Pakistan in the Yemen Crisis

On April 6, 2015, Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain convoked the 4th joint session of the two houses of parliament. The Pakistani Minister of Defence, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, addressed the parliament, speaking about the only question on the agenda. Namely, "security issues amidst the crisis in Yemen". The session was convened at the request of the opposing parties with the view of developing a foreign policy in the Middle East and defining the role of Islamabad in the foreign military conflict.

Let us remind you that on March 26, 2015, Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif promised "unconditional military support" of the actions of the Arab coalition led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against Houthis who control much of the Yemeni territory. He sounded his statement, firstly, pointing at the fact, that the royal family had asked Islamabad to intervene and, secondly, reminding of a need to defend the holy sites in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan saw a sharp division of views.

Khawaja Muhammad Asif, the Minister of Defense, stated before the parliament that "the Saudi leadership appreciated Pakistan’s unreserved support to Saudi Arabia’s territorial integrity and expressed the hope that Pakistan would join the coalition for Operation Decisive Storm by contributing aircraft, naval vessels and ground troops." He said that due to the deterioration of the situation, Pakistan cannot let the sovereignty of Saudi Arabia be endangered...

Thus, the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML N) led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sees the federal army as the foreign policy instrument in the Middle East.

There were two regional factors that hindered Islamabad’s decision to join the military efforts of the Arab coalition.

First, in early April 2015 as a result of constant airstrikes, the crisis in Yemen was already in the "hot phase" amidst the coalition’s failure to make real progress.

The second factor was the agreement that the P5+1 and Iran managed to reach in Lausanne on April 3, 2015 with regard to Iran’s nuclear program. Pakistan officially welcomed the mutual understanding between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5 + 1.

Given the rapidly changing realities, with his statement of March 26, 2015 Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif drove himself into a corner, ending up "in between the past and the future."

- "in the past" is the restoration of Saudi Arabia’s trust for the saved life, the long-term financial assistance, etc. (Nawaz Sharif still inertly relies on the ancient XX century paradigm engendered by the worshiping Saudi Arabia's petrodollars, multi-year sanctions against Iraq, and others);

- "in the future" is Iran’s rapid return in April 2015 to the global hydrocarbons market, which many, including Pakistan, hardly expected. The new geopolitics of the region dictate a further change of geo-economics, and Tehran is becoming a leading force. The new Iranian role is a different topic altogether.

Many in Pakistan have devoted attention to the period of the military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, given that the conflict has lasted since autumn 2014. In June 2014 the General Staff of the Pakistani Army launched a full-
scale military campaign against local and foreign militants, and, according to the Chief of Army Staff Gen. Sharif, in April 2015, it is nearing completion. The elimination of a major terrorist threat in Pakistan coincided with the beginning of the Saudi-led military operation against the Houthis in Yemen.

In its early years, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan created two trademarks that are internationally recognized. These are its nuclear program and its military forces. Today the question of exporting to the Middle East human military "commodities", namely, the Pakistan army (trained for several decades, battle-hardened in operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistani rebels and numerous foreign terrorists) is definitely on the agenda.

The Pakistani media have recently published information on Saudi Arabia’s plans to "... deploy within 3-4 years the full corps of the Pakistani army under the command of the KSA." At the same time, Saudi Arabia stated that it will only let the contracts to the Sunni Pakistani soldiers and officers. About 70% of the Pakistani military are Sunni, and 30% are Shia. This initiative was harshly criticized in Pakistan. It was underlined that Saudi are trying "to not only divide the population, but divide our army as well, meaning that... when a soldier puts on a uniform, he fights for his country, not for his religious beliefs." Bearing this in mind, many viewed Pakistan’s participation in the armed Middle Eastern conflict as a major player as "a way to erode the unity of the armed forces, signing a death sentence to a professional force like the Pakistan Army."

Pakistan realizes that air strikes on the Yemeni territory controlled by the Houthis are no struggle for the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia which is not threatened by anything: the civil war is taking place in a third country, and Islamabad should not take part in it.

Members of both Houses of Parliament expressed different viewpoints while discussing Pakistan's role in the Yemeni crisis, most of which were that there was no need to send ground forces, air forces and naval vessels to the conflict zone in the Middle East.

At the same time, Islamabad is under strong pressure from the regional players. Turkey and Iran agree on the need to stop the crisis in Yemen. Tehran's concerns over earlier plans of Islamabad were once more stressed by unscheduled visit to Islamabad of Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif.

On the other hand, Egypt's Minister of Defence, General Sedgu Sobkhi Sayed immediately arrived at the Pakistani ground force headquarters to discuss the redeployment of Pakistani troops to Arab Coalition headquarters.

The USA, for its part, supported the plans of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to join the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia against the Houthis in Yemen. Washington has accelerated arms deliveries to the alliance and their allies, in particular to Pakistan. In early April 2015 US State Department approbated Pakistan's old request to purchase American helicopters, missiles and other equipment amounting to 952 million dollars.

If the Pakistani parliament approves military participation in the crisis in the Middle East, the chances of a ground operation in Yemen will increase dramatically. This can lead to deeper North-South divisions in the country. Islamabad will hardly benefit, if only financially, but its losses could be disastrous.

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