Pakistan - Afghanistan: the End of the “Honeymoon”

“The honeymoon between Afghanistan and Pakistan has ended,” according to a Pakistani journalist, who spoke those words at a briefing in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad shortly after a terrorist attack on the Afghan parliament building.

The events of recent weeks testify to the increased tension in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Each party has indicated its own reasons for the change.

The first harsh statements in mass media appeared in May 2015 immediately after the signing of an Agreement between the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and the Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It received an ambiguous response both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan.

Islamabad saw it as the highest indicator of the two countries' cooperation in the fight against terrorism, demonstrating the degree of mutual confidence among the generals’ rank. On the contrary, Kabul (its legislators, political opponents, and the local press) was highly critical of President Ashraf Ghani Akhmadzai’s actions, calling them a betrayal of national interests, and demanding that he immediately terminate the Agreement on Intelligence Information Exchange.

Having come to power in September 2014, President A. Ghani for various reasons took a course for rapprochement with Islamabad, and with its military establishment in particular, sharing a mutual conviction of the need to overcome the past and build a relationship based on confidence. He turned a new page in modern Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and adhered to the charted course until May 2015. During those nine months, the parties frequently exchanged delegations of politicians and military and intelligence personnel, with a view to deepening their cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Later, though, the relations between the two countries took a downturn: cancellation of the Afghan Minister of Internal Affairs’ visit to Pakistan; an attack by militants on the parliament building in Kabul at the end of June; in the beginning of July, the Afghan Border Police at Angoor Adda gate firing, unprovoked, on the Pakistan side; a “forcible seizure” (as follows from a statement of the Pakistan Ministry of Internal Affairs) by the Afghan authorities of an employee of the Pakistan’s Consulate General in Kandahar, and his detention in custody, etc.

The NDS spokesman Abdul Haseeb Siddiqui confirmed to the Afghan agency Pajhwok that the recent attack on the Parliament in Kabul had been organized by militants from the Haqqani Network under orders from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). According to him, 7.5 million Pakistan rupees were allocated for these purposes. Shortly before the terrorist act, the NDS informed the Pakistan Defense and Interior ministries of the future attack. All these statements were made despite the fact that the Afghan Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

All the above events are at first sight related to the contradictions in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, but we must consider Afghanistan’s numerous internal problems as well.

Kabul accuses Pakistan of a number of things, primarily causing the breakdown of negotiations with the Afghan
Taliban Movement (TM) militants, and the fact that the Pakistani side did not succeed in convincing the Taliban of the need in an inter-Afghan dialogue.

As far as negotiations with Taliban are concerned, the Prime Minister's Adviser on National Security and Foreign Affairs, S. Aziz, admitted that Pakistan had contributed to the arrangement of the first meeting between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban in Ürümqi, a city in northwestern China. Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai, one of the key members of the Afghanistan High Peace Council, headed the Kabul team. The Taliban were represented by the commanders of all Pakistan-based groups of militants.

According to statements from the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan, the details of the second meeting were discussed by Afghans themselves.

Speaking in the Pakistan Upper House of the Parliament Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs secretary Aizaz Ahmad emphasized that Pakistan would play the role of a mediator in the Afghanistan dialogue in the future as well; he called on the Afghan Taliban to recognize the coalition government of Ashraf Ghani, and renounce violence in the country. One of Islamabad's conditions is the extradition of Mullah Fazlullah and other militants working against Pakistan by Afghanistan authorities (Mullah Fazlullah is the leader of Pakistan's Taliban Movement, in hiding in the territory of Afghanistan).

The Pakistani media suggest that some people in Afghanistan, as well as in the region, and in particular, in India, are interested in the breakdown of Pakistan-Afghanistan détente. They understand here that the involvement of the Afghan Taliban in the political mainstream at the current stage, in other words, providing them (partially) with political power, means a simultaneous reduction of power for some other political or ethnic group. However, according to Islamabad, the ruling circles of Afghanistan are not ready to share political power with the Taliban.

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