On the External Factor of the Afghan Problem

Recent events around and on the territory of Afghanistan strengthen the author's opinion that a positive solution to the problem of this nation is possible only based on the formation of a more or less coherent "orchestra," including China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran and, of course, the new leadership of Afghanistan itself.

Such an approach to the Afghan problem is a direct consequence of its general assessment as one of the important elements of the "Great Game" unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region, where the focus of world events is shifting. The problem itself is not a local autonomous phenomenon and, even less so, is not a consequence of the activity of the notorious "terrorists," who play a pretty instrumental role in this game.

The U.S. is missing from the list above, despite being one of the major world players, although it retains signs of presence in the problem in question. In the author's view, in this case, it would be better for everyone if Washington followed the principle of "leave while you are leaving."

With the Taliban (still banned in Russia) in a dominant position in Afghanistan, it is unclear how a recent enemy could be of any use to them. But the neighbors listed above will come in handy in the course of solving the challenging problems that will immediately arise as soon as you have to deal with the management of the conquered state.
The new leadership, of course, knows better what needs to be done first. But “from an outside perspective,” the list of priority measures might look like this: suppression of all sorts of residual armed excesses, apparently inevitable, as in any civil war (one of the sides of which, moreover, enjoyed the support of the interventionists); establishing control over its own border zone and contacts with border guards of neighboring states; the formation of a system of law and order, which everyone must adhere to; determination of the administrative structure of the country with the provision of a certain autonomy for minorities; the beginning of economic recovery with the suppression of the drug business, in which the (recall, banned) "Taliban" were very successful in the late 90s.

Again, neighboring countries can play a very productive role in all this. But, of course, only in the format of the aforementioned "orchestra," that is, acting in concert on the path of movement toward jointly formulated goals, which is simply unattainable if one or the other participant sees the other as a source of serious trouble or even as a potential enemy. In that case, Afghanistan will again be transformed from an object of joint efforts, as it has been for centuries with the various warriors on its territory, into an instrument of a struggle between the participants.

In this regard, the state and trends of relations between the Asian giants India and China, whose sphere of influence includes two other participants in the Afghan problem, namely Pakistan and Iran, deserve special attention. The highly complex system of Sino-Indian relations is under the constant scrutiny of New Eastern Outlook.

Today, its primary irritant remains in one of the highland sections of the quasi border in Ladakh, the ownership of which is the subject of disputes between the parties. At the beginning of August, there was a 12th round of negotiations at the level of corps commanders regarding the separation of the military units involved in last year's incidents. The results of these negotiations are assessed as "cautiously optimistic". The meeting of Indian and Chinese Ministers of Foreign Affairs on the sidelines of the SCO event in Dushanbe on July 14 provided the impetus for this. It was devoted mainly to the Afghan problem.

But on the same day, an event occurred that still lingers, taking on shades with grave consequences for Sino-Indian relations. We are talking about the previously mentioned terrorist attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Pakistani province bordering Afghanistan, which killed nine Chinese engineers and workers, as well as four Pakistanis. They were all on a bus that terrorists had bombed on its way to the hydropower plant. Since 2017 it is being built by a Chinese company in the headwaters of the Indus river near Dasu.

Once again, we note that Chinese specialists working in Pakistan on various construction sites have long been the target of attacks by diverse terrorist groups.

Nevertheless, in this case, let us identify a few specific points. First, it became the bloodiest in years. Secondly (and perhaps most importantly), never before have Pakistani authorities so clearly pointed the finger at India as the mastermind of a terrorist attack against the Chinese presence in the country.

Earlier, semi-official statements were made about the "provocation by Indian secret services" of the Baloch to anti-Chinese actions in connection with the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor facilities. The Baloch see the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor today as a key challenge in their struggle for independence from Pakistan. But Balochistan is on the opposite side of Pakistan (stretched in the shape of a "sausage" 3000 km long) with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa adjacent, again, to Afghanistan. It is inhabited by Pashtuns, who are the backbone of the Taliban movement.

A month after the terrorist attack in Dasu, Pakistani Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi stated that it had been organized by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (also, of course, banned in Russia) based in the same Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In this case, according to Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the latter was connected with the Indian foreign intelligence service RAW (the Research and Analysis Wing) and a similar service of the (now former) government of Afghanistan.

Again, RAW has been mentioned before in connection with the not infrequent terrorist attacks in the country in the rhetoric of Pakistani officials. But, as a rule, it was about bilateral India-Pakistan relations, which look bad more or less all the time, and the participation of the intelligence services of both countries in some "unfriendly" actions against each other does not surprise anyone.

But, for the first time, Indian intelligence services have been accused of provoking Pakistan's conflict with its key ally China. Considering that public statements at the ministerial level cannot include unsubstantiated speculations, the question arises (more or less relevant for all countries) about the status of control over the work of the "military/security/intelligence" links of the state organism. It is tempting for these "links" to decide what is essential
for the country and what can wait.

Meanwhile, in the case of the China-India tandem, the cost of this issue is too high. We are talking about a set of relations between the two leading Asian powers and the prospect of their working together on Afghan issues.

Note that the Chinese leadership will not be able (even if they wanted to) "to let go" of an attack of this magnitude, which immediately became the subject of discussion on the phone of Prime Ministers Li Keqiang and Imran Khan.

The prospect of India's involvement in Afghanistan is also becoming quite dim because the new Afghan leadership is inclined to prioritize relations with China and Russia. While the previous ("secular") government favored India. In this regard, the harshly-worded warning sent by the Taliban to Delhi against trying to "interfere" in the domestic turmoil in Afghanistan was notable.

Some are very uncomfortable with the prospect of a friendly relationship between the two Asian giants and, in particular, their productive work together in Afghanistan. This could upset a much larger game in the entire Indo-Pacific region to build an anti-Chinese coalition, in which India's participation is of crucial importance.

Here again, let us point to the potentially positive role of the Russian Federation both in the Afghan problem and in smoothing out the contradictions between its main external actors. Together with China, Russia should initiate a process under the general meme “fewer weapons; more politics, diplomacy, economy, trade.”

The important thing is not to fall victim to the utterly presumptuous and endlessly stupid propaganda about "cutting off heads," "stoning women," and "the (imminent) collapse of the United States." It is, on the whole, parasitizing on other people's tragedies and seemingly ready to fall back into a state of prolonged hysteria (as it did two months earlier).

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