Russia in the Middle East in light of the US presidential election

Judging by President Vladimir Putin’s statements, which he made on June 17, 2016, at SPIEF, Moscow is now beginning to understand that Hillary Clinton, not Donald Trump, is more likely to win the US presidential election this coming November. The Russian leadership had begun to have certain hopes that Trump might prevail for improved relations with Washington, especially concerning the pressing issue of the removal of anti-Russian sanctions.

As the date of the United States presidential elections draws closer and the global economic crisis on the oil market continues, Moscow has been left with no other option but to come up with a new level of partnership with quite a number of countries, including the Arab countries and Iran given the special attitude the Democratic Party candidate holds about the Middle East in general, and the Persian Gulf in particular. What is actually striking is that Hillary Clinton is well known for her hostile stance, and some may even call it aggression, towards Russia, Syria, Iraq and Iran, and this is down to the fact that she is unable to differentiate between pragmatism and weakness. She doesn’t seek out compromise. On the contrary, she is prepared to act firmly and decisively. Her position and practical actions on Libya five years ago are a vivid example. In addition, there is the fact that in the Middle East, she is focused on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is no secret that they gave her lavish gifts of jewellery back when she was the Secretary of State during Barack Obama’s first presidential term.

Russia and the above-mentioned countries in the region urgently need to prepare for Washington’s new policy in the region, the main objective of which will be squeezing Moscow and Tehran out of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestinian affairs, as well as the comprehensive strengthening of Saudi Arabia’s position aided by America and its allies in the GCC against Iran in the Persian Gulf. After all, it is clear that Hillary Clinton is not Barack Obama, who, in spite of all his clearly non-pacifist actions, actually did a lot to mitigate his country’s negative image as an aggressive player on the world stage: the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, his refusal to conduct bombing operations in Syria in 2014, his unwillingness to participate in a NATO-GCC ground operation in Libya, his rejection of direct military intervention in the Yemeni conflict, the deal on the Iranian nuclear program, his declaration of willingness to reset relations with Moscow and his successful campaign to normalize relations with Cuba and Vietnam.

In speeches to Democratic Party voters in her recent pre-election tour of the United States, Hillary Clinton clearly indicated that her main "enemies" in the Middle East, and in the whole world, are Russia, Iran and China, “who fail to realize American interests in the region.”

The most important thing now is that Moscow, Beijing and Tehran clearly understand that with Hillary Clinton ascension to power, there will be acceleration in the objective of undermining the foundations of the ruling elites in all three countries, with the ultimate purpose of their replacement with pro-Western regimes. What’s more, the funds allocated to this end will be increased. As for Russia, there is no doubt that the new occupant of the White House will target Russia’s most sensitive area – its economic dependence on hydrocarbons. Yet, Moscow is clearly biding its time in the vain hope of a split amongst the Western powers on the issue of sanctions, especially in the EU, and that by some miracle, oil prices, followed by gas prices on the global market, will once again quickly soar upwards. However, this will not happen: here, it is necessary to simply assess the situation and realize that there won’t be another reason to impose sanctions so Washington will exploit the current situation to the maximum. Clinton also understands that the economic strangulation of Moscow will be carried out primarily through Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other oil and gas-rich Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. After all, it is their direct action in reducing oil prices, as well as the dumping of LNG in the EU by Qatar that hits Russia the hardest.
It is important to admit that presently, the West and their Arab allies continue to successfully split constructive dialogue between Moscow and Tehran, Tehran and Baghdad, and Moscow and the Arabs as a whole, clearly dragging the whole episode out until Clinton enters the White House. Swallowing generous promises from Arabian sheikhs, Russia raises certain doubts in many Arab capitals as well as in Iran. For example, the recent gesture of the much-celebrated gift of an Israeli tank downed in Lebanon in 1982 to the current Israeli Prime Minister, B. Netanyahu was obviously quite ill-considered. This leads to nothing but perplexity in the Arab-Islamic world.

