Pakistan: Prime Minister I. Khan Visits the US

There was an atmosphere of euphoria in Pakistan, and flattering epithets met Prime Minister Imran Khan during his official visit to Washington in July 2019. At the height of the trade war with China, tough economic sanctions and military threats in Iran, tense relations with Russia, the prevailing uncertainty in the negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, the US-Pakistani relations appeared to be an island of wellbeing in the region. The staged bilateral agreement of Washington and Islamabad was the result of a tough compromise where the national security interests of the two nuclear powers clashed. The first urged its former off-NATO ally to provide support in convincing the Afghan Taliban to sign the Peace Treaty in order to end the 18-year-long antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan, while Pakistan insisted on resuming the military and financial aid, recognizing its role in antiterrorist action, as well as bilateral cooperation on an equal basis. The achievement of this objective, according to I. Khan, promoted the improvement of Islamabad’s image before the international community and strengthened its positions both in the region and in the whole Muslim world.

Everything happened... verbally. The scenarios were put down. But the US is known to ditch its situational allies as soon as they are no longer needed, and the East is always about subtlety.

Prime Minister I. Khan held negotiations with President D. Trump in the White House on July 22, 2019. The leaders of both states had not officially met since 2015; for the 45th US President this was the first handshake with the Pakistani Prime Minister who took the position in July 2018.

The 2019 White House reorienting towards Islamabad was a public recognition by the Oval Office of its miscalculations 2 years prior:

- D. Trump, even before his inauguration in January 2017, called Pakistan “a terrorism sponsor state” and discontinued the economic assistance via the Coalition Support Fund ($1.3 billion). The call on Islamabad to take drastic action against the terrorist groups was the explanation. While waiting for the response, Washington suspended its assistance to Pakistan in the security area; in 2018 the US refused to sell weapons and blocked the traditional admission of Pakistani military personnel for training in United States Military Academies;
- During the Afghan crisis in August 2017, just like in 2009, the Pentagon relied on a military solution and rejected the diplomatic approach;
- the US started considering India as “… a loyal friend and partner in the solution of problems around the world.”

Already in 2017, US think tanks recommended that the White House thoroughly revise the information on Pakistan’s involvement in terrorism.

In 2019, it is retrospectively obvious that many plans of Washington failed without support in the region:

1. Time adjusted the Washington Administration’s objectives in view of the coming US presidential election campaign, the Department of State and the Pentagon reoriented to expanding the US interests in Western Asia with a new mission: to maintain stability in the region.

III. The US, as well as China and Russia, welcomed Pakistan’s participation in consultations on Afghanistan, considering that it could play an important role in promoting peace in Afghanistan.
Recognizing the role of Islamabad in the negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, Washington has insisted on its hands-on assistance in signing the Agreement between the US and the Afghan Taliban with the control date of September 1, 2019, proceeding from the fact that the arrangements resulting from eight rounds of negotiations in Doha have to provide guarantees of a safe withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan (via the territory of Pakistan).

The US also expects Pakistan to take security measures, including those against the terrorist organizations. Islamabad heard this repeated call on the eve of the visit and, in response, wasted no time putting H. Saeed, the leader of the outlawed Jamaat-ud-Dawa organization, under house arrest stating that it was made for the benefit of Pakistan.

In exchange for Islamabad’s responsiveness, President D. Trump promised economic and investment support and the resuscitation of commerce. The trade volume between the two countries reached a record $6.6 billion in 2018. Pakistan remains an attractive market for the US considering “… its favorable demography, English language skills, low cost of labor and local natural resources.” Of course, now and then, there are indications of jealousy that China is the largest importer to Pakistan. But D. Trump is planning to transfer certain American production facilities to the Pakistan’s territory.

In Washington, Pakistan’s objectives were to establish, at last, a long-term partnership between the two countries on the basis of mutual respect, trust and shared values; resume the provision of financial aid from the US and the IMF; get its assistance and avoid Islamabad being put on the Financial Action Task Force black list in 2019 (in 2018, Pakistan was put on the gray list of the organization).

During his visit to Washington, Prime Minister I. Khan assured President D. Trump that Pakistan, as the responsible state, would do its best for promoting the Afghan peace process, however he reiterated that Islamabad would only promote it, but would not become the guarantor of the Afghan Peace Agreement at the same time emphasizing that “… the Afghan issue remains our shared responsibility.” The discretion of Islamabad’s statements was dictated by the disagreement of the parties (the US and the Afghan Taliban) on the terms of the US troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan. Washington is planning to end the antiterrorist campaign by 2020 stating that an early withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan would be a strategic mistake. The Afghan Taliban insist on the deadline of ten months for the occupational troops to remain in their homeland.

What Pakistan achieved in the negotiations:

- The US leadership recognized the contribution of the Pakistani army to the war against terrorism and its role in the peace process in Afghanistan;
- The renewed cooperation of the Defense Ministries. General M.A. Milley who had been recently appointed Chief of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff confirmed his objective to maintain the defense relations between the US and Pakistan. All this means that Washington will have to consider the interests of Pakistan;
- Washington scrapped its accusatory rhetoric regarding Islamabad as a sponsor of terrorism.

In its turn, Pakistan assured the US that its cooperation with China (the Chinese-Pakistani Economic Corridor project) would cause no damage to the US interests in the region. Moreover, it would pave a way for the American and other Western investment into the CPEC and the energy sector and for the participation of US companies in infrastructure projects.

What price the US paid to Pakistan for the latter’s assistance in resolving the Afghan military campaign issue:

The answer is simple: India. Islamabad has lately kept assuring Washington of the impossibility to consider the situation on its Eastern border separately from the other issues, while “the Indian aggression, according to the statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, is affecting the Afghan peace process.” In July this year, President D. Trump agreed to mediate the settlement of the Kashmir conflict between Islamabad and New Delhi. The Foreign Ministry of Pakistan welcomed the decision, viewing it as a withdrawal of the US from its former stance that the problem of Kashmir was a bilateral dispute between the two neighbors with nuclear weapons and that they are the only ones who can find the best solution. The Indian party immediately reacted to D. Trump’s statement regarding mediation. New Delhi adheres to its traditional policy of a bilateral settlement of the Kashmir crisis. The Kashmir mini-crisis of February 2019 when the two countries made air strikes against each other’s territories, confirmed the importance of developing a conflict de-escalation mechanism which has two dimensions: bilateral and international. The White House head’s statement made in August 2019 and confirming its mediation intentions undermines the positions of India in the region. If Pakistan plays its cards right regarding Afghanistan, it
will probably manage to convince the US to change its relations with India, and, thus, achieve a diplomatic victory in Kashmir.

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