
IRANIAN PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO UZBEKISTAN IS CANCELLED

- 29.07.2018

Vestnik Kavkaza (26 July 2018)

A scandal broke out around the forthcoming visit of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), Hasan Rouhani, to Tashkent. The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs refuted the report of the Uzbek media, which, referring to their Iranian counterparts, announced the talks between the leaders of the two countries for August. At the same time, the Office of Public Relations and Media of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan called this kind of publication irresponsible and incompetent, and one of the foreign ministry officials threatened journalists with reprisals by the prosecutor's office if such materials are published without agreement."

The Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official announcement that the exact timing of the upcoming Uzbek-Iranian meetings at the highest and other levels has not been determined at the moment, and the official representatives of Uzbekistan and Iran are working out their dates and agenda."

Ph.D. in Political Sciences, the member of the Scientific Council of the Institute for Central Asia and Afghanistan Studies Iran-East (Iran), Igor Pankratenko told Vestnik Kavkaza the following: "The words that the parties are currently working on the agenda are the key ones. During Hassan Ruhani's presidency, Iran's influence in Central Asia has dropped almost to zero, and in the case of Tajikistan, it has become even negative. Tehran claimed that the region is temporary unpromising, so the country did not pay attention to it. This turned out with a series of unpleasant surprises for the Iranian diplomacy."

According to the expert, Tehran certainly did not expect that in a short time President Shavkat Mirziyoyev would not only be able to return Tashkent to the big politics orbit, but also find the right words capable of convincing an international coalition led by the United States that Uzbekistan could become the key partner in the Afghan settlement. Trump was interested in a quite a realistic settlement program through the economic cooperation with both Kabul and the Taliban (an organization banned in the Russian Federation).

"As a result, Tashkent immediately entered the big league of key players in Afghanistan, and it is now necessary for Tehran not only to reckon with this but also to negotiate with the Uzbek side on a cooperation. The first attempt took place just a few days ago, during the meeting of Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, with the secretary of the Security Council under the President of Uzbekistan, Viktor Makhmudov. There was no specifics during the meeting as it still has to be worked out, hence the logical pause Tashkent takes with regard to Rouhanis visit, Pankratenko said.

For Iran, which suffers new US sanctions, it is important to reorient itself to the Asian and Central Asian markets, where Tehran had rather stable positions, which have recently been visibly shaken. Therefore, Rouhani's visit to Tashkent was prepared especially carefully. Both sides are interested in the cooperation. Since it is important for Tashkent to enter the markets of the Persian Gulf, it is clear that the cooperation cannot be achieved without Iran. Iran is becoming a key country in the development of transport corridors: Uzbekistan - Turkmenistan - Iran - Oman; China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran, as well as the Trans-Afghan Corridor. The Iranian side has previously stressed that it would make every effort to complete the construction of the Khaf-Herat railway, which will be the continuation of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat line and will significantly increase the volume of goods transported between the countries of the region due to the lower prices and delivery terms.

In addition, Tehran counts on simplifying the visa regime and developing banking cooperation. These issues were discussed at a recent meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) on trade-economic and scientific-technical cooperation between Uzbekistan and Iran, which was held in Tehran. At the same time, a business forum was held on the basis of which a package of the export contracts for the supply of textiles, legume, and dried fruit and vegetable products was signed.

Tehran counts on the fruitful negotiations in Tashkent. The economic delegation is thought to come along with Rouhani. The countries intend to increase the turnover in the upcoming years from \$ 250 million up to \$ 1 billion. Today, Uzbekistan supplies Iran with textile and agricultural products, and imports pistachios, tea, zinc and petrochemical products.

But as the source, who wished to remain anonymous, told Vestnik Kavkaza, the parties have not yet agreed due to Tehran's excessive ambitions. In particular, Turkmenistan makes claims that Iran has arrears for the gas supply. To address the issue, Hasan Rouhani visited Ashgabat twice this spring. The situation is complicated by the fact that Tehran simply does not recognize the existence of the debt, requests to recount everything and is convinced that it may be about some insignificant sums that it is ready to compensate with the supply of consumer goods. The position of Ashgabat is diametrically opposed. Turkmenistan counted for Iran \$ 2 billion for the additional gas supplies, which were not carried out at a reduced price. Experts believe that the Iranian-Turkmen contradictions may play its role after the signing of the Concept on the Status of the Caspian Sea on August 12. The document will put an end to the long-term conflicts between the Caspian states around the largest reservoir and will open the way to the implementation of the large-scale energy projects connected with the pipeline transfer of hydrocarbons from one coast of the Caspian Sea to another. But at the same time, Iran, guided by the protocol on the procedure for assessing the environmental impact of projects, which will be signed simultaneously with the Convention, may block Ashgabats initiative on the construction of TAPI.

The relations with Tajikistan are severed. Formally, the main reason for the deterioration in the Tajik-Iranian relations was the participation of Muhiddin Kabiri, the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), in the annual Islamic Unity conference in Tehran in December 2015, after the party's activities were banned in Tajikistan. However, some experts do not rule out that the IRPT is only an excuse since no other country in the world has supported Tajikistan on this issue. In fact, there is a financial reason for the tension. Tehran demanded Dushanbe to return of \$ 2.7 billion, which the Iranian billionaire Babak Zanjani transferred to the accounts of Tajik banks from the sale of Iranian oil, bypassing the sanctions imposed on Iran. Zanjani is under arrest since December 31, 2013. He awaits execution of the sentence - the death penalty through hanging. He can be saved only if the money returned to Iran. However, Dushanbe is not in a hurry to return this money and accuses Iran of financing the high-profile murders of Tajik politicians, journalists, fomenting civil war in Tajikistan and involvement in a coup attempt in 2015. A final point in the relations between the two countries was put by the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon. In May, during a meeting with the public, he called Iran an unfriendly country, saying that the IRPT members have been converted to Shi'ism. This was a reason for the support group of President Rahmon to picket the Iranian embassy in Dushanbe.

Against this background, Iran's relations with Kazakhstan are almost ideal. As President Nursultan Nazarbayev said, "Kazakhstan regards Iran as a close political and economic partner, the relations with which have always developed despite various difficulties."

"Kazakhstan and Iran have many points of contact, starting from a common position on the peaceful use of nuclear energy and ending with security in the Caspian region. As for the Caspian region, Kazakhstan and Iran are interested in maintaining the long-term stability in this region, and all possible disagreements between the Caspian states should be solved on the basis of consensus and diplomatic negotiations, the Director of the Risk Assessment Group, Dosym Satpayev told Vestnik Kavkaza.

The economic cooperation is conducted within the framework of three priority areas: transport infrastructure, energy cooperation and agriculture. For Kazakhstan, it is important to reach the Persian Gulf, first of all, within the framework of transport cooperation with Iran. The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway route (Uzen-Bereket-Gorgan) was launched in 2014.

In regard to Kyrgyzstan, despite the fact that the diplomatic relations were established 26 years ago, there are no special achievements. Kyrgyzstan delivers small quantities of lamb to Iran and imports the products of the chemical industry and agricultural machinery. However, Kyrgyzstan is of interest to Iran as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, with which Iran signed an interim agreement on a free trade zone. After the document enters into force, the parties will be able to save on the customs import duties.

<http://vestnikkavkaza.net/analysis/Iranian-President%E2%80%99s-visit-to-Uzbekistan-is-canceled.html>