Pakistan - Turkey: Lessons of the Failed Military Coup

The attempted coup on July 15, 2016 in Turkey was met with a lively response in the Pakistani society. The debate about the balance of power between the military establishment and the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N took over the government after the general election in June 2013) has become more intense.

Islamabad and Ankara, both of whose countries have experienced four military coups, prolonged suspension of the Constitution, and Emergency Rule in their recent history. The civil society of Pakistan has condemned the unconstitutional actions of the military in Turkey, praising the activity of citizens in the defence of democracy headed by President R. Erdogan. At the same time, Islamabad learned three main lessons from the events in Ankara and highlighted the need to strengthen civilian constitutional control over:

- the armed forces;
- the supreme judicial power, since every time after a coup the military sought the support of the judicial community for the legalisation of its actions;
- the social media, which, according to Pakistani media sources, would complicate a military takeover at present.

The actions undertaken by the Turkish authorities in the post-coup period - the introduction of emergency rule, statements made by the authorities about the restoration of death penalty, the demands on the US to extradite F.Gülen who the Turkish President saw as the main inspiration behind the military coup, the hundreds of dead and wounded people during the suppression of the rebels in the night of 15 to 16 July 2016, the arrest of tens of thousands of activists, scientists and government officials) - all this was justified by Erdogan's and the people's desire to retain the democratic foundations of the Republic.

In response to the harsh criticism of Western countries, Ankara retorted that emergency rule was introduced in Paris, the heart of Europe, after the terrorist attack in January 2016. Turkey was in dire need of support from the international arena especially its regional neighbours, when it was in a similar situation.

In 2015-2016, Pakistan's foreign policy swiftly responded to new trends in the changing global and regional political and economic landscape. In 2015, Islamabad, due to a number of circumstances, faced the need to adjust relations with its traditional partner in the Middle East - the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The political and economic rapprochement between Islamabad and Beijing as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor intensified the Chinese vector of its foreign policy. Removing economic sanctions against Iran dictated the restoration of full-scale political and economic ties with Tehran. Implementation of all these measures weakened Islamabad’s attention towards Ankara in 2015. Pakistani-Turkish relations have developed steadily, however there was no urgency in their additional promotion.

The intensive rapprochement of Pakistan and Turkey in July-August 2016 met the national interests of the both countries. The need to balance the increasing Indo-Iranian relations demonstrated to Islamabad the importance of maintaining and strengthening its relations with Riyadh and Ankara. In turn, Ankara needed to recognize the
legitimacy of the bloody suppression of the rebel military.

One of the first foreign visits of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, was made to Islamabad after only two weeks after the events in early August 2016. Pakistan once again, as in July 16, 2016, confirmed its "... unequivocal support for a democratic, peaceful and stable Turkey under the dynamic leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan", and congratulated the citizens of the country on their successful campaign aimed at preventing the attempted coup on July 15, 2016.

The search for supporters in the international arena requires flexible approaches, mutual support in any format, and loud statements. That is how it was this time. The migration crisis in Turkey, the negotiations between the government of Kabul and the armed opposition in Afghanistan, and Kashmir are the main areas of the current regional cooperation between Islamabad and Ankara.

Both parties again called on the international community to pay attention to the plight of Syrian refugees in Turkey in order to prevent a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe. They called on the developed countries to increase financial contributions and, thus, reduce the disproportionate burden on developing countries of the temporarily displaced persons.

Ankara's address to Islamabad is justified, since for the past 35 years, Pakistan has taken in millions of Afghan refugees and knows their problems firsthand. Currently, both countries take in the largest number of refugees in the world.

Islamabad also used the negotiating platform with Ankara. Given the the two levels of crisis in the Afghan dossier (in Pakistani-Afghan relations and the suspension of the negotiation process/refusal of the armed opposition to take part in the dialogue), it reminded the international community about its reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan; the measures taken to improve border management between the two countries; as well as about the status of three million Afghan refugees. At the same time, Islamabad stressed the need to include Turkey in the process of peace negotiations in Afghanistan as an international mediator (along with the US proposal of including India and Iran in June 2016.)

Turkey exerted pressure, and Pakistan supported its urgent appeal to the international community to strengthen the fight against terrorist organisations. In the context of Pakistan-Turkey relations, this should be read as a requirement to break ties with all educational, cultural and business centres operating under the auspices of the imam F. Gülen.

Despite the fact that the Adviser to the Prime Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan S. Aziz only promised to investigate the work of Turkish educational centres, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Çavuşoğlu said that Islamabad fully supported the Turkish government’s position and closed schools and business centres associated with the “terrorist organisation of F. Gülen". Islamabad simultaneously declared the need to take steps to ensure that 10,000 students enrolled in these centres in Pakistan could adequately complete their education. In response, Ankara announced its full support for Islamabad in its dispute with India over Kashmir. Çavuşoğlu ruled out violence, confirming that the disputed status of Kashmir could be resolved only through negotiations between the two countries, and supported Islamabad's initiative to send a Contact Group and an observer mission from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to the valley to investigate cases of human rights violations.

The current stage of the Pakistani-Turkish relations is aimed at further strengthening their strategic partnership and signing a Free Trade Agreement in August 2016.

Pakistan is considering and conducting its foreign policy as a whole. The process of making the "right" decisions at the right time calls for an understanding of the global and regional strategic environment and its potential trends in order to have an impact on the surrounding environment to protect national interests. The negotiations between Islamabad and Ankara in August 2016 look like they are playing a giveaway in chess where both sides (black and white) are on velvet.

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