De facto, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are already carrying out a hydrocarbon war against Russia and Iran. Saudi Arabia began supplying oil to Europe, including to Poland, and they recently lowered the price for European consumers, which had a negative impact on Russia, which is a major oil exporter to the EU. At the same time, the Saudis are subtly playing games on the Asian markets, which are the main consumers of Iranian oil, and are trying to retain the largest and most promising consumers of oil – China and India. Qatar, through its spot supplies of LNG and apparent dumping in Europe, on the markets that traditionally bought Russian pipeline gas, is knocking down Gazprom prices and is generally reducing the amount of gas purchases from the Russian Federation. In addition, the development of LNG production facilities in the Emirates will slow down the supply of Iranian gas to Asia, thereby pushing Iran towards Europe and Turkey, and thus colliding Moscow’s interests with that of Tehran.

It is clear that Hillary Clinton is not going to wait until the Russian economy starts to fall apart at the seams. This will take too long. Washington should hurry, while Moscow still has not yet got the full hang of the US plans to replace the current government of the Russian Federation with a pro-Western liberal government. It is only after this has been successfully done, that the United States will be able to tackle China as the next major contender to America in the world. Currently, the US is behaving very foolishly, hoping as always that the “Chinese tiger” will once again remain perched on its hilltop watching the battle below. However, China cannot afford to be that laid-back. Washington has clearly defined Beijing, along with Russia and Iran, as the main forces of “evil” in the world today. China is preventing the United States from deploying troops in Asia and ensuring the safety of its main allies – Japan and South Korea. It is pointless to talk about economic competition. Everything is clear: China simply prevents Washington from dominating the Asia-Pacific region.

However, China still does not understand the main issue in the whole conundrum: for the next 20 years, America will be, in spite of everything, militarily, politically and economically stronger than China, where there are growing problems associated both with economic growth and with internal problems, including conflicts on ethnic and religious grounds. Under such circumstances, Beijing stands no chance of becoming the only world leader. Its ideology and cultural and religious essence are considered alien by the West and by its Asian neighbors, who are simply afraid of Chinese expansion and are looking for allies to counterbalance China. The two options being the United States and India. India, on the other hand, is also going to be a major power in Asia. So if Beijing wants to avoid being crushed by the West, it must stop its “neutrality” and form an alliance with Russia, to which the other countries opposing the US have been aligning themselves for the purposes of jointly coping with the seemingly never-ending hegemony of Washington, NATO and its partners in the Middle East and Asia.

However, Moscow currently faces a more acute short-term goal: how to counter the forthcoming offensive by Clinton on Syria and Iraq, where Russia has huge vested interests. It is time to understand that Washington, Riyadh, Doha and Ankara will never accept the fact that in Syria, with the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese "Hezbollah", Bashar al-Assad’s legitimate government will continue to exist. Without Syrian territory as a transit country, Saudi Arabia will never be able to construct the pipeline to Europe, and Qatar will fail to construct its main gas pipeline to the EU and Turkey.

It is also urgent to do something with Baghdad, where H. Abadi’s government is clearly falling into a growing dependence on the United States. Moreover, the recent military operation by Iraqi forces to retake Fallujah has showed that Washington is ready to once again rely on the Sunnis in Iraq, including those who had once been on the side of Saddam Hussein. This is because Sunni Arabs have always been the basis of Western influence in Iraq, while the Soviet Union was largely sympathetic to the Shiite population of the country.

