Iran-Saudi Crisis and Pakistan

Pakistan has become an intermediary between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran against the background of increasing fears that a prolonged bilateral confrontation could potentially have serious consequences for the entire region. With a view to resolving the conflict, the civil and military leadership of Pakistan visited Riyadh and Tehran in January 2016. Both capitals responded favorably to the visits of the high-level guests, the tone of the Iranian leaders changed, the world stood still in anticipation of the detente... but no miracle happened. A few days later Riyadh firmly rejected both the mediatory role of Islamabad and the possibility of a dialogue.

Iran-Saudi tensions were escalating throughout 2015. Riyadh’s irritation grew after diplomatic missions of the Kingdom in Iran were raided, as well as in connection with the lifting of sanctions against Tehran by the United States and the European Union on January 16, 2016, which immediately promised to supply considerable stocks of crude oil to the world market to restore the status of the main hydrocarbon competitor of the KSA.

The mediatory role of Islamabad was quite understandable. Firstly, its concern was caused by the request of the Foreign Ministry of the KSA for the military establishment in Pakistan not only to send land forces into the zone of a potential conflict, but also to use nuclear weapons, the development of which had been actively financed by Riyadh for many years. In the past, Islamabad repeatedly declared the inadmissibility of a military intervention in a conflict on the side of any state within the Muslim Ummah.

Secondly, it was caused by Iran’s reaction to the establishment of an anti-terrorist alliance under the leadership of the KSA in December 2015. Islamabad was registered as its member, but it learned about it from statements of officials in Riyadh. The list included 34 more states, with the exception of Iraq, Iran and Syria. As the Saudi authorities explained later on, these countries had not been invited because of a lack of confidence in them.

Thirdly, Islamabad feared another surge of Sunni-Shiite massacres in its country, especially after the wave of protests that swept neighbouring Iran in early January 2016 in connection with the execution of the well-known Saudi Shiite preacher Ayatollah Nimr al-Nimr by the leadership of the KSA on January 2, 2016.

Pakistan demonstrated impartiality during the growing tension between the two countries. It did not openly condemn the actions of Iran in connection with the attack on the diplomatic mission of the KSA, but it did not sever diplomatic relations with it either, as did a number of countries of the Persian Gulf; it stressed its neutrality even during the visit of the Foreign Minister of the KSA to Islamabad in mid-January this year.

Riyadh’s request to send several thousand Pakistani soldiers at the disposal of the authorities of the KSA changed the subsequent course of events. Islamabad immediately canceled a visit of the civilian Defense Minister H. Asif to Tehran in mid-January this year. In a short time, the Pakistani military and, in particular, the Army Chief of Staff General R. Sharif, initiated a project of mediation in the Iran-Saudi conflict.

On January 18 this year, two Sharifs (the namesakes - Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff General R. Sharif) visited Riyadh with a mission to settle disputes by peaceful means in the interest of the unity of the Muslims in these difficult times. The leadership of the KSA was sympathetic to the mission of Islamabad and handed over a list of items to the Pakistani delegation to be further discussed with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and
spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assuring the guests from Islamabad that if the Islamic Republic of Iran showed positive signs, diplomatic relations could be restored.

The next day, on January 19, the civil and military leadership of Pakistan arrived in Tehran. It is fair to say that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was the first world leader who visited Iran after the lifting of sanctions. As reported by the Pakistani media, he managed to obtain a positive response from the Iranian leadership in respect of initiating the Iran-Saudi dialogue and regulating the issue of coordinators, whose mission, as planned, was to maintain business contacts with officials of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The mediation of Pakistan yielded positive results. On January 20, 2016, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly condemned the attack on the embassy of the KSA in Tehran for the first time.

It seems that Riyadh and Iran heard each other thanks to the efforts of the intermediary. But instead of a triumph, Islamabad’s diplomacy failed once again. On January 25, 2016, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the KSA Adel Al Dzhubeir said that Tehran was pursuing a hostile policy towards the Arab world, and interfered in the internal affairs of foreign countries inciting religious strife and supporting terrorism. Of course, the efforts of Islamabad turned out to be useless against this background.

Riyadh’s refusal of Islamabad’s services in the development of dialogue with Tehran is due to several factors: the change in the overall political and military situation in the Middle East, the intensification of the military cooperation of the KSA with the United States and India (Indian military and, consequently, their arms are taking up the positions of Pakistani military trainers stationed in Riyadh under the previous agreements) and Islamabad’s repeated refusal to send land forces at the disposal of the KSA. We should recall that in late March 2015, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised the Saudis to send his troops at the disposal of Riyadh, but in early April the parliamentarians, under pressure of the generals, refused to send their troops to fight against the Huthis in Yemen.

The mediation failure of the civil and military leadership of Pakistan to establish Iran-Saudi dialogue means that this time Riyadh excluded Islamabad from the list of its allies for a long time, and it will greatly reduce the amount of financial assistance and expand trade and economic, military and other contacts with its old rival - New Delhi.

The domestic policy of Pakistan is also in anticipation of change ... The issue of the extension of the term of office of the Chief of Army Staff General R.Sharif (official retirement in late November this year), that has long been discussed in the country, has already been decided. On his return from a tour of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif refused to extend General R.Sharif’s term of office. The army commander had nothing to do but to publicly declare his refusal to continue service and his retirement upon reaching the retirement age. The generals of Pakistan are one of the strongest and most masterful government institutions and have seized power in the country four times; the Army Chief of Staff is the de facto first person in the state. Thus, the completion of the anti-terrorist campaign initiated by General R.Sharif delivered has been jeopardized.

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