Imran Khan’s Trip to Forum in Davos

The speech given by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan at the World Economic Forum in Davos (which marked its 50th anniversary) as well as his meeting with US President Donald Trump on the sidelines of this summit became one of the most significant events in world politics in the first month of 2020.

In the current context, what with the ongoing charade involving a Swedish schoolgirl and climate activist, and banal speeches, made at the Forum, regarding the threat growing inequality (of all kinds) posed to global stability, it is not at all surprising that the attendees’ attention was drawn towards the leader of one of two nations engaged in a simmering regional dispute, which could turn into a catastrophe of global proportions.

The “international community” is gradually starting to realize that the actual conflict hotspots are not only in the Greater Middle East, a region that global media outlets have been primarily sounding the alarm about in recent years.

In fact, PRC’s coastal area with its center in Taiwan is vying for first place among such zones for good reason. After all, a direct confrontation between the two world powers could happen there. In the author’s opinion, South Asia is in second place with its Kashmir conflict, which, if it were to turn into a full-scale military confrontation between India and Pakistan, would inevitably involve the PRC and, therefore, the United States.

It is thus not surprising that Pakistani Prime Minister’s speech in Davos drew so much attention. Everyone wants to know the current state of the aforementioned dispute and what the future holds for the relationship among nations that are engaged in it either directly or indirectly.
It is worth noting that there were frequent flare-ups over various aspects of the Kashmir conflict throughout the previous year. These started in the middle of 2018 after the government led by Imran Khan had just come to power. And the focus of its foreign policy strategy was (at least according to public rhetoric) on rapid normalization of ties with India.

In February 2019, both countries ended up on the brink of nuclear war after a terrorist attacks in the Indian part of Kashmir. But as soon as that crisis had subsided, India revoked the special status granted to the state of Jammu and Kashmir at the beginning of August, thus plunging the bilateral relationship to a new low.

Then tensions de-escalated yet again, however, the year still ended on a pessimistic note after India’s Supreme Court ruled on a disputed territory on top of a hill (sacred to both Hindus and Muslims) in Ayodhya, and after India’s parliament passed a bill aimed at easing the path to citizenship for refugees but not if they are Muslim.

Hence, having filled the conference hall to the brim, journalists and Forum attendees in Davos had very good reasons for taking the time to listen to the leader (representing one side of the conflict) assess the situation that has arisen in South Asia and describe possible means of resolving it.

It seems apt to remind our readers about the key difference in India’s and Pakistan’s approaches to resolving the far-reaching Kashmir dispute. The former views it, by and large, as an issue concerning only India and Pakistan. And the aforementioned legislative acts are viewed by New Delhi as purely an internal matter.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has been striving to “internationalize” the problem to the fullest since its inception (i.e. starting at the end of 1940s). The reason behind this approach is far from complex, after all, any form of mediation in the Kashmir issue will mean that opinions of Kashmir residents (an overwhelming majority of these people are Muslim) will be taken into account on one way or another.

Hence, any attempts from the “outside” to provide friendly assistance in resolving this painful issue are greeted with strong opposition, even if such overtures are made by partners who are important to New Delhi (and the United States “takes pride of place” among them.) Donald Trump’s offer to assist with “mediation” during his meeting with Imran Khan (who was on an official visit to the United States at the time) caused an outrage among India’s parliamentarians in June 2019.

Both leaders again had a chance to talk on the sidelines of the Davos Forum. According to the statements (which were much more carefully worded than before) made by the US President following their meeting, the two leaders once again discussed the issue of Kashmir. For instance, Donald Trump asserted that if they [author’s note: the USA] could help, they certainly would do so.

This time around there was no official reaction from New Delhi either towards the fact that Imran Khan and Donald Trump had had the aforementioned discussion or towards the latter’s words on this issue. The upcoming visit by the US President to India (expected at the end of February) was probably the reason for the silence in the capital.

However, Indian media outlets did not mince words on the matter. For example, Times of India (ToI, the nation’s leading newspaper), citing a book written by one of Donald Trump’s numerous detractors, made it quite clear that the current US President was not only fairly ill-informed but also seemingly clueless about the geography of the region. And the photograph used in the ToI article clearly illustrated the aforementioned point.

However, in the context of Donald Trump’s upcoming visit to India, a far more serious issue (in comparison to various statements made in Davos and on other occasions) became the yet another hike in tariffs on imported derivative steel and aluminum products by the United States. And the author of this article did not find India on the list of nations unaffected by this increase.

Incidentally, this happened to be the second measure of this nature, because, in May 2018, the United States had already raised tariffs on imported steel and aluminum products, which, at the time, seriously aggravated the India–United States relations.

Behind closed doors, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will almost certainly have to listen to some of his guest’s thoughts on various aspects of the Kashmir dispute, including those that India considers to be purely domestic in nature. And this will, yet again, illustrate the fact that last year’s legislative measures have resulted in the “internationalization” of the Kashmir conflict, something that India’s leadership has always tried to avoid (as mentioned before).
Not to be outdone by the United States Congress, which excels at finding and then condemning various lawbreakers, the European Parliament got involved too.

In September 2019, the EU body felt the need to address the Rohingya issue in Myanmar. Around the same time, a certain European Parliament group paid a “curated visit” to Kashmir. And at present, EU parliamentarians are discussing the anti-CAA resolution (Citizenship Amendment Act mentioned earlier in the article) but the voting on it has been postponed until March.

Still, in Imran Khan’s opinion, which he shared during an interview with Deutsche Welle shortly before his trip to Davos, the response to the Kashmir issue from Western countries had been lukewarm thus far. At any rate, their reaction has not been as far-reaching as that towards the events in Hong Kong.

In his wide-ranging speech during the Forum in Davos, the Pakistani Prime Minister covered a broad range of topics and stressed the importance of, first and foremost, restoring and maintaining peace in the region. Within this context, he mentioned the situations taking shape around Iran and Afghanistan. Imran Khan also expressed his dismay about the fact that the state of India–Pakistan relations was not as he had hoped.

If the Prime Minister had left it at that, a response in India would have been limited to reports with fairly innocuous summaries of his speeches’ key points by local media outlets. But once again he asked the “international community” to play the role of a mediator between Pakistan and India in order to prevent a conflict between “two nuclear-armed countries”. And, as a result, India’s Ministry of External Affairs was unable to refrain from responding “in a suitable manner.”

Finally, it was impossible not to pay heed to a distinct sound of weapons in the midst of “related” events in year 2020. We are referring here, first and foremost, to a nine-day Sino-Pakistani naval exercise, which started on 8 January in the Arabian Sea. An impressive number of warships took part in the drills and engaged in trainings to resolve (“general”) issues.

At more or less the same time, India also decided to send a number of vessels, headed by its aircraft carrier Vikramaditya (formerly Admiral Gorshkov but seriously modernized), which were also tasked with some general activities, to the Arabian Sea.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning that it is hard to find anyone who is not in the Arabian Sea nowadays.

Pakistani Prime Minister’s trip to Davos was certainly worthwhile. And his presence at the Forum drew the world’s attention to a serious geopolitical issue.

*Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*