The South China Sea: a Big Storm Passes By

The latest events in the South China Sea show that the long-standing conflict has still smoldered here, and it occasionally flares up. Recently we have got used to seeing such events take place when the Americans send another destroyer assigned to deliberately cross the border of the forbidden waters designated by China around the artificial islands in the South China Sea. The whole world at such moment literally stands still afraid that one accidental shot can start a conflict between the great superpowers.

However, lately, there has been another reason for increased attention to the South China Sea: China sent a research vessel assigned to establish the availability of oil and gas in the water area that, according to all international regulations belongs to Vietnam. And it was made quite unexpectedly, approximately following the same scenario as in 2015.

Back then, China sent a drilling rig to the Vietnamese territorial waters, which caused a huge international resonance and a long-standing conflict. In its course, the Vietnamese and the Chinese vessels watered each other from fire pumps, rammed one another and held precariously on the verge of a military collision for several weeks.

At the time, Vietnam even saw a rise in spontaneous anti-Chinese rallies began, and the tension in the relations of the two countries reached the limit. It took a great deal of diplomatic effort to avoid most serious consequences at the time.

In 2019, everything began as last time, but developed in an absolutely different way. The Chinese vessels appeared in the Vietnamese waters and left them quickly enough. No fire pumps, journalist crowds or demonstrations this time around. The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry submitted an official protest, specifying that “over the last several days, the Chinese survey ship, Haiyang Dizhi 8 and its escorts conducted activities in the southern area of the East Sea that violated Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.” The statement emphasized that this site is located within the territorial waters of Vietnam, and it was demanded that the Chinese vessel stop its illegal activities and left the Vietnamese waters.

The Chinese MFA Spokesperson Geng Shuang, in response to this statement, said that Beijing “hopes that the Vietnamese party will be able to respect the sovereign rights and jurisdiction of China over the corresponding waters and will take no actions that could exacerbate the situation.” After making this statement and thus preserving the national prestige, the Chinese ships were ordered to leave the Vietnamese waters. Thus, in August 2019, the possible conflict between Vietnam and China that the Americans had counted so much on was over.

Washington did not even try to hide its disappointment with this outcome, as it sought to kindle this conflict in every possible way. It gave numerous leaks to the press with reference to certain analytical centers that the Chinese and the Vietnamese ships “had clashed” for several weeks. The interest of Washington to triggering the conflict is quite clear: the worse the relations of Vietnam and China, the more chances the US gets to exploit the conflict of the two neighboring countries to its own advantage.

Thus, the US is obviously disappointed that both Hanoi and Beijing showed patience and common sense and acted quite differently from the situation in 2015.

It is most likely that the leaders of the two countries, without involving the press, spontaneous rallies and general excitement, simply had a quiet discussion of the current situation via the interparty channels closed from the press
and reached a certain compromise. As a result, the Chinese research vessel entering the Vietnamese waters caused neither a long-standing opposition, nor international attention, and, by now, it has become one of the historical moments, which there have been plenty of throughout the history of the conflict in the South China Sea.

The conflict has not been resolved, both parties retain their positions. But we see now that there is a new efficient way to avoid armed confrontation, however strong the desire of Washington to see action might be.

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