Pakistan - Afghanistan: an Intelligence War in the Making?

In May 2015 Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen the fight against terrorism. This is the first agreement between the intelligence agencies of the two countries. The news was confirmed on the Pakistani side by the Public Relations Department of General Headquarters of the Pakistani Army, and on the Afghani side by the MPs of Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of Afghan parliament) who harshly criticized President Ashraf Ghani. They have expressed doubt on the sincerity of Islamabad in the fight against the Taliban. The ISI-NDS agreement is another step to strengthen military cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The question arises who benefits from such cooperation in May 2015?

The memorandum includes a number of traditional points: intelligence data sharing, joint development and coordination of anti-terrorist operations on both sides of the Pakistani-Afghan border. ISI has undertaken commitments to train Afghan specialists, etc.

At the same time the document contains a number of new provisions, such as joint investigation of cases in which perpetrators are known or suspected to have committed a terrorist act. This provision should be considered as a know-how of the Pakistani intelligence agency, seeking not only to possess a complete and updated database, but to control and manage the armed opposition in neighbouring countries. At the same time, Pakistan has consistently emphasized the fact that they "... strictly adhere to the policy of non-interference in the affairs of Afghanistan."

Brief information: In January 2015 the military community of Pakistan has "pressed" the legislative and executive authorities for establishing the military courts. Their functioning on top of the regular courts was defined in the 21st Amendment to the Constitution which had been passed on January 7, 2015 for a period of two years. Military courts began to be formed everywhere. One of the main reasons for the establishment of military courts is to examine cases involving persons suspected of committing acts of terrorism. Afghanistan will probably also follow with a reform of their judicial system in the near future or the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of parliament) will adopt an Anti-Terrorism Act (AA) following the example of Islamabad. According to the AA the rights of the military circles in civilian state institutions will be expanded. All in all, this indicates that the military community of Pakistan is considering the Af-Pak region as a single bridgehead of anti-terrorist actions, and accordingly, holds a similar strategy and tactics against the rebels, who are based in Afghanistan. For example, in Pakistan as a result of operations (conducted by intelligence), a large number of terrorists hiding across the country were arrested (military courts will hear their case).

In recent days, the Pakistani media have spoken repeatedly in unison about the growing cooperation between the two countries after years of mistrust, emphasizing the fact that the main reason was the rivalry between the two intelligence agencies. There has been a lot of publications saying that Rahmatullah Nabil, leader of the National Directorate of Security, was harbouring Latif Mehsud, one of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan leaders. Afghan media were surprised at the rapid and fundamental changes in NDS policy, which in recent years has sharply criticized the ISI for harbouring leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and for aiding and abetting the Afghan Taliban and other militant groups who fought in Afghanistan.
Incidentally, Nabil refused to sign the above-mentioned memorandum. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai described the agreement as "a blow to the national interests of Afghanistan."

In autumn 2014 as the national solidarity government in Afghanistan still did not have strong positions the ruling administration was forced to seek an alternative to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), whose weapons supported the former regime of President Hamid Karzai from 2001 to 2014. ISAF left Afghanistan due to the completion of the combat mission in December 2014. National Security Forces "took" over the responsibility for security from ISAF, but in reality the country was on the brink of a military default in the face of the Taliban onslaught. In November 2014 the head of the NDS, Rahmatullah Nabil, informed parliament that there was an "overwhelming wave of violence" in the country and he recorded 107 places where the fortified hideouts of militants were found in the provinces around Kabul.

President Ashraf Ghani made a favourable decision on Pakistan shortly after his inauguration in September 2014. He wanted to "...build a comprehensive and long-term partnership," "special relationship" in order to build an economically integrated region.

During the first official visit of the President Ghani to Pakistan in November 2014, the parties agreed to destroy militant hideouts on both sides of the border, deciding to launch a coordinated war against the terrorists on both sides of the Durand Line. Pakistan, for its part, promised to contribute to the process of peace in Afghanistan.

