Pakistan and Iran are Strengthening the Centre-oriented Trends in the Region

The Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif’s visit to Islamabad in late August 2018 was the first meeting conducted by the new Pakistani leadership headed by the Prime Minister Imran Khan and high-ranking foreign guests. The agreements reached confirmed the trend towards consolidating the forces in the region.

The ad hoc nature of the visit rendered by the Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs has to do with the tumultuous events in the world and in the region, as well as the intention to make the acquaintance of the new Pakistani leadership as soon as possible. Let us remind you that the formerly opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PMJ) won the Parliamentary Elections on July 25, 2018 replacing the former political élite.

Tehran needed to synchronise watches with the new Islamabad management in view of the coming South Asian tour of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the US Minister of Defence Jim Mattis in September 2018, as well as the Pentagon’s warning New Delhi of possible sanctions in connection with the purchase of Russian weapons by India and the harsh measures the White House is planning to use regarding Pakistan.

Tehran does not request the assistance of Islamabad very often, especially on short notice. This is a reaction to Washington imposing sanctions on Iran which requires a collective response from the region. Islamabad considers it likely that the Pakistan nuclear programme could become the next target of the US sanctions if, for instance, Pakistan failed to convince the Afghan Taliban to begin negotiations as demanded by Washington.

The US President Donald Trump announced the US abandoning the JCPOA nuclear deal already in May 2018. In
2018, Washington increased the financial pressure exerted on Iran in order to limit its designing nuclear and other kinds of weapons. He accused Tehran of supporting the terrorists and the vicious actions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In August 2018, when the 90 day term stipulated by the Preliminary Requirements Implementation Agreement expired, the US President Donald Trump signed the Decree No. 13846 on Reimposing Sanctions on Iran which came into force on August 7 this year. The second sanction package aimed at the Iranian energy sector will be implemented on November 5. In response, the Islamic Revolution Leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei reiterated Iran’s right to abandon the nuclear deal in case it runs contrary to its national interests.

Over the recent years, Islamabad had several times discouraged any kind of sanction-imposing policy and emphasised the importance of negotiations. In August this year, Islamabad expressed its support for Turkey and its protest against the unilateral double duties imposed by the US on the aluminium and steel imported from Turkey. Later that August, Islamabad supported Tehran regarding the JCPOA nuclear deal issue. The Pakistani Minister for Foreign Affairs Shah Mehmood Qureshi expressed his hope that “the remaining parties of the Agreement would uphold their duties on compliance with its text and intention,” taking into account the fact that Iran abides by the Agreement terms and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had repeatedly conducted checkups on the country’s nuclear facilities.

Let us remind you that Pakistan originally supported the US sanctions and later, in 2015, welcomed their withdrawal. However, the Nawaz Sharif Administration that was in power at the time (2013 - May 2018) pressured by Washington was not eager to resume the hydrocarbon contract (signed by the President Asif Ali Zardari in 2013) which was crucial for Islamabad’s dealing with the energy crisis in the country. The then ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) made an alternative Agreement for the shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG) with the Qatar company Qatargas for the period of 2015 - 2030.

The turning point in the long-time strained Pakistani-Iranian relations took place a year ago, in 2017. Strange as it may seem, the US Strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia announced in August 2017 became the departure point for the change. Its objective was to force Pakistan into “making a great effort in combating terrorism” by threatening to withdraw the financial backing ($ 800 m) allocated for combating the very same terrorism (in 2018, the US Congress supported by the Pentagon denied Pakistan this backing).

And already in October 2017, for the first time in 20 years, the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa made an official visit to Tehran at the backdrop of the civil and military leaders of the 2 countries’ growing awareness that the region’s security and the economic prosperity of the 2 nations are interconnected. By that time, the former Premier Nawaz Sharif, one of the political opponents of the rapprochement between Pakistan and Iran, had been disqualified by the Supreme Court of the country. The Chiefs of the Armies made an agreement on the military and military-technical cooperation and discussed the traditionally raised issue of the Pakistani-Iranian border (which stretches for 900 km) security. The progress is evident.

Islamabad considers strengthening the ties with the neighbouring states, in particular with Iran, as a crucial aspect of countering the anticipated growing pressure of Washington fearing the US imposing sanctions on the Pakistani nuclear programme and cutting down on its financial backing and the Pentagon’s further escalation of the armed conflict in the neighbouring country of Afghanistan.

Many political experts share the opinion that US was too late with its gradual imposition of sanctions on every country in the region. These sanctions have a low efficiency rate. But the main thing is that there is a growing awareness of the importance of the joint anti-American action (of Shia and Sunni Muslims) in Asia.

The next critical aspect of the 2018 Pakistani-Iranian agreements is the demonstration of a neutral political stance by the new Islamabad Ministers regarding the Yemen issue. Islamabad made several official statements expressing its disapproval of the Houthi strikes on the regions of Jizan and Riyadh. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia backed by the US is currently calling on Pakistan to openly express its support for the military coalition against Yemen (and, by extension, the Shia) in exchange for petrodollars that would enable Pakistan to overcome its financial deficit.

It is still too early to speak of an organised anti-American coalition of the states in the region. The states are too different, their mutual distrust and hostilities of the past stand in their way. However, the essentially ultimatum-like US policy of imposing sanctions is urging the countries to form a centre-oriented unity regardless of their religious differences.