Washington’s Rift with Riyadh Grows Deeper

With Joe Biden’s arrival in the White House, several irritants have once again come to the forefront in US-Saudi Arabia relations. The Saudis are unhappy with President Biden’s intention to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in relations with Iran, as well as the US refusal to see the Houthi movement in Yemen as a “terrorist organization”. The Biden administration’s repeatedly expressed desire to bring the issue of human rights abuses, which was not raised under Donald Trump, back into the realm of bilateral relations, was also of particular concern. Riyadh’s global criticism of Washington’s sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia by Western powers to continue the war in Yemen did not go unnoticed, as did the US authorities’ intention to review their arms deals with the Arab monarchy.

Besides, this spring, Washington announced the start of the withdrawal of Patriot and THAAD air defense/anti-missile defense systems from the Middle East, including the territory of Saudi Arabia, which is the US ally in confronting Iran. The move was very painfully received in Riyadh as it significantly undermines the Saudi kingdom’s security in the face of continuous missile attacks from the Houthis and Iran. The Pentagon attributed this withdrawal of US anti-aircraft systems to their alleged “limited numbers” and the need to use them in other regions, particularly against China and North Korea. However, Saudi experts do not exclude the possibility that one of the excellent reasons for such a step by Washington was the apparent inability of Patriot systems to combat drones. In these circumstances, the US is simply afraid of losing international credibility due to the evidence of the inability of their air defense system to protect from missiles and drones that fire on Saudi infrastructure. So the other day, Saudi Prince Turki Al Faisal explicitly pointed out to the United States that Washington simply needs to stop withdrawing Patriot air defense systems from the kingdom to prove its previous friendship with Saudi Arabia.

It cannot be ruled out that, amid the compromise of the Americans in Afghanistan, the volume of arms purchases
However, these moves by Washington are only further pushing Saudi Arabia to strengthen and expand ties with Russia and China. In these circumstances, as well as several other difficulties in relations with Washington in the recent period, have prompted the Middle Eastern Kingdom to think about diversifying military cooperation and its military procurement. Therefore, it is not surprising that Saudi Arabia has turned its gaze to Russia, with its superior weaponry well known worldwide, which has already proven its worth in the fighting in Syria.

Wanting to overcome its complete dependence on American weapons systems, as early as 2020, Riyadh began to negotiate with Moscow over the possible supply of S-400 air defense systems. After the attacks on Saudi targets, it became apparent in the Middle Eastern kingdom that American systems are flawed, and Americans are not prepared to defend their allies. Saudi Arabia has therefore taken a closer look at Russia’s defensive and strike systems: the S-400 surface-to-air missile system, TOS-1A Solntsepyok heavy flamethrower system, the SU-35 multipurpose fighter jet and the Iskander-E tactical missile system.

Relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia have not previously been known for their warmth and mutual trust. Recently, however, the parties have managed to take a step towards each other and reassess mutual interests. Despite Saudis’ discontent with the developing cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, which the kingdom sees as the primary source of threat. However, deep regional problems with its neighbors, including Iran and Qatar, as well as growing criticism of actions against Saudi Arabia by traditional Western allies, have prompted the Middle Eastern Kingdom to cooperate with Russia. The rapprochement between Russia and Saudi Arabia was officially explained by Awwad Bin Saleh Al-Awwad, Minister of Culture and Information of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He stated that Riyadh seeks “to diversify its foreign policy and foreign economic relations, as necessary for the implementation of the strategic development program Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 2030.” Indeed, due to the recent visits of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Riyadh and the Saudi Princes and King of Saudi Arabia to Moscow, the participation of an impressive Saudi delegation at the Military-Technical Forum “Army-2021” in Kubinka near Moscow on August 23 have boosted business contacts and military cooperation between the two countries. Russia is also important for the kingdom to develop nuclear energy. The Saudi authorities have previously announced plans to build dozens of nuclear power plants in the country, and Moscow would also like to be involved in these projects.

The views of the two countries coincide on many issues. For example, Russia and Saudi Arabia believe that the State of Palestine should be established within the 1967 borders as a result of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations with the participation of international mediators. In addition, Saudi Arabia and Russia share the same views on what is happening in Egypt: both sides support President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, viewing the Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, as terrorists. Another reason for such a rapid rapprochement between the two countries is the sharp fall in oil prices in late 2014 and early 2015. Moscow and Riyadh face similar economic challenges: budget deficits, economic diversification, and reduced dependence on oil exports. However, Russia and Saudi Arabia are interested in maintaining high energy prices, given that they jointly provide 25% of global oil production. In 2016, countries reached agreements to reduce black gold production between OPEC and independent producing countries.

American journalists were jealous of the fact that the Saudi authorities went into direct contact with Russia on military cooperation. Thus, reflecting the opinion of the current US authorities, Breaking Defense writes that the agreement between Russia and the Saudi monarchy clearly demonstrates the willingness of the latter to go beyond the established framework of military partnership with the United States and a long-standing focus on Washington.

In these circumstances, and fearing such a Russian-Saudi rapprochement, the US has called on Riyadh and its other allies to avoid significant defense deals with Russia, commenting on the signing of a military cooperation agreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia. In addition, in a clear demonstration of Riyadh’s aversion to the kingdom’s show of rapprochement with Russia, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin postponed a planned August visit to Saudi Arabia under the blatantly contrived pretext of allegedly “having problems with its schedule.”

On the whole, when Biden came to power, the main objectives of the United States in the Saudi track of Middle Eastern policy were outlined as follows: minimize direct involvement in the affairs of the region, preserving maximum influence, reduce dependence on Riyadh, keeping the kingdom in its orbit and not allowing it to get closer to Russia and China. Biden is strictly following his campaign promise to treat the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia like a “pariah.” The Democratic administration has downgraded contacts with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and also imposed sanctions on people and organizations in his inner circle. Meanwhile, Washington believes that such a policy, among other things, could strengthen opposition to Mohammed bin Salman.

However, these moves by Washington are only further pushing Saudi Arabia to strengthen and expand ties with
Russia. As for Biden’s promise to “turn Saudi Arabia into a pariah,” even the British publication The Economist questions this implementation by the American president, as the US remains dependent on Riyadh both on oil issues and in terms of its strategic interests in the region. Therefore, the White House will have to pursue a policy that prevents Washington’s unpleasant “impulses” by Saudi Arabia while allaying “its worst fears.”

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