Islamabad is pursuing its goals and so it was necessary to ensure that Kabul does not allow to use its territory against its neighbour; it will not be used by anyone to wage war - the proxy war (referring to New Delhi).

Islamabad - Kabul relations which have historically been strained and difficult during the 2011 - 2014 years, became even worse because of border disputes, disagreements on the fight against terrorism. In contrast to the previous administration, President Ghani has taken a step forward to bilateral military cooperation.

The military authorities of Pakistan in autumn 2014 promoted ambitious plans of military-technical cooperation in Afghanistan. In the first phase, in order to implement preventive measures to prevent cross-border raids of militants, they confirmed their readiness to develop a joint Pakistani-Afghan coordination mechanism on border security in exchange for intelligence data and transparency of operations on both sides. The Pakistani side in those days repeatedly raised the issue about the locations of Taliban Pakistan / PPP terrorists hideouts based in Kunar and Nuristan provinces.

In the next phase (early November 2014), the Chief of Pakistan Army Sharif made a new proposal to the Afghan side - "a full range" training course for soldiers of the Afghan Security Forces in Pakistan's educational institutions (training infantry brigades, supplying equipment and conducting joint military exercises).

The terrorist attack on Dec. 16 2014 in a secondary military school in Peshawar (133 students died) was a turning point in the relations between the ISI-NDS. The Chief of Army Sharif and the Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), LtGen Rizwan Akhtar, insisted on the transfer of information on Kunar-based Taliban splinter, involved in the organization of the massacre of schoolchildren. The troops of the two countries conducted coordinated operations along the border.

In the next few months, the mutual visits increased. At that time, the Afghan side (first of all President Ghani) expressed concern about the potential threat posed by the militant Islamic State, stressing that terrorist groups are increasing their influence in several areas of Afghanistan.

The next step in strengthening the military cooperation was the arrival of the first group of Afghan students to study at the Military Academy in Pakistan in early 2015. Already in April the commander-in-chief of armed forces of Afghanistan Gen Sher Muhammad Karimi was attending a parade at the military academy in Kakule Kaku.

At a first glance, in the early spring 2014 the Pak-Afghan relations were perfect. But tough offence from the Taliban experience by the central provinces, including Kabul, have given rise to doubts about the cooperation with Pakistan. Islamabad admitted that they failed to convince the leaders of the Afghan Taliban to join the peace process, Kabul is back-pedalling the process of "handing" the militants to Pakistani side.

Despite the mutual accusations the ISI-NDS signed the Agreement in May 2015. Pakistan is as much as Afghanistan interested in eliminating armed outbreaks in the Af-Pak region. The federal army launched large-scale military operations in June 2014 to destroy foreign and local militants and in June 2015 could show significant progress. Most of the extremists crossed the Hindu Kush to enter the Afghan territory which significantly strengthened anti-
Kabul armed opposition. It continues to create a major threat to the social and economic reforms planned in the Pakistani province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

This could put the end as the long-term appeal of the military community to the Afghan authorities about exchanging the intelligence data have been implemented. But it was the May 2015 ISI-NDS agreement that caused another chill in relations between the two countries. President Ghani sent the civilian and military leadership of Pakistan a letter in which he put forward several demands:

- an official declaration by the political leadership of Pakistan condemning the launching of the Talban offensive operation;

- a directive by the military leadership that sanctuary will be denied to the Talibam and effective measures by the security forces and civil authorities that the directive is carried out.

- a direct(ive) to extend the counter-terror campaign to the Haqqani network and verification that those responsible for the recent terror campaign in Afghanistan are arrested.

- place the leaders of the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura under house arrest and to initiate legal proceedings against them for threatening a friendly state and so forth.

In his address to the civil and military authorities of Pakistan, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani set a deadline for the requirements - three weeks. “If this does not happen, the window of opportunity will be closed, Ghani warns.

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