Today, the realities of the South China Sea have changed so drastically that we’re dealing with a whole new reality that is nothing like what we used to analyse or discuss. The tensions within this region were purely local in their nature and concerned China and its immediate neighbors, but now it’s obvious that they have evolved into a matter of global security. All the previous evaluations professing a swift settlement of all issues on the back of the cultural unity and common mentality of the parties involved in the conflict turned out to be absolutely wrong. What transpired here is unlike anything that we could have anticipated.

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has become a major attraction for all sorts of investors due to its economic potential. After all, it’s the region of some of the world’s most crucial sea routes stretching from China, Japan, South Korea, Russia to the west coast of the United States. An unparalleled number of commodities are being shipped along these routes every year.

On one hand, the lack of firm boundaries within the region and vast expanses of water facilitate trade and connect peoples, countries and continents, but on the other, these routes remain exposed to all sorts of meddling, which means that one has to invest an extensive amount of effort to protect them. This is the common goal of all the countries of the Indo-Pacific region and, above all, the countries of ASEAN and India, which are located at critical junctions of these trade routes. India and the ASEAN member-states share a common reliance on these oceans and their connecting seas, and a common perspective that supports openness, inclusion, sharing and peaceful
cooperation. Their common goals are the maintenance of peace, stability and security, unimpeded lawful commerce, freedom of navigation, along with the preservation of marine resources. All of these are the base of India’s and ASEAN’s policy towards maritime security and connectivity and stable peace and development.

Another important point that is that the Indo-Pacific region is one of historical, cultural and political interpenetration, as a number of local states derived their governing principles from Indian heritage and culture. Even if it creates additional difficulties, it just as well creates preconditions for mutual cooperation and integration within this region. Not only historical, but also cultural traditions that we can see in almost all ASEAN member states now show us that India for centuries was the main political, trade and cultural partner of Southeast Asia. So there’s an inherited common approach to the question of maritime security and connectivity.

But does the regional security in Southeast Asia play such an important role in global affairs these days? To a larger extent the security of the region amounts to maritime security. All but one of the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states are coastal states; two of these are the world’s largest archipelagos on earth. At its narrowest conception, maritime security involves protection from direct threats to the territorial integrity of a state, such as an armed attack from a military vessel. Most definitions would typically add protection from high seas crimes, such as piracy, armed robbery, vessel hijacking and terrorist acts. However, intentional and unlawful damage to the marine environment, including from illegal dumping and the discharge of pollutants from vessels, and depletion of natural resources, such as from illegal fishing will also constitute a threat to the interests of coastal states.

Most of these points are acute in the Indo-Pacific region but can be resolved by mutual actions of regional states. But we can see that for India and especially for the countries of Southeast Asia, the most sensitive point is the ongoing aggravation of the situation in the South China Sea. This ongoing dispute poses an area of challenge to maritime security in several ways. First, competing territorial and maritime claims can lead to incidents at sea as states seek to assert or defend sovereignty or their claims to natural resources.

Second, the lack of clarity over the status and maritime entitlement negatively impacts all states involved. This issue has caused considerable tension between the United States and China. This problem has manifested itself in Washington’s assertions of maritime rights in the South China Sea under its Freedom of Navigation Program as well as China’s objections to this course of action.

The US uses this conflict to strengthen its military-political ties with ASEAN to make some countries of this bloc their allies in a bid to turn them against China. America seeks to show that only their fleet can pose as the guarantor of maritime security in this region and prevent the transformation of the South China Sea and its islands into China’s inland sea. With incredible perseverance they send their warships to the zones around the bulk islands in the South China Sea, which China has declared a forbidden area, to demonstrate their determination to defend the principles of freedom of navigation. This is a highly dangerous undertaking for maritime security, as it’s plain to see that a shooting war between the two superpowers can erupt at any given moment.

Last May, two US military ships passed near the Spratly archipelago in the South China Sea. The American destroyers Preble and Chung Hoon passed within 12 nautical miles of the Gaven reefs and Johnson reefs. The commander of the Seventh Fleet of the United States, Admiral C. Doss, stated that this was an “innocent passage” intended to challenge China’s “excessive maritime claims” and aimed at maintaining free access to the sea lanes in accordance with international laws and norms. Prior to that, at the end of May 2018, the US destroyer Higgins together with a rocket cruiser Entitem would sail past the disputed islands in the South China Sea, approaching them by 12 nautical miles. Under these circumstances, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced that Beijing was forced to send its ships and aircraft to demand that the American ships leave Beijing’s territorial waters. The ministry has also called on the United States to abstain from any such demonstrations in the future. In response, the Pentagon would defiantly send a strategic bomber, a B-52 Stratofortress to patrol the area near the disputed islands in the South China Sea.

According to a statement by the Pacific Air Force, falling under the US Air Force, the aircraft took off from Anderson base on Guam on March 4. The representatives of China have again sharply condemned these hostile actions against their security.

Given the ongoing tensions, there is a question of how long China will endure all this and not open fire. The answer is not entirely clear. Moreover, an honest mistake can be made, bringing down the entire existing system of relations in Asia and the world. The stakes are very high. That is why some of the leaders of ASEAN countries such as Rodrigo Duterte or Mohathir Mohamed have asked the Americans to either stop these military incursions or turn them into a...
purely symbolic action without using heavy warships.

