The Gap between Washington and Islamabad is Widening

In recent years, there has been an undisguised deterioration in relations between Washington and Islamabad. However, this breakdown with a country once considered a critical military and political ally of the United States in South Asia and the Middle East has long been evident.

The US-Pakistan alliance has already been severely damaged since the killing of Osama bin Laden by US commandos inside Pakistan in 2011 behind the backs of Pakistani intelligence agencies. This and many other incidents have badly strained relations between the Pakistani and US authorities. The result is that the number of US-positive people in Pakistan has plummeted in recent years and now stands at no more than 10-12% of the population.

During Barack Obama’s presidency, the deterioration in relations continued, with US authorities increasing pressure on Pakistan by refusing in 2016 to provide $300 million in military aid to a key ally in South Asia. The Pentagon’s decision attributed to "insufficient activity by Pakistani security forces in combating the Haqqani network (a terrorist group banned in Russia) operating in the border areas with Afghanistan." Much of this escalation coincided with the growing crisis in Islamabad’s relations with India accusing Pakistan of supporting terrorists in Kashmir. Washington has clearly decided to side with New Delhi.

US cooperation with Pakistan was also severely tested in the “Trump era”. During his speech at Fort Myer base in Arlington, Virginia, on August 22, 2017, he actually accused Islamabad of supporting terrorists. Moreover, despite the Afghan grouping of US troops being supplied through the Pakistani border, the United States deliberately went to this cooling of relations with Islamabad.
However, there is reasonable ground to believe that the real reason for the US falling-out with Pakistan is not related to terrorism but China’s growing influence on the Islamic Republic’s policies. In this context, Washington’s sharp reorientation towards developing and deepening relations with India is a future counterweight to Chinese expansion in White House policy. India itself hastened to take advantage of the situation to pull the United States to its side in the dispute with Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, an unprecedented decision was taken in January 2018 by Pakistan's leadership. Islamabad has responded to the American accusations with dignity, showing that the nuclear weapons state with a population of many millions is no longer going to bow and scrape before "Uncle Sam" by making guilty excuses. As a result, Pakistani authorities decided to suspend cooperation with the United States through the Ministry of Defense and intelligence agencies. In fact, it was an indication that the country was abandoning further alliance with Washington. Moreover, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry explained American charges against the country because the US and NATO campaign in Afghanistan is failing, so Washington is looking for a scapegoat, and Pakistan appears to be a very convenient country for American politicians and generals in this case. Of course, Islamabad itself would never take such a demonstrative step if the US had not created the preconditions for a deterioration in bilateral relations.

However, it should be emphasized that the US alliance with Pakistan has always been purely situational, tactical in nature. Therefore, this partnership has had a very shaky foundation from the beginning. The long-standing “friendship” of the two states was based primarily on the confrontation with the Communist block during the Cold War. At that time, the Soviet Union was supporting India, Pakistan's main adversary, and was also active in neighboring Afghanistan, which could not fail to alarm the elite of Pakistan. In these circumstances, it was Pakistan that Washington chose as the key link in helping the Afghan mujahideen, who were fighting against the Soviet troops and the army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

Anti-US sentiment in Pakistan also has a long history. Back in 1979, an angry mob set fire to the American Embassy in Islamabad - the diplomats barely escaped. Even then, Pakistani society did not believe in friendly relations with the United States. It was the mistrust of Washington that led, among other things, to the South Asian nation’s authorities categorically refusing to reduce its tactical nuclear weapons capabilities at the suggestion of the White House in 2015.

The arrival at the beginning of the year of Joe Biden's new administration in the White House initially seemed to offer an encouraging sign regarding a possible settlement of bilateral relations. And the occasion was the announcement of the inclusion in the Biden administration of two Americans of Pakistani origin. These are Ali Zaidi, as the first Deputy White House National Climate Advisor, and Salman Ahmed, he joined Biden's foreign policy team as the Director of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff. Ahmed previously served as senior director of strategic planning for Barack Obama’s United States National Security Council. Salman Ahmed has also served as chief of staff of the US mission to the UN and as senior political advisor to the US permanent representative to the UN.

However, given that Joe Biden's election campaign (as well as Donald Trump's) was in serious competition for Indian Americans votes, the above appointments have not changed the White House's attitude towards India's already established influence in the US. And a striking example of this is Joe Biden's nomination, less than 100 hours before his inauguration, of 20 Indian Americans, including 13 women, to key posts in his administration, a record in itself for this small ethnic community which makes up 1% of the country's population.

For years, Islamabad's significant contributions to the "war against terrorism" in Afghanistan have sustained the close ties between Washington and Islamabad. But the cooling of relations between Washington and Islamabad has to some extent devalued Pakistan's contribution to the American war against terrorism. It has also indirectly weakened the country's special status in international affairs. This also harmed the implementation of the US deal with the Taliban, as evidenced, among other things, by the course of events in Afghanistan as US troops withdrew from the country. There will always be a risk of terrorism, and Biden objectively cannot discount Pakistan's importance in bringing stability to the Afghan situation. With respect to Pakistan, Washington's choice, of course, will certainly have to determine the balance of US policy with both New Delhi and Islamabad, where the White House expects each of these countries to fulfill "its purpose" in carrying out relevant and essential functions for the US. That is, India to contain China through the Indo-Pacific strategy and Pakistan to fight terrorism in Afghanistan.

However, the United States, which has long since forgotten how to use diplomacy to seek the truth and resolve complex inter-state issues and has switched entirely to a policy of threats and sanctions, has decided to use a decidedly coercive method in determining the prospects for future bilateral relations with Pakistan. And this was...
confirmed by United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who said on September 13 that "the US administration intends to assess the role Pakistan has played in supporting the radical Taliban (banned in Russia) and the events in Afghanistan". During a speech in Washington, the secretary of state noted that Pakistan's actions "in many cases go against US interests." In this regard, he said, US authorities intend to "review in the coming days or weeks" what "role Pakistan has played in the last 20 years" in the context of the situation in Afghanistan and the country's takeover by the Taliban. According to Blinken, Washington will also discuss what role, from the US perspective, Pakistan should "play in Afghanistan in the coming years, and what it needs to do."

To support the US position on Pakistan in the media space and with the explicit coordination with Washington, the German publication Die Welt even published an article "The main enemy has always sat in Islamabad" with explicit "recommendations" on how to punish Pakistan for the apparent defeat of the US in Afghanistan.

However, such moves by the White House and its "advisers" in Western Europe are unlikely to restore the former "cooperative business relationship" between the US and Pakistan.

_Vladimir Platov, expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._