Pakistani Regional Influence is on the Rise

In recent months in the wake of the events in Afghanistan, Pakistan has conspicuously increased its regional influence, a fact noticed not only by the most active international actors, but also by Pakistan itself.

Thus, on September, 22 at a business conference in Islamabad Pakistani Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Ahmed Chaudhry highlighted the increased regional importance of his country pointing out that under Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan has now become a global decision-maker. To support his claim the Minister stressed out that Pakistan is taking an active part in Taliban’s efforts to form an inclusive Afghan government (banned in Russia) and is engaged in connecting Gwadar and Karachi with Central Asian countries by rail via Mazar-i-Sharif as part of the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. In addition, the government has initiated 1,100 various projects involving other countries as well.

After a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan the US has found another reliable communications channel with Taliban via Pakistan. It became another venue in addition to Doha where under the auspices of CIA office in Central Asia talks with Taliban on the US military withdrawal were held. In an effort to establish a line of communication with Taliban CIA decided to turn to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which has close ties with the militant organization and had previously helped the US to facilitate contacts with it.
Beijing also decided to turn Pakistan into its foothold in the region so that it could, among other things, check US regional influence thus becoming a leading investor in the country’s economy. For that reason Chinese investors have funneled more than $70 billion into Pakistani economy.

Meanwhile, Pakistan can capitalize on its close ties with Taliban helping the US and CIA not only to escape the Afghan trap with dignity, but also to punish the culprits who had killed the US military personnel in Kabul airport during the evacuation. To achieve this goal without Pakistani intelligence’s aid will be a difficult task. China also takes interest in Pakistan’s mediation services regarding not only ensuring stability in Afghanistan but also expeditious recognition of Taliban regime in the West. In early September, to address these matters General Faiz Hamid, the head of Pakistani intelligence, visited Kabul to discuss with Taliban leaders security issues as well as economic and trade engagement thus becoming the first top foreign official to set foot on Afghan soil after Taliban seized power in this country.

At the same time on September, 13 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was quick to announce that the US administration intends to assess Pakistan’s role in supporting the radical movement of Taliban as well in the events in Afghanistan. The US authorities are set to look at “what role Pakistan has played over the last 20 years” amid the events in Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, he said. Washington will also take up the issue of what role, from the US perspective, Pakistan “has to play in the coming years and what it will take for it to do that”. During his speech the Secretary of State said that actions of Pakistan in many cases “are in conflict with” US interests although at some points the interests of the two powers converge. Blinken stressed out that the US cooperates with Pakistan on a range of issues regarding counterterrorism.

With Taliban’s grip on power now secure, the political significance of Pakistan has clearly swelled. Let’s recall that Pakistan was one of the three countries (the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) that had recognized Taliban government in 1990. It also was the last to sever official ties in 2001. For more than two decades Pakistan provided injured Taliban leaders with shelter and medical care. Many Afghans who joined the movement were educated in Pakistani religious schools. For the first time in its history, Pakistan has gained global influence since such important countries as Russia, China and the US rely on its active participation in helping the interested parties in Afghanistan to engage in mutual cooperation as a new political landscape in Central and South Asian region emerges, which is a matter of interest for them.

Pakistan’s significantly increased importance was also visible during the last SCO summit as Islamabad, along with Iran, China and Russia, took an active part in debating Afghanistan’s political future. And this is understandable since Islamabad remains the only regional actor that has a direct sway on Taliban.

It should also not be forgotten that control over Taliban in Afghanistan is vital for Pakistan itself since it wants to stave off Taliban’s merging with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (banned in Russia) or with other Taliban militants present in the country who are in control of mountainous federal territories. Such coalition would entail the creation of a gigantic Pashtunistan, a threat to Pakistan’s very existence.

Proving this point in Islamabad on September, 12 General Faiz Hameed, the head of Inter-Service Intelligence, hosted a meeting of chiefs of intelligence services of Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Iran and China. The participants discussed the situation in Afghanistan, exchanged views on what was going on in the country and also discussed measures needed to ensure “lasting peace and stability” in the region. According to Mohammad Sadiq, Pakistan’s special envoy to Afghanistan, participants “were unanimous that peace in Afghanistan is vital for security, stability and prosperity of the entire region”. He said that the region-wide approach and the active role of Pakistan in this process will help to both realize the potential of the republic, and resolve problems of mutual interest.

Meanwhile it is not coincidence that Pakistan, fearing that Afghan destabilization will have a “ricochet” effect on it, is simultaneously maneuvering within the coalition Pakistan — Qatar — Turkey. So now the Pakistani intelligence is trying to determine how deep is the rift between the parties and what it could mean both for Islamabad and the region as a whole.

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