The regular excursions of American warships is hardly the only way to aggravate the situation in the South China Sea. Washington has yet another tactic at its disposal that is being advanced, predicated upon the same pretext of boosting maritime security efforts in Southeast Asia. This involves various manifestations of US maritime security assistance on the bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral levels, ranging from Washington’s improving its engagement with local coast guard units in Southeast Asia through the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI).

This initiative was launched in 2015 with the goal of boosting the region’s capacity to resist a range of maritime challenges – including China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. It is comprised of such means as improving regional maritime domain awareness, expanding exercises, and leveraging senior-level engagements.

Today, the results of this program can be seen in supplies of military equipment to Southeast Asian countries and the development of military cooperation with them. One can see the sale of vessels to Vietnam as well as the long-mulled ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX), or an announcement by the Pentagon that the United States would sell drones to several Southeast Asian states.

Americans make no secret that it’s all directed against China’s maritime assertiveness. American politicians are making increasingly harsh statements about China’s actions in the South China Sea. For example, at the recently concluded annual conference on military-political issues – Shangri-La in Singapore, former US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said that the United States will no longer “tiptoe” around China’s behavior in Asia. He said that Washington “consistently warns Beijing against the militarization of man-made objects in disputed waters.” In addition, P. Shanahan accused China of “sabotaging the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea”.

We can see that the Americans are obviously heightening tensions, trying to divide a huge region into opposing blocs. The goal is understandable to preserve and, if possible, strengthen its influence and position in the Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions. They want to advance the logic of confrontation that would eliminate any possibility of a peaceful solution, or compromise. After all, if the development of events proceeds along a non-confrontational channel, they will have to compete with China economically, and most importantly, any idea of a military anti-Chinese bloc will be history. Therefore, they are urging both ASEAN and India to expand military cooperation with them, explaining this as a joint struggle for democracy against the dangerous actions of China, which they are trying to transform into a pretext for reestablishing primacy in the region through military means.

It is clear that some of China’s steps in the South China Sea in a number of other areas in Asia can be described as controversial, but it should be resolved through the logic of peace. The logic of war will lead to the appropriate answer.

What is the way out of the current intense situation and how is it possible to preserve both maritime security and develop connectivity between countries and, above all, between India and the ASEAN countries? Creating a military bloc within the framework of Trump’s famous plan to transform the Indo-Pacific region into a kind of anti-Chinese bastion is an extremely dangerous idea and most likely a futile venture. It will not give calm and stability to the countries of the region, nor will it ease tensions but rather divide the whole Asia-Pacific region into several hostile blocs. This will be the worst possible future for the region. Only the US will benefit from this development.

Another option is to increase the supply of weapons to ASEAN countries so that they can counter possible threats. But this path is also flawed, since any such action gives rise to countermeasures. China will not calmly look on amid a shifting balance of power. An arms race may start, which will only weaken the ASEAN countries, failing to lead to a qualitative change in the existing situation. In this case, we may face a maritime arms race and the tension and distrust associated with it. All of this will not improve the security situation at sea, nor will it lead to new trade routes and infrastructure projects.

In such a situation, Russia’s position is really important. Not because of the power of its naval forces but because of the fact that Moscow is not directly involved in any disputes in the South China Sea, in Asia or Indo-Pacific. Russia's best interests are to preserve the status quo to develop trade and economic projects. One can see that all development plans for the Russian Far East are directed towards this goal.

In this regard, the Russian position is aimed at a principled resolution of the conflicts in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions through peaceful means. Moscow does not reject the idea of Indo-Pacific, it opposes the notion that it should be turned into a military alliance, against the division of countries for ideological reasons, some into a democratic camp and others into a totalitarian or populist one. This position was persuasively stated by Deputy
Minister of Defense Colonel General A. Fomin in Singapore at the Shangri-La conference. In his presentation he said that “some colleagues tell us that the system of closed exclusive military alliances existing in the Asia-Pacific region is the “cornerstone” of regional security. But we are convinced that the narrow-bloc model cannot be a universal tool, since it does not guarantee the security of those countries that are not part of these alliances. And given the threats that have changed since the Cold War, a natural question arises about the ability of such structures to respond effectively to modern regional and global challenges.

Russia seeks to ensure that existing contradictions are resolved by the countries of the region themselves without external resistance. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has repeated many times that “Russia is not a party to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and will not be drawn into them. We basically do not take sides. We are firmly convinced that the inclusion of third forces in these disputes will only fuel tensions in the region.”

Russia cannot allow itself to be friends against anyone in its regional policy and must be extremely careful and sensitive in its attempts to find a delicate balance in approaching various regional actors, seeking to maintain at least the fragile status quo in the region. Russia understands participation in situational blocs and coalitions on territorial disputes is fraught with the risk of engaging in a conflict, which at any time may develop into an armed confrontation.

All of this shows that Russia is looking for the foundations of maritime security not in creating new military structures, not in fueling an arms race, not in deepening confrontation, but on the path of mutually acceptable compromises, growing confidence on the basis of common business interests and common benefit. Russia’s approach to territorial conflicts is based on the principles of respect for state sovereignty and the national integrity of states, the inviolability of borders, as well as reliance on international law. Russia adheres to the position of strict neutrality in relation to those territorial and border problems in which it’s not involved directly. Its approach is in line with that of the ASEAN countries and India who claim that Indo-Pacific should be inclusive and promote peace and cooperation, instead of military tensions. This common position should be used to resolve the most acute problems of maritime security and connectivity.

*Dmitry Mosyakov, Professor, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Director of the Centre for Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”*