From 3 to 4 February of this year, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan paid an official visit to Malaysia. Events of this nature are not a common occurrence for a number of reasons, first and foremost, in light of various aspects of the Kashmir conflict and their development.

The aforementioned dispute arose at the time (i.e. the end of the 1940s) the independent nations of India and Pakistan came into being. Since then, tensions between the two nations have risen on a number of occasions, and the issue once again became a source of concern over the course of last year.

It was during the most recent flare-up in tensions over Kashmir that the essentially two-way conflict between India and Pakistan (with China’s indirect involvement) began to transform into an international issue fraught with danger. And this time around, leading world players, such as the United States and Russia, were compelled to say something more or less reasonable about its resolution. And it was painfully clear that none of them wished to do so.

However, they had no choice in the matter. After all, two (de facto) nuclear powers ended up on the brink of war, and any armed conflict between them will not be confined to South Asia. And both parties to the dispute (again, as never before) are seeking support on the international arena, which makes it difficult for external players to ignore the Kashmir issue.

Although Malaysia is not among the leading nations of the world, it is certainly not a second-tier country. It is an influential nation in its “own” Southeast Asian region and in the entire Muslim world. Based on Malaysia’s overall level of economic development and GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita data, the nation is in second place (after Singapore) in Southeast Asia, and it is approaching the Four Asian Tigers (which include Singapore, South
Malaysia’s economy has prospered largely on account of the fact that, from 1981 to 2003 (i.e. for over 22 years), its government was headed by Mahathir bin Mohamad, a unique individual in the world of politics. In May 2018, after a triumphant victory of the Alliance of Hope coalition in the scheduled general election, he once again became the nation’s Prime Minister at the age of 93.

Malaysia’s and its leader’s high standing in the Muslim world was evidenced by (among other things) the fact that the 2nd Islamic Summit was staged in Kuala Lumpur from 19 to 21 December 2019 (the first conference had also been held in the capital of Malaysia in 2014). Representatives from 56 countries took part in the event. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan was meant to be one of its key participants.

However, under pressure from Saudi Arabia, which opposed Iran’s participation in the Summit and, in general, does not wish to have a rival to its Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Imran Khan was forced to cancel his trip to Malaysia at the last minute. The reason why Saudi Arabia’s stance on this issue mattered to Islamabad is that the Kingdom is essentially one of Pakistan’s biggest financial “sponsors.”

Still, Malaysia remains an important partner for Pakistan in the Muslim world, and Imran Khan decided to travel to Kuala Lumpur one and a half months after he had refused to take part in the Summit in order to receive support on certain issues pertaining to the Kashmir conflict. It is also worth pointing out that this was the third meeting between the two leaders, the previous one had taken place less than a year ago (in March 2019).

As gathering support of international organizations and specific nations becomes an increasingly important factor of influence on the consequences of the de facto revocation of Article 370 of India’s constitution (which had granted special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir), it is crucial for Imran Khan to ensure that such a widely respected politician as Mahathir bin Mohamad is on his side.

The joint statement issued at the end of the visit includes not only phrases that are typical of such documents, i.e. “strategic partnership,” deepening and expanding, etc, but also references to the Kashmir conflict in clauses 15.3 and 16, which described it in a fairly general and objective manner. Clearly, Kuala Lumpur does not wish to spoil its relationship with New Delhi.

For example the statements says: “The Prime Minister of Pakistan briefed the Prime Minister of Malaysia on the illegal and unilateral actions of the Indian Government of 5 August 2019,” i.e. the day the aforementioned Article 370 was revoked. But the document does not include any comments by the Malaysian Prime Minister in response to the aforementioned information.

Imran Khan also needed Mahathir bin Mohamad’s support in another important matter linked to the Kashmir dispute. We are referring here to the fact that, in 2012, the inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) placed Pakistan on the grey list of countries whose domestic laws were “considered weak to tackle the challenges of money laundering and terrorism financing” in, for instance, Indian-administered Kashmir.

Being on this list is surely unpleasant but Pakistan still has access to foreign sources of funding. What is important, however, is not to end up on the black list, which includes countries such as Iran and the DPRK. Still, it would be best if Pakistan were removed from the grey list. But first, FATF will need to ensure that this nation’s financial system no longer poses a risk to its international equivalent.

And Mahathir bin Mohamad’s view on this issue appears to be far more certain. Clause 11 of the joint statement says: “The Prime Minister of Malaysia acknowledged the extensive counter-terrorism efforts by Pakistan and progress it continued to make in complying with the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).”

Mahathir bin Mohamad’s unwillingness to cause even minimal damage to Malaysia’s relationship with India during his negotiations with Imran Khan is evidenced by the statement in the aforementioned document commending Islamabad and New Delhi on the opening of the so-called Kartarpur Corridor (situated in one of the sections of the India–Pakistan border) on 9 November 2019. In fact, this event became almost the only glimmer of hope in the relationship between the two key parties to the Kashmir conflict in recent years.

Still, India “reacted sharply to the reference” to the dispute in the document since Malaysia is not “directly involved” in it. Seemingly to add weight to the arguments put forward in the statement made by the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, India hinted at the possibility of imposing certain restrictions on imports of palm oil from Malaysia, which is the second biggest exporter (after Indonesia) of this product based on its sales world-wide.
And all the rhetoric directed against India by Imran Khan (and other high-level government officials), the very next day after his return from Malaysia, is indicative of the sad state of Indo-Pakistani relations at present. Such statements were made on account of Kashmir Solidarity Day, celebrated on 5 February in Pakistan.

Notably, India is just as savvy at “dishing out” such rhetoric. Hence, it is difficult to predict what the next SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) Summit will be like (which is scheduled to take place in New Delhi this year).

Finally, it seems apt to briefly discuss Russia’s stance on the Kashmir conflict. Its viewpoint became apparent during a review of the latest request (on 19 January of this year) by the PRC to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) urging the body to look into the alarming situation developing in Kashmir as a result of recent measures taken by India.

The Russian Federation agreed with the decision of all the other UNSC members (except the PRC), i.e. to leave the resolution of this aspect of the Kashmir dispute to the two parties to it, i.e. India and Pakistan. Hopefully, Beijing, our strategic partner’s capital, understands that Moscow cannot afford to end up in a situation where it is forced to pick a side: India or Pakistan or the PRC.

It is important to point out once again that all the other external players also wish to avoid making such a choice. And the outcome of Pakistani Prime Minister’s visit to Malaysia is evidence of that too.

The only thing that can be expected from the Russian Federation is to dutifully facilitate (along with other UNSC members) the resolution of the conflict, but on one very important condition: that the parties involved request such assistance. And thus far India has not asked for such help.

After all, mediation (especially on a voluntary basis) in bitter conflicts is more often than not a thankless job. In fact, U.S. President Donald Trump, for instance, experienced this firsthand just last year.

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