In addition, Moscow should urgently address the ‘Saudi issue’. Failure to do so will result in it being unable to sharply raise the price of oil, and stop the games being played by Riyadh in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and in the Arab and Islamic world in general. The Saudi kingdom is currently mired in the Yemeni war; its budget has been exhausted due to the low oil prices; the reform program that was recently adopted by the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense and King Mohammed’s son, is doomed to fail; tribal alliances are dissatisfied with the ruling Al Saud family, due to the reduction of financial grants; a conflict is spreading within the royal clan between the pro-American Crown Prince, Naif, and his wayward deputy, Mohammed, and King Salman is weakening. At the same
time, Saudi Arabia continues its costly adventure in Libya, is spending huge amounts of money to maintain the military regime in Egypt, and continues to fund radical opposition in Syria, tearing the inter-Syrian dialogue, which itself can be considered more dead than alive, apart. So isn’t it time to end this conservative Wahhabi regime’s harmful policies, and at the same time stop the brazen intervention by the other Wahhabi monarchy – Qatar? The sponsors of the “color revolutions” and the "Arab Spring" clearly must go through this pet project of theirs themselves and finally become normal modern-day civilized countries, instead of the existing vestiges of the 17th century.

In any case, time is inexorably moving, and Hillary Clinton’s ascension to the White House is drawing ever closer. It was not by chance that, the other day, the Saudi King’s son, Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, Deputy Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, recently (on June 13-17) paid a visit to Washington, and invested 20% of the total “budget” of Hillary Clinton in her election campaign fund. He held direct talks with leading representatives of the American elite, with Secretary of State, John Kerry, the Minister of Defense, Ashton Carter, the director of the CIA, John Brennan, Minister of Commerce, Penny Pritzker, the leaders of Republican Majority and Democratic minority in Congress, Paul Ryan and Nancy Pelosi, the members of the Senate Committee on Armed Services and members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs. The delegation that accompanied the Prince was also representative. It included not only the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir and Information Minister Adel Al Toraifi, but also two other leading ministers of the economic bloc of the Saudi government – Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Khalid A. Al-Falih, and Minister of Trade and Investment, Majed Bin Abdullah Al Qasabi. Together with them, the delegation also included the head of the General Intelligence Department, Khalid Al-Humaidan. Finally, the completion of the official part of the visit was marked by a meeting between the Prince and the current US President, Barack Obama, in the White House Oval Office. Referring to Prince, Mohammed bin Salman’s visit, the head of the White House stressed that “the United States considers it necessary to continue cooperating with Saudi Arabia for the benefit of both countries,” working together with Riyadh “in support of the security and stability of the Middle East and to counter regional challenges.” An important part of Mohammed bin Salman’s trip was a visit to New York, where he met with the UN Secretary, General Ban Ki-moon, at the UN headquarters.

Prince Mohammed discussed three ‘core dossiers’. The first one was a ‘political dossier’ that included the currently existing problems and disagreements between Riyadh and Washington, including the Iranian nuclear program. The second was the ‘security dossier’ and, in this regard, bilateral cooperation in the field of intelligence sharing and military cooperation. And a certain level of understanding is reached on many military and political issues: Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen. Finally, the third ‘dossier’ was linked to the issues of bilateral economic relations. Prince Mohammed bin Salman held talks not only with representatives of American business on Wall Street in Washington DC, presenting them with the main provisions of the Vision: 2030 program and its start-up phase – the National Transformation: 2020, but also made a trip to California’s Silicon Valley, where he met with the heads of major US (global) companies – Google, Apple and Facebook, providing scientific and technological support for initiatives to be implemented within the framework of the Saudi ‘Vision 2030’. As early as June 16, 2016 the largest US chemical company, Dow Chemical Company announced the completion of the company’s commercial registration and commencement of operations in Saudi Arabia, where, in turn, it was emphasized that the company’s decision was linked to the implementation of the Vision: 2030 program.

Meanwhile, during SPIEF in St. Petersburg, the head of the Russian Private Investment Fund strongly praised investors from the Arabian Peninsula, especially the Saudis. In Washington real deals were made, but at SPIEF, it was all just hot air that has zero impact.

As the saying goes, ‘delay is tantamount to death’. It is time to learn to act pre-emptively to counter threats, rather than waiting to then try to deal with their consequences. This way, there is no guarantee of success. Hopefully, Moscow, Beijing and Tehran will come to realize their common goals and be able to come up with concrete steps to prevent the imminent threat. It is still not too late.

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