Pakistan and the New Afghan Government

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 led to the country falling under the control of the Islamist movement Taliban (banned in Russia). The fall of the previous Afghan government caused deep concern for all the countries that share a border with Afghanistan. Pakistan is worried about the recent events in Afghanistan, because in Pakistani society radical Islamists enjoy great support among the population, and a large number of terrorist organizations are active in the country. The strengthening of the Taliban’s position could have a negative impact on Pakistan’s well-being.

On August 23, 2021, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said that the world community should start a dialogue with the Taliban. According to the Pakistani foreign minister, other countries must maintain contact with the Taliban. Shah Mahmood Qureshi said Pakistan is doing all it can to help stabilize Afghanistan. The Pakistani foreign minister called on the states neighboring Afghanistan to take action that would lead to a de-escalation of the conflict in that state.

The Afghan-Pakistani border is 2,670 km long. It is a challenge for Pakistan to maintain control of its borders with Afghanistan, as the border runs along the desert and there are settlements along the border areas whose residents
have a negative attitude toward the government forces.

The Pakistani leadership is interested in order in Afghanistan, because if there is none, Pakistan may face an acute problem in the form of Afghan refugee flows in a very foreseeable future. Islamabad does not need such an unpleasant turn of events, because the standard of living in Pakistan is relatively low, and an influx of refugees would painfully affect Pakistan’s economy, which has already been hit hard by the financial crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Pakistani authorities are also concerned about the fact that the Afghan regions adjacent to Pakistan are populated by ethnic Pashtuns. Today, the Pashtuns in Pakistan are the dominant ethnic group which plays the most important role in the political life of the state. It should be noted that the Pashtuns are the core of the Taliban. If Pakistani Pashtuns, inspired by the example of their tribesmen from Afghanistan, were to radicalize en masse, this could lead to a significant deterioration of the situation in Pakistan.

It is important to mention that among Pashtuns there are supporters of creating a sovereign state, Pashtunistan, in the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Pashtuns are the majority of the population. This idea does exist, but its implementation is still out of the question. As noted earlier, Pashtuns occupy almost all the top positions in Pakistan, so they rarely share separatist ideas.

However, there is an Islamist group, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP; banned in Russia), which regularly commits terrorist acts in Pakistan. The TTP, as a separate organization, is actively cooperating with the Afghan Taliban to jointly establish an Islamic state on the territory of both countries. The Pakistani government is actively fighting the TTP on the grounds that it poses a serious threat to Pakistan’s territorial integrity and national security. If the Afghan Taliban becomes stronger, it will provide significant support to the TTP. The strengthened TTP would be a great challenge for Pakistan’s economy, as the state would have to significantly increase spending to deal with the domestic threat.

Afghanistan is not a mono-ethnic state: the country is home to a wide variety of nationalities. The Taliban who seized power are Pashtuns. The Taliban’s plan was to have a government composed entirely of Pashtuns, but neighboring countries insisted that power should be distributed proportionally among all nationalities. And according to many experts, an inclusive government is one of the pillars of a united Afghanistan. If other nationalities are deprived of the opportunity to gain power, separatist sentiments will be popular among them for the foreseeable future.

On September 17, 2021, Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan and President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon met in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. The press service of the leader of Tajikistan stated that the sides agreed to organize negotiations between the Taliban and the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, which is based on Tajiks living on Afghan territory, in Dushanbe. Rahmon reported that the Pakistan-Tajikistan talks resulted in an agreement to promote peace in Afghanistan. Imran Khan, for his part, said he had discussed at length with his Tajik counterpart how to ensure order and stability in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. The Prime Minister of Pakistan noted that Tajikistan and Pakistan are concerned about the conflict between the Taliban and the Tajiks in Panjsher.

Imran Khan called on the president of Tajikistan to influence the Tajiks of Panjsher, and he himself promised to reach agreements with the Taliban and the Pashtuns. The Pakistani prime minister stressed that Afghanistan is home to many peoples, so harmony can only be achieved after an inclusive government is formed, and his country will urge the Taliban to do so.

On September 19, 2021, Pakistan entered into negotiations with the Taliban to establish an inclusive government. The Pakistani prime minister said the multinational composition of the cabinet will help Afghanistan move to a new level of development. Imran Khan is confident that ending the Afghan conflict will benefit the entire region.

Despite the fact that Pakistan is a rather conservative state with, for example, functioning sharia courts, the state strives to keep up with the most developed countries. Many of today’s Pakistani politicians studied at the best universities in Europe and are familiar with the Western way of life. In particular, in September 2021, Pakistan became the home of the Afghan women’s soccer team, which the Taliban had banned from participating in sports.

Pakistan’s leadership understands that their troubled neighbor needs help. The world community is reluctant to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan’s new government, and the Taliban will not be able to constantly quell citizen discontent. Without the support of neighboring countries, Afghanistan might not be able to establish itself as a state, which would have a negative impact on the development of the entire region. Pakistan understands this, and
therefore contributes to the resolution of the conflict.

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