Russia and Pakistan: the Fifth Year of “Friendship”

The changing political situation in the world, and the growing threat of terrorism, require that the world’s powers periodically expand the areas in which they cooperate at an international level, and this includes defense. As far as Russia goes, what is interesting is how it is gradually developing the scope of its interaction with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (IRP).

For many years, the IRP was more inclined to be an ally of the United States, including on defense-related matters. The Pakistani military was trained by American instructors, inside Pakistan, during the 1979-1989 Afghan war, and with support provided by the United States camps for mujahideen fighters were set up; back then, not even a word could be uttered about cooperation between the IRP and the USSR/Russia.

But times change, and now a gradual rapprochement can be observed between Pakistan and the Russian Federation - and against the backdrop of that, it is slowly moving away from the US. One thing that is of no small importance is that both Russia and the IRP feel the pressure from the growing threat of international terrorism, and that particularly concerns Afghanistan. Both countries are at the forefront in combating this phenomenon, but Washington seems to have begun to withdraw from Afghan affairs in recent years, shifting more of its attention to China.

Since 2016, Russia and Pakistan have begun to conduct their annual joint military exercise, which is dubbed “Friendship”. The Russian side is represented by military service personnel from its Southern Military District. The exercise has taken on anti-terrorism overtones, and they take turns holding it in both countries: “Friendship” was first held in the IRP; in 2017 it took place in the Russian republic of Karachay-Cherkessia, and Friendship-2018 was held in Pakistan again. The Friendship-2019 exercise took place in October 2019 in the Russian area of Kuban, and will be remembered for how the new Russian Mi-8AMTSh transport and assault helicopter, known as the Terminator, was used during it.

The venue for the fifth Russian-Pakistani exercise Friendship-2020 was the training base for IRP special operation forces in the village of Tarbela (Pakistan), and the IRP’s national counterterrorism center in Pabbi. Special forces soldiers from the 49th Combined Arms Army in Russia’s Southern Military District arrived in the IRP to take part in the event. The opening ceremony for the exercise took place on November 9, 2020, and besides Russian and Pakistani military the Russian Ambassador to the IRP, Danila Ganich, took part in it; this underscored the event’s political component. For almost two weeks, the Russian and Pakistani military practiced counterterrorism activities in the Pakistani mountains and forests, after which they ended the exercises with a spectacular assault on a simulated adversary’s base.

It is worth noting that while military cooperation between the two countries usually speaks to the fact that they interact politically at a very high level, in Pakistan’s case this is twice as true since in Pakistan the army is not just an armed force, but also a state-forming institution that unites the country - and has great influence on the foreign and domestic policies taken by the IRP. At the opening of the Friendship-2020 exercises, Russian Ambassador Danila Ganich spoke about this, calling the Pakistani army “the core of Pakistani statehood and society”.

It is believed that fostering military and political cooperation between Russia and Pakistan may elicit discontent from Russia’s principal military partner in South Asia, India, since relations between Pakistan and India are extremely complex, and have often spilled over into bloodshed. The last time an armed clash between Indian and Pakistani military forces occurred in February-March 2019, was accompanied by participation on the part of Pakistani illegal
armed groups, and resulted in dozens of casualties on both sides. In this regard, according to some experts, the Russian-Pakistani “Friendship” exercises could either cause - or be a sign of - cooling relations between New Delhi and Moscow. However, other experts believe that conclusions like this are premature. First, both Russia and India are aware that each country has its own interests and its own policies - therefore, for example, the Russian Federation cannot lodge any complaints against India owing to its strategic partnership with the United States. Incidentally, from November 3-20, 2020, at about the same time that the Friendship exercises were taking place, India held its scheduled Malabar exercise - its 24th one already - jointly with the United States (the opinion also exists that, to a certain extent, "Friendship" is Russia’s response to that), and this did not cause any issues on the Russian side.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that both countries - India and Pakistan - share a border with Afghanistan, where large swaths of territory are controlled by terrorist groups, and constitute a source of the terrorist threat for the entire world, especially for adjacent countries. And right now the terrorist threat from Afghanistan may intensify to an extreme degree by virtue of the decision made by the US to withdraw its troops from the country. Despite their various differences, New Delhi and Islamabad must be aware that this situation is dangerous for everyone. It is also clear that a huge role in combating Afghani terrorism belongs to the leadership in Pakistan. The border between the IRP and Afghanistan is very porous, and militants from terrorist organizations like the Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation) move across it freely, and control areas of territory on both sides. It is common knowledge that Pakistan’s leadership has led a relatively peaceful coexistence with the Taliban for a long time now. However, in recent years the IRP Armed Forces have been waging an increasingly active struggle against it.

After the Americans withdraw, terrorists in Afghanistan could reinforce their positions to such an extent that they could launch an offensive in areas that they control, including in those located in Pakistan. In this instance, both India and the rest of the region’s countries will be forced to provide all the necessary assistance to Pakistan’s lawful government to keep these Afghani-Pakistani terrorists in the bounds of certain pockets and not allow them to turn Pakistan into a springboard to perform their activities throughout all of Asia. And the fact that even now, without waiting for American troops to withdraw from Afghanistan, or for there to be an upward swing in the terrorist threat, Russia and Pakistan are practicing joint counterterrorism activities, holds tremendous importance for the entire region, including India - and New Delhi should have an understanding of this.

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