Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: the Balance of Relations

For the second time in 2016, Pakistani Prime Minister, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, paid an official visit to Riyadh in March. He took part in the closing ceremony of the Northern Thunder military exercise in the Saudi desert. The intensity of the visits is dictated by the importance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in the foreign policy of Pakistan, as well as the need to maintain a balanced approach to the countries of the region as a whole, given the recent intensification of relations with Iran. It is noteworthy that it is also the second time that the Prime Minister was accompanied by Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif on a foreign trip to the KSA. Much remains yet to be clarified.

Military contacts between Islamabad and Riyadh have been maintained for several decades. The first bilateral agreements were signed back in the 60's; in the 80's, two teams of Pakistani ground troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. In recent years, the commands of the two capitals hold annual joint military exercises, for example, Al Shihab-1 in 2015.

Despite the significant financial support from the KSA of social, economic, military and other projects in Pakistan, the relationship between the royal dynasty and the military and civil administration of Islamabad were not always smooth. The most recent failure occurred in March 2016. The royal family appealed to the Prime Minister, N. Sharif (and he publicly promised) to post part of the Pakistani army in the zone of military conflict in Yemen against Huthis Shiite in support of the KSA. But after ten days under the pretext of protecting only the holy places, the National Assembly of Pakistan (the lower house of parliament) refused. The Pakistani media wrote about a certain pressure the generals applied to parliamentarians.

The latest of Riyadh’s military appeals to Islamabad, announced in December 2015 as part of an alliance of 34 countries to combat the terrorist threat in the region, once again caused a lot of questions from the military leadership of Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Lebanon about the goals and objectives of the new military campaign, the place and role of each participating country. For a long time, issues remained unclear related to the operational strategy, antiterrorist working methods, management, control and composition of the proposed cooperation. For two months, Islamabad did not comment. Sharif’s visit to Riyadh in March lifted the veil. According to the Pakistani media, Rawalpindi (the location of the Army headquarters) plans for its participation to include the exchange of intelligence information, the supply of military equipment and the development of counter-extremist propaganda.

Pakistan once again refused to participate in the armed conflict, putting forward several arguments: first, the reluctance to get involved in a so-called "foreign" war; secondly, the desire to avoid the explosion of separatist and sectarian movements within Pakistan; and thirdly, that new and promising markets (Iran) and possibilities are opening up, given the recent geopolitical developments in the region.

In the February issue of this year’s Pakistani military magazine Hilal, the author of the article entitled Balanced Approach Towards the Middle East underlines the importance as never before, of the diplomatic efforts to solve the "raging" conflicts. It’s hard not to agree with Mr. Masood Khan and his statement: “it is not clear, in which direction the Middle East will move in 2016 ... fine balancing is required ... in order to prevent a major war in the region,
protect our interests and save Pakistan from sectarian faults." Thus, in contradiction to the centrifugal tendencies conducted by KSA in the vast region, Pakistan, on the contrary, promotes and supports centripetal forces. Its policy of non-participation in armed conflict puts obstacles in the way of splits, the formation of secessionist movements and / or fragmentation of its territory. Islamabad experienced the disease of separatism in 1971, allowing the separation of the Eastern Province and the proclamation of the independent Republic of Bangladesh on the territory in 1973.

At the same time, Pakistan is aware of the need to preserve traditional solidarity with the Saudi royal family, yet maintain that the time of its leadership in the region is in the past.

Islamabad is opening itself to radically new transnational projects of the 21st century in the region. Islamabad regards rapprochement with Tehran as a positive direction, despite the fact that, in general, Teheran’s step towards the Western world has made the region "feverish" (in the words of Mr. Masood Khan). In February 2016, Pakistan also lifted sanctions against Iran, supporting the decision of the “Six” (the permanent UN Security Council members and Germany). In addition to the prospective energy and hydrocarbon supplies to the country, Pakistan is set to earn a huge profit by using its strategic geographical position. The area will act as a transport bridge from the Chinese border and further to Central Asia, Iran, and then to the West under the revived China’s Silk Road project (one belt - one road). In February 2016, Beijing and Tehran signed a series of agreements.

Despite the fact that in January 2016 the Minister of Defense of the KSA rejected the mediation efforts of Pakistan in resolving the crisis with Iran (after the rift in diplomatic relations in early January 2016), Islamabad, for various reasons, remains one of Riyadh’s few opportunities to maintain civilized dialogue with Tehran and to stabilize the situation in the region.

The position of neutrality, which Pakistan upholds, and above all, the Army generals (given that the Pakistani army is one of the strongest in the region), is a guarantee their own security.

At the same time, the Northern Thunder military exercise (participated in by 21 states), led by the KSA, is a kind of demonstration of military force of the Sunni wing of Islam to the Shiites, in particular the leadership of Iran and the Yemeni Huthis.

The non-interference policy of a number of states in the region, in particular, Islamabad, is a deterrent to the further military ambitions of the new leaders of the Saudi dynasty and thus counteracts the emerging destabilization mechanisms. The Middle East will not sustain another armed conflict.

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