The new leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor (formerly the Minister of Aviation in the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), on Sept. 22, 2015, the eve of Moslem’s Eid al-Adha, a holy holiday of sacrificial offering, in his first public address, which was published on the website “Taliban Movement of Afghanistan” (TMA), outlined his formula for peace in Afghanistan: withdrawal of all occupying forces from the country, and repeal of the Security Agreement, signed with the US in 2014 by President Ashraf Ghani.

His position undercuts completely the regional scenario for peaceful regulation in the country following the withdrawal of the majority of the US and NATO’s coalition forces from Afghanistan in Dec. 2014. Currently, after 14 years of combat operations against the Afghan National Army and foreign forces, the TMA once again underscored that it represents a military and political power to be reckoned with in Kabul, the region, and the world community.

His statement also stressed that the Afghan Taliban operate only within the borders of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. That means that foreign insurgents, waging war on Pakistan’s soil and in Afghanistan, for a number of reasons, will be pushed out by the Taliban from Afghanistan into Central Asia, China’s Xinjiang, the Mideast, Iran, etc.

The timing of the IMA leader’s address was not chosen at random: it was heard also on the eve of the first anniversary of President Ashraf Ghani’s ascension to power (Sept. 28, 2014), and has been read in world capitals as the answer to Kabul’s endeavors, and mediation by Pakistan, China, and the US to bring members of the Taliban Movement and Kabul’s administration to the negotiating table.

The turbulence of events in the AfPak region over the last 3 months has dropped. One of the reasons has been that very same Mullah A. Mansoor, the new regional player. His “sudden” appearance on July 30, 2015 in the media arena coincided with the Pakistani Foreign Service’s announcement of the death of Mullah Omar (founder of the TMA, Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001), right on the eve of the second round of negotiations between the TMA and central government of Afghanistan, planned for July 31 of this year. The dialog was set aside, and each of the parties busied itself with reconciling internal conflicts.

According to reports by the Afghan and Pakistani press, Mullah Omar, leader of the Afghan Taliban passed away back in April 2013, and likely within Pakistan. The fact about his death was held in secret for a long time. It would appear that in both Kabul and Islamabad, it was decided to wait until the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, and on behalf of the Afghan Taliban’s long-ago deceased leader, “agree” to negotiations.

The first round took place in the beginning of June this year, not far from the Pakistani capital. In those days, the media presented this event as a triumph of Pakistani diplomacy. But Islamabad’s active role, first and foremost its army’s top brass, which handle a series of conditions to Kabul (in particular, handing over the leader of Pakistan’s Taliban Movement, who was hiding in Afghanistan, access to Pakistani insurgent captives, reform of the intelligence service, etc.) in exchange for organizing a dialog with the Taliban, evoked discontent within the ranks of the Northern Alliance, Afghan insurgents, the US, etc. The only trump card that could be played to halt the dialog was to announce the death of Mullah M. Omar.
Recognition of the Taliban’s new leader came with extremely mixed reactions. Often, information would turn up in the media about the latest failure of negotiations with Mullah A. Mansoor, about decisions by groups to conduct combat operations independently against NATO forces and the central government in Afghanistan. Mullah M. Omar’s family initially refused to swear allegiance to anyone, giving precedence only to his heir, his son, Mullah Yaqub. The insurgent groups insisted on an election, and not designation by Rahbari Shura or the new Emir’s Supreme Council. In time, after more than two months, differences were successfully settled. Pakistani media wrote that, under pressure in the middle of September of this year, M. Omar’s family recognized the leadership of Mullah A. Mansoor.

At the same time, criticism by the political opposition toward A. Ghani sharply intensified over betrayal of national interests, primarily from the chief executive director, Abdullah Abdullah (second in command in the government), who is supported by the Northern Alliance.

Insurgent groups spoke out against actions of the President, who entered into a dialog, according to them, with “imposter” emissaries from the Taliban Movement. Once again, terrorist acts resounded in Afghanistan, in government institutions and public places. Attacks against bases of foreign forces became more frequent, etc. This, in turn, brought forth sharp statements by A. Ghani himself, who accused Islamabad of support for terrorists and providing them cover on its own territory. Afghan media unleashed a fierce anti-Pakistan campaign.

The media storm of criticism of Islamabad was successfully calmed only in the beginning of September of this year. The basis was the Pakistani head of Foreign Service, S. Aziz’s visit to Afghanistan. Under the framework of the trade and economic conference, Afghanistan was provided a significant aid package and easing of trade regulations. In particular, a promise was announced to increase the volume of cross-border trade, three times, from the current 1.6 billion to 5 billion dollars in 2017. At the same time, Islamabad would decline support from the Afghan Taliban in the event that, as they worded it, “this threatens Afghanistan.” But, in changing tactics during the negotiations with Kabul’s leadership, Islamabad would not deviate from its strategy towards its northern neighbor. Pakistan will always consider Afghanistan among its political priorities, and will not lessen its influence there.

The TMA’s leadership was able to settle internal conflicts among insurgent groups, frequently breaking their resistance in order to restore its own balance of forces, not allowing separate field commanders or groups in the country, which support the “Islamic Government” organization, to break up the country from within. Kabul’s administration also understands this. For its part, Islamabad will undertake all measures to resist the splitting up of Afghanistan.

A. Mansoor’s position coincides with the position of Afghanistan’s ex-president, H. Karzai, who, in 2014, refused to sign any military or political agreements with the US. And, in his person, the TMA’s leaders received powerful support. It would seem that, under current conditions, President A. Ghani would make certain concessions to the TMA: he has isolated himself; neither the Taliban nor the political opposition in country supports him. Islamabad is pursuing exclusively its own national interests.

In recent days, Pakistan once again adjusted its position on the Afghan question. The indirect pretext was the US President, B. Obama’s address in Sept. of this year. In answer to the media campaign, criticizing the Administration in Washington for its policies’ failure in the Middle East, and collusion with Islamabad’s government, the head of the American Administration warned, “But what’s happened with this radical, violent extremism is that it’s metastasized and it’s spread to other areas. And right now, ground zero for those activities is in Syria with ISIL.”

The accusation toward the AfPak region of extremism, as in a few years ago, hurt Islamabad deeply. Fears that the US would support insurgent groups in Afghanistan, who swear loyalty to ISIL, to break up this country, convinced Pakistan’s top brass, which is well known for its old sympathies for the Afghan Taliban, to support its new leader, who called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, preferring to operate independently on its own turf.

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