USA’s “Persian Golf”

Nowadays, hardly anyone would probably disagree with the statement that the Trump administration’s actions in the Middle East have been more than just careless. With its conduct and policies, Washington is in fact pushing away its key allies in the region, which we can clearly see by following U.S. strategy, first and foremost, in relation to Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Anti-American sentiments have been growing in these countries recently, and this has had a negative effect not only on Washington’s trade and economic relations but also on its military cooperation efforts. Difficulties plaguing their relationship with the United States as well as the desire, in such circumstances, to overcome their reliance on American weapons have already pushed Turkey and Saudi Arabia to look for military cooperation opportunities elsewhere. As a result, they have grown closer to the Russian Federation and have made decisions to purchase Russia’s S-400 missile systems, a more up-to-date option than the U.S. Patriot defense system, which did not prove its worth during the attack on oil facilities in the Middle Eastern Kingdom in September 2019.

The inability of several dozen heavily advertised by Washington launching stations for Patriot missiles (the hit-to-kill weapons guided by radar) to respond with a counter-strike in order to protect Saudi Arabia’s oil production facilities has resulted in disruption in cooperation between Washington and Riyadh in the military sphere. And the truth is that it is difficult to come up with a reasonable explanation for the failure of the United States to defend Saudi Arabia, after all, only along the northern border of the Kingdom, there are almost ninety launching stations for USA’s Patriot missile system. And most of them are its latest versions, i.e. PAC-2 and PAC-3. In addition, at the time, there were three guided missile destroyers equipped with Aegis Combat Systems (designed for sea-based ballistic missile defense) “on duty” near the coast of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf. In theory, even a mosquito should not have been able to breach these defenses. But, in reality, the outcome was diametrically opposite, thus confirming that the
failure of the American air defense systems must have stemmed from the discrepancy between actual capabilities of these Patriot and Aegis missile systems and those professed by Washington.

Additional tensions affecting the bilateral military cooperation and relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia arose after the incident at Naval Air Station Pensacola (in Pensacola, Florida) on 6 December, when Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani (a trainee at the base) killed 3 people and then himself. Treating this as an act of terrorism, U.S. authorities decided (in the middle of January) to expel 21 Saudi servicemen training at US military installations. It has been reported that they had social media content containing "jihadi or anti-American sentiment".

The aforementioned incident in Pensacola raises a number of questions, after all, it is well known that Saudi Air Force servicemen who take part in military trainings in the United States are vetted very thoroughly by intelligence agencies of both nations. Saudi participants for these training schemes are carefully selected, and often include individuals from rich families of high standing in the Kingdom, which substantially reduces the chances of them turning out to be "terrorists".

Another scandal between Riyadh and Washington erupted recently because of suspected involvement of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, in the hacking of the phone belonging to Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. According to The Guardian, a video file loaded with malware was sent from a WhatsApp account of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud as far back as 1 May 2018. After the hack, large amounts of data was then covertly stolen from the phone of Amazon’s CEO. A few months later, some of this information, including Jeff Bezos’ messages and photographs of him and his lover, were published by the National Enquirer, a U.S. tabloid newspaper. People close to the entrepreneur believe that the tech attack was a retaliation against Jeff Bezos by Riyadh for the criticism levelled against the Kingdom by The Washington Post (a newspaper that belongs to him) for its involvement in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

As a result of these developments, grievances on both sides (from Saudi Arabian leadership and the Trump administration) have accumulated recently.

Notably, this rise in tensions is taking place not too long after 45th U.S. President Donald Trump clearly demonstrated to the world that there was a special relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh was the first foreign capital he visited after he had become U.S. leader. During the trip, the two sides signed agreements in accordance to which Washington committed to supply $350 billion worth of weapons to the Kingdom over a 10-year period and to also modernize Saudi Arabia’s armed forces. However, difficulties plaguing Riyadh’s relations with Washington have pushed the former to consider the idea of finding new partners to cooperate with in the military sphere. And as a result, the Kingdom began negotiations to buy Russia’s S-400 missile systems with Moscow.

Still, military cooperation issues are not the only ones causing problems in the relationship between the United States and the Kingdom. Other factors include the destabilizing role Saudi Arabia has been playing in regional security, as, for instance, its involvement in the bloody conflict in Yemen; its support of extremist Islamic groups in the Syrian civil war, and its isolation of Qatar, where the most important U.S. military base in the Persian Gulf is located.

As a result, negotiations between Riyadh and Washington on nuclear cooperation have visibly run into difficulties because the aforementioned developments have forced the United States to question the feasibility of providing aid to the Kingdom to build nuclear reactors. But even if the USA refuses to share its nuclear technology with Saudi Arabia, there is nothing to prevent Riyadh from obtaining it from China, Russia or other countries. For instance, in 2015, the Russian Federation signed its own equivalent of the 123 Agreement (named after Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act) with Saudi Arabia, which is a prerequisite for nuclear deals between Moscow and other nations. And there have already been proposals from the Russian side to build a nuclear power plant in the Kingdom. At the end of the day, USA’s refusal to export nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia is a relatively futile attempt by the world power to prevent proliferation.

Judging by numerous articles critical of Saudi Arabia that have been published by American media outlets recently, nowadays, in the eyes of many Americans, disturbing aspects to the Saudi Arabia–United States relations outweigh any potential benefits of their further development. According to opinion surveys conducted in the USA after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, only 4% of respondents viewed Saudi Arabia as an ally, 23% considered it a friendly nation, and 42% perceived the kingdom as a foe. During nation-wide discussions about politics, a mood of skepticism (in relation to Riyadh) is especially strong among those who hope that increasing U.S. oil production capacity will
help the nation become less dependent on energy resources from the Middle East.

Still, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia’s feelings of excessive attachment to Washington are currently “ebbing”, the United States itself will continue to try and preserve its disintegrating alliance with the Kingdom. And such attempts will not be motivated by feelings of friendship and loyalty between these two nations but instead by the fear that Washington’s rivals (especially Beijing and Moscow) could derive potential benefits from the collapse of this cooperation.

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