Pakistan: the First Foreign Visit of the Prime Minister Imran Khan or Who Is the Boss Here?

The Prime Minister Imran Khan, the leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice) that came to power after the parliamentary elections on July 25 2018, made his first foreign visit, namely to the countries of the Persian Gulf: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on September 19 - 20. The first foreign visit of a Prime Minister is usually made with the objective to demonstrate the priorities of the country’s foreign policy. However, with Islamabad, that is not always the case.

An invitation from the KSA Royal Family is considered a decency and a guarantee of support by the leading Pakistani politicians. In the first decade of the 21st century, the Saudi Arabians stood up for the life of the Pakistani ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (convicted in his native land in 2001) and gave him shelter for 7 long years; later, in October 2007, they welcomed his returning to Islamabad and, in 2013, supported his election as the Prime Minister for the third nonconsecutive term.

In September 2018, the parties traditionally rallied for expanding the cooperation in economy, defence, increasing the bilateral trade, confirmed the importance of developing joint projects and resolving the issue of 2.7 m Pakistani labour migrants who had come to Saudi Arabia to get jobs.

The currency deficit became one of the first challenges that the Imran Khan administration encountered. It manifests
itself, in particular, in the fact that, according to the Pakistani mass media, Islamabad is unable to pay out the loans of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) pilot project that is being implemented under the auspices of the One Belt, One Road Initiative (BRI). Washington DC that demands that Islamabad exert pressure on the Afghan Taliban in order to make them begin negotiations with the Government of National Unity can block the originally planned applying to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an assistance package.

Requesting the assistance of Riyadh is an unconditional guarantee of new loans provided by the IMF. But Islamabad chose a different approach by inviting the KSA to become the third member of the CPEC. The Royal Family’s agreement to finance the Corridor projects is tantamount to resolving the crisis in the balance of payments, but the main thing is investing in the pilot project that is to begin in 2030 and is expected to account for 2 - 3% of the GDP annually, according to the estimates of experts.

Riyadh expects a lot from Imran Khan and the new legislators in the Parliament looking forward to receiving their support regarding the Yemen crisis and intensifying the role of Islamabad in the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in order to counter Iran ruled by Shah Muslim. The IMCTC is often referred to as the Islamic NATO, it has been headed by the Commander-in-Chief and retired General Raheel Sharif since its foundation in 2016 and until this very day.

The Yemen crisis that Riyadh started already in spring 2015 complicated the relations with Islamabad as well, first, with the legislators in the Parliament. On March 26, 2015, the KSA air force launched the first strikes on the territory of the neighbouring country of Yemen controlled by the Houthis. A land operation was planned after the air strike, the allied forces of Egypt and Pakistan were expected to take part; the latter was to send jet fighters, naval ships and land army to the area of the conflict. The official support of the military operation by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif contrasted sharply with the refusal of the Parliament to send the federal army troops to wage “somebody else’s war” in April 2015.

The failure in the KSA’s prolonged military campaign in Yemen over the recent years required the assistance of Islamabad once again. In February 2018, the Pakistan Federal Army General Headquarters PR Service informed that “In continuation of ongoing Pak-KSA bilateral security cooperation, a Pakistan Army contingent is being sent to KSA on training and advice mission. The military action will remain within the KSA borders...” 1,000 soldiers of the land army troops joined the 1,180 Pakistani soldiers already deployed in Saudi Arabia under the auspices of the effective bilateral 1982 Security Agreement. In response to the action on the part of the General Headquarters, the Pakistani Parliament objected to the deployment of the troops in the KSA, stating angrily that the decision of the Land Army General Headquarters had been made bypassing the Parliament.

In this connection, in response to the recognition and promise to make multi-million investment, the KSA authorities currently expect Imran Khan and the representatives of the ruling PTI party that he is heading to approve the decision to send troops to the area of the military conflict on the KSA - Yemen border, which de facto means joining the military operation of Riyadh against the Houthis and, as a result, the further escalation of the Middle East crisis. Time will show whether or not and to what extent Islamabad will make this move.

The official visit of Imran Khan to the KSA coincided with the 3 day visit of the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Qamar Javed Bajwa’s visit to Beijing. It was China that the Pakistani Minister for Foreign Affairs Shah Mehmood Qureshi called the cornerstone of Pakistan’s foreign policy. And it is the contractor companies affiliated with the General Headquarters that are employed in the construction work under the auspices of the CPEC infrastructural projects. This visit is notable because, due to a number of reasons and the peculiarities of the military - civilian relations in Pakistan, it gives a clear picture of who is de facto running this country, of the military winning over and keeping the control over the main areas of Pakistan’s foreign policy.

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