On Pakistan's Current Foreign Policy Course

The recent attention to Pakistan in describing aspects of the current stage of the Global Game is understandable. As one of the two “de facto” nuclear powers (along with India, Israel’s status, in this case, being labeled “volatile,” Pakistan occupies quite a distinctive place at the world’s gaming table, specifically, in the format of the China-U-India triangle, where one of the critical parts of the global political action is being played out.

Once again, Pakistan is not just sitting next to the noted “magnificent three” but participates in the game with its own cards. And what are those cards? When and how will they throw them on the gaming table? They are being watched with interest from every “corner” of the said political configuration.

The evolution in time of the answer to this question throughout Pakistan’s state independence (that is, since 1947) is quite adequately traced, for example, in a recent study by Carnegie Endowment experts.

We should add that at the current stage of development of the situation in the aforementioned triangle, the most remarkable and relevant reducing the importance of the United States in Pakistan’s foreign policy. It gradually evolved with the end of the Cold War and was accompanied by a parallel trend of the increasing importance of China. The relationship with Pakistan has always been positive, but in recent years it has been defined by strong terms: “all-weather,” “ironclad.”
In Pakistan-India relations, on the other hand, there remains a fundamental basis for contradictions related primarily to a set of issues stemming from the Kashmir problem. The February agreement on a cease-fire on the stretch of quasi-border that has divided India and Pakistan in the former Principality of Kashmir since 1948 is a significant positive development in bilateral political relations. But judging by the recent statements of senior military officials of both countries, this seems to be all that can be expected for the near future on this fundamental problem.

As for Pakistan’s relations with the United States under the new administration in Washington, we agree with those American experts who rule out the success of the attempts (allegedly) made by Islamabad in recent months to downgrade the importance of the “geopolitics” factor by replacing it with that of “geoeconomics”. The two are hard to separate at all. But this is especially true for characterizing the behavior in the outer arena of the leading players. Perhaps Islamabad is trying to derive some mercantile benefit from US interest in Pakistan in the process of solving the relatively local problem of a more or less unproblematic withdrawal from Afghanistan. But such attempts are indeed easy for Washington to see and not very highly regarded accordingly.

The US has long been faced with a different, global problem in the face of China, in the solution of which Pakistan can not be seen as an ally but at least a neutral country.

In this regard, the Wilson Center experts’ prediction that the Joe Biden administration will not show interest in a qualitative change like relations (particularly in the sphere of the economy) with the country, “which is a close ally of China.” The general conclusion of these experts is quite apparent: Of course, Washington will give India preference in the complexity of the latter’s relations with Pakistan. Again, based on the central problem of American foreign policy due to the global confrontation with China.

From the just-announced President Joe Biden’s draft budget for the next fiscal year allocates 324.5 million dollars to several South and Central Asian countries, of which something will “go” to Pakistan. But its “share” is designed to solve the rather narrowly applied problems of the same general problem of maintaining at least some control over the situation in the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In this regard, the speech of Pakistan Minister of Foreign Affairs Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi on May 26 in the Upper House of Parliament was a landmark event, who stated that his government would not allow the US to deploy military bases for counterterrorist attacks. In particular, they mentioned American drones, the uncontrolled use of which in the noughties on the territory of Pakistan was already a source of not a minor headache for his government.

Today, there could not be any other position on this issue. Islamabad faces the task of establishing relations with the future government of Afghanistan, which will almost certainly be dominated by the Taliban (banned in the Russian Federation). It is understandable how the latter would react to a neighboring country providing military bases to a bitter enemy that had just left their own territory.

The results of the regular trilateral (video) conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, held on June 4, proved that Islamabad intends to cooperate closely with Beijing in the Afghan direction. That is to say; there is no tangible indication that in recent months “Pakistan has swung swiftly in the direction of Washington.” As such, it is unlikely that any of the outcomes of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan’s trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in early May could be counted as such. If this fact is relevant to the state of US-Pakistani relations, it is very indirect.

And why would Pakistan turn away from Beijing toward Washington? You can’t take the nonsense seriously about China’s “technological recurrence.” The inventors of gunpowder, paper, the compass, porcelain, ... “recurrent”? Activated adherents of the “Chinese threat” thesis should more often remember how China was treated by the current “technological leaders” in the 19th century.

The April 21 terrorist attack in Quetta, which nearly killed the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, is no indication of the deterioration in Sino-Pakistani relations. It is safe to say that Islamabad has nothing to do with it. The Baluchi (Quetta is the capital of the Province of Baluchistan in Pakistan) has long struggled in various ways with the central government of Pakistan for their own statehood. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC passing through Baluchistan is considered to be the main threat. Throughout this project (and earlier during the modernization of the Gwadar Port), Chinese engineers and workers were repeatedly targeted by the Baluchi militant organizations.

It should be noted that the CPEC, as a key element of the more general Chinese Belt and Road Initiative project, has
long been the target of propaganda attacks by Western “well-wishers” of both China and Pakistan. The CPEC is exposed as an example of BRI member countries falling into a “debt trap” from China. “Well-wishers” also insist that state funding for the project (“the payoff from which may stretch for many years”) is at the expense of solving other, more urgent problems.

There is indeed much to talk about, but let us note that there has not been a single example of political “abuse” by Beijing of financial insolvency by some of its partners in implementing various branches of the BRI. Roads, bridges, industrial-energy facilities (not counting direct assistance in fighting epidemics, developing education) - here they are in front of our eyes. At the same time, some ledgers recorded numbers of money debts to the same Beijing, probably, preventing the leadership of the partner countries of China from sleeping peacefully.

But, again, they have not had any real trouble of a political and economic nature so far. In this case, the principal capital that Beijing “earns” is outside the sphere of the mercantile aspects of the “Global Game.” In this regard, see how the already mentioned Carnegie Endowment for International Peace experts observed that “China is not only exporting its model of development ... but also assimilating local, traditional norms and practices.”

Thus, there is every reason to believe that since the new administration came to power in the United States, there has not (and could not) be any fundamental change in Pakistan’s foreign policy positioning.

_**Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.**_