Pakistan: the foreign policy of Prime Minister Sharif

On June 25, 2014, the adviser to the Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Aziz Ahmed, announced the “Strategic Vision of Pakistan’s Foreign Policy”. This statement is a report on the completion of the first year’s work of the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

As was declared in 2013, Pakistan’s foreign policy priorities were focused on strengthening relations with the countries in the region such as Afghanistan, India, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf Coast countries, and then followed by the U.S., the European Union and Russia. But in general, these priorities had the character of intent.

Last year saw some adjustments to the country’s foreign policy priorities. A distinctive feature of the new strategic vision is, “the security of its own country and not the security of others”. The mechanism by which to ensure security and key to its success is the liquidation of the growing extremist threat in a concerted Pakistani political and military strategy. In 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not mention a word of the generals, thereby underlying a disassociation from the military. But that was last year.

The next three priorities have been the traditional priorities over the course of the past fifteen years:

- to ensure economic recovery and the sustainable development of the country and to overcome the energy crisis. This can be achieved, according to the Foreign Ministry, through expanding investment and trade (not aid), resolving the energy crisis, and addressing extremism and terrorism;

- peaceful coexistence, i.e., the further development of regional ties and the strengthening of their own positions;

- the conversion of the strategic geographical location of Pakistan from a liability into an asset by promoting regional trade, transport, communication and energy projects with China, Central Asia and West Asia. This, in turn, aims to achieve a balance in the geo-strategic and geo-economic priorities of Pakistan.

The statement opens with a list of achievements on the further strengthening of the strategic partnership with Beijing, “Relations with China remain the cornerstone of our foreign policy”, President Asif Ali Zardari declared in June 2013. In the years 2013 and 2014 more than twenty investment projects in various sectors of the economy were signed. For its part, Pakistan supports the interests of China in Tibet and Taiwan.

In the Pakistan-China relationship, the leading role is played, as it in previous years, by Beijing, but each of the parties in serving their national interests receives benefits. Islamabad receives long-term investment and confidence in the implementation of major infrastructure projects. The search for new energy markets has forced China to look for geographical access to direct supply routes of hydrocarbons in the Strait of Hormuz. And since 2005, with the investment and technical assistance of China, construction began on the port of Gwadar. In 2013 and 2014, the project gave impetus to the development of a series of agreements for the construction of railways and highways through Pakistan’s Baluchistan province up to the point where it can connect with Chinese rail, road and energy
On Afghanistan over the past year, as the Foreign Ministry said in its statement, “constructive engagement has allowed us to reduce that deficit of trust.” However, despite attempts for the progressive movement of both parties towards each other, there has been little progress. There are several reasons that would explain this. Pakistani-Afghan relations in 2013 and 2014 developed as part of international efforts to resolve the internal political situation in Afghanistan. Numerous border incidents have complicated the relationship. Adding to the uncertainty were the presidential elections in Afghanistan from April to June, 2014. At the end of May 2014 President Barack Obama revised the U.S. timetable for the withdrawal of coalition forces, U.S. and NATO from Afghanistan, and on the contrary, it strengthened anti-terrorism efforts of Pakistani-Afghan cooperation. But there are continuing calls for the normalization of relations between Islamabad and Kabul, as well as a coordination of measures for the prevention of using territory against one another, the problems of transit trade, regulation and management of border control, the return of refugees to Afghanistan, the fight against the trafficking of drugs and the intensification of the dialogue at the regional and international level.

The relationship with New Delhi remains on the list and is characterized as being complex and urgent. Despite statements by Foreign Minister and by the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, on the government’s intention to seek sustainable and productive dialogue on issues of Kashmir, expanding economic cooperation has not resulted in meaningful progress. Dramatically complicating dialog between Pakistan and India were a series of border incidents centered on the line of control in 2013 and the spring of 2014. In 2013 and 2014, the Foreign Ministry has reversed policies from the successful experience of the former ruling Pakistan People’s Party (2008 - 2013.). In 2012, the PPP proposed to postpone any discussion of the main contentious issues (Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, etc.) and enter into a new round of discussions on the “humanitarian package”. From New Delhi’s perspective, there was a positive reaction, followed by consultations at the level of state secretaries, which led to a breakthrough in Pakistani-Indian relations. Visa agreements, in addition to customs agreement along with several others were signed. In 2013 and 2014, Pakistani Foreign Ministry did not take any initiatives. The objective reason for this was the expectation for parliamentary elections in India (April 2014), and the subsequent change of government in New Delhi. Building a relationship with the new Prime Minister of India, N.Modi, will be another challenge for Islamabad in the near future.

Relations with the U.S. are of a more ambiguous nature. This is partly due to the loss of interest by Washington towards Islamabad as a key ally in the fight against terrorism in the region. The withdrawal of coalition troops (U.S., NATO) from Afghanistan, the reorientation of the White House on the Asia-Pacific region, conflicts in Syria and Iraq has displaced the need to consider the positions of Islamabad as it had in the past. The United States Congress has cut financial aid to its ally; and despite protests from Pakistan, the U.S. continues to use drone strikes on militants hiding in places of the Pashtun tribes along the Pakistani-Afghan border. In 2014, Islamabad again aims to transform the substance of the relationship, as it remains interested in attracting American investment, increasing the volume of trade and opening up U.S. market markets for Pakistani goods.

The defining foreign policy achievement of the ruling administration was granting to the EU GSP + status in December 2013. Trade, investment and cooperation in the social sector are on the rise, while cooperation in fighting terrorism continues to strengthen. But efforts to reduce customs duties and providing trade preferences for Pakistani goods in the European market, which began in 2010, was at the moment going in circles. Pakistan eventually got its desired result, but only in December 2013 under Nawaz Sharif.

Commencing in June 2013, the new cabinet priority of foreign policy began paying attention to the countries of the Gulf, primarily the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Nawaz Sharif felt obliged to the Saudis for his salvation due to the fact that he sought political asylum in the country (intervention by Riyadh in 2001 influenced the decision to repeal the death penalty on the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, on charges of treason). In 2013 and 2014, the overall situation in the Middle East deteriorated in connection with the military in Egypt entering the political arena, the arrest of former President Mursi and the deterioration of the situation in Syria. The impetus for a change in the attitudes of the new authorities in Islamabad were the events in Cairo as well as the Syrian conflict. Over the past year, Islamabad has greatly enhanced military cooperation with the countries of the Gulf Coast.

Next in the ranking of priorities is Turkey and Iran. Istanbul is considered by Islamabad as one of the key regional allies militarily and as well as in trade; Islamabad has welcomed Turkish investments in key sectors of their economies. In contrast, building Pakistani-Iranian relations, the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan restricts itself to the study of practical ways to enhance trade within the guidelines of U.S. sanctions.
Russia occupies the last place in the ranking of priorities for the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cooperation with Moscow is considered primarily within the framework of international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In acknowledging the previous, it can be noted that Islamabad realizes turbulence events in different regions of the world and makes extremely cautious assessments, not allowing itself harsh statements.

*Natalya Zamaraeva, Ph.D. and Senior Research Fellow of the Pakistan sector, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".*