

## Iran strengthens its rear ARVAK Center comment, 26.04.2024

On April 22, 2024, Iranian President I. Raisi paid a three-day official visit to Pakistan. This is an extremely important event for both states, given the fact that they almost found themselves on the verge of war in January of this year. However, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian's words on the eve of the visit provide an exhaustive answer to the question of how and why Tehran and Islamabad managed to avoid the clash: *“Terrorists in the border areas are controlled by third countries that do not wish the well-being of the peoples of Iran and Pakistan”*. President Raisi himself supplemented his Foreign Minister’s thought with the following statement: *“The developing relations between Iran and Pakistan do not please the world hegemons, and they are trying to create divisions between the two peoples, the two Islamic countries, by inciting sedition... Tehran and Islamabad should thwart the plans of their enemies”*.

It is obvious that both sides are not interested in an escalation on the border, no matter how much *“third countries”* try to throw Iran and Pakistan together by inciting the Baluchis. Thus, the visit of the Iranian leader is intended not only to demonstrate the *détente* between the countries, but also to lay the foundation for a new phase of their rapprochement and cooperation. I. Raisi arrived in Islamabad with a package of ready-made documents covering almost the entire spectrum of bilateral relations. Eight agreements were signed in political and diplomatic, economic, trade and logistics, energy, and other fields. The parties reaffirmed each other's territorial integrity, agreed to jointly fight cross-border terrorism, and pledged to take steps to solidify the Islamic world's condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza. This point of the agreements became particularly important for Tehran, as Islamabad had not previously expressed a clear position on this issue.

However, the most significant achievement of the parties was the agreements on economic cooperation, which, according to some analysts, can be described as sensational. First of all, an agreement was signed on close cooperation between the Iranian and Pakistani ports of Chabahar and Gwadar.

The fact is that until recently, Iran's Chabahar was seen as the main competitor to Pakistan's Gwadar for land and sea trade routes from Asia to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The former is being developed primarily with Indian capital while the latter with Chinese investment, and it can therefore be said with a high degree of certainty that a cooperative arrangement to manage trade flows between the two ports would have been virtually impossible without the mutual consent of New Delhi and Beijing. In a broader context, the Iran-Pakistan rapprochement is evidence of a consensus between the two Asian political-economic giants, which are not on the best of terms, at least on the issue of joint exploitation of the *“Southern Trade Corridor”*. This may have been influenced by China's anticipated geopolitical complications in Central Asia, which once again became the focus of attention in Washington, London, and Ankara. Combined with Russia's perceptible weakening in the Caucasus, the West's political and economic expansion into Central Asia, with the possible activation of nationalist and radical Islamist sentiments in the Turkic countries of the region, could challenge not only the security of China's *“Middle way”*, but

also the tranquility of China's own northwestern provinces. Against the backdrop of such prospects, diversification of trade logistics in a southerly direction by easing tensions in relations with India seems quite likely and logical.

As for the observed Iranian-Pakistani rapprochement, another extremely important agreement between the parties should be noted. This is the “Peace” gas pipeline, the project of which was approved by Tehran and Islamabad back in 2009, but the Pakistani part of the pipeline, some 800 km long, was never built under US pressure. Washington, citing anti-Iranian sanctions, not only did not give its permission to Islamabad, but also did not offer the promised alternative in exchange for Iranian gas. Now, according to the signed agreement between I. Raisi and the Pakistani Prime Minister Sh. Sharif, Islamabad has undertaken to complete and connect its section of the gas pipeline from the port of Gwadar to the Iranian border, where an Iranian pipe with a length of 1000 km has already been laid.

Given the determination of the parties to significantly expand economic ties, it can be expected that the more than modest \$2 billion trade turnover between the two countries can quickly grow many times over in the next few years.

All in all, the fundamental rapprochement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan testifies to the unwillingness of these countries to yield to the provocative interference of the “*third sides*” in their relations and is based on objectively existing geopolitical realities. Islamabad, amid the severe economic and explosive social crisis, desperately needs Iran's affordable and geographically accessible energy resources and food. In the face of new existential challenges in the Middle East, it is important for Tehran to reliably secure its “Central Asian rear”.