Rakisits is an Associate with the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington DC. He taught there for three years (2015–2017), including a course on peace and security in the Indian Ocean region and one on the Australia-US Alliance. He was also a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Atlantic Council (2014–2015). His principal, but certainly not sole, academic interest is Pakistan, which he has been following for over well 30 years. His doctorate, which he earned from the University of Queensland, was on *National Integration in Pakistan: The Role of Religion, Ethnicity and the External Environment*. He also closely follows developments in the Middle East, Africa and the South Asia and Indian Ocean regions. His publications and media interviews can be viewed on his consultancy homepage: [www.geopolitical-assessments.com](http://www.geopolitical-assessments.com). Dr Rakisits is also an Honorary Associate Professor in Strategic Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



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