The creation of forums in powerful Asian nations aimed at promoting discussions about various issues that arise in relationships among leading participants of the Big Game is becoming one of the signs pointing to the shift of the center of global processes from the Euro-Atlantic region to that of the Indo-Pacific.

As these new (Asian) platforms are growing in importance, those that still exist in the Euro-Atlantic region are on the decline. A telling example of this is the decrease in interest towards the World Economic Forum in Davos (In Switzerland), and the growing popularity of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) (an event that has been held annually in a Chinese resort town on the island of Hainan since 2001) with every year.

In the second half of October of this year, the focus of attention was on the fact that both the PRC and India staged two separate discussion events, which government officials, respected members of the global community and experts participated in.

From 21 to 22 October the 9th Xiangshan Forum on the theme “Maintaining International Order and Promoting Peace in the Asia-Pacific” was held in Beijing. It was organized by two leading Chinese research centers (equivalent in importance to organizations typically labelled as think tanks by journalists in the United States).

Currently, it is a track 1.5 dialogue platform that acting high-ranking government officials, former public servants, members of various research organizations and independent experts take part in.
The first Xiangshan Forum took place in 2006. And although, at the time, foreign participants included only 24 delegates from 14 countries, the staging of this event in the first place was proof enough that forecasts of the more far-seeing U.S. political scientists (of the second half of the 1990s), who had predicted that China would become USA’s key geopolitical opponent in 10 years’ time, were indeed becoming a reality.

As many as 530 foreign delegates (including 23 minister of defense-level participants) from 76 nations registered for the most recent 9th Forum. On its very first day, the attendees listened to a welcome address from PRC’s President Xi Jinping.

The organizers of the event paid particular attention to the Russian delegation, headed by Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu. The speeches given by him and Minister of Defense of the PRC Wei Fenghe became the focal point of the entire 9th Xiangshan Forum. Both addresses included fairly similar assessments of the state of affairs in the region, and described security threats and measures that need to be taken in order to ensure stability in it. The two presenters talked about the destabilizing effect that the U.S. withdrawal from the Treaty on the elimination of intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles had had.

Naturally, during his speech the Chinese minister focused on PRC’s key issue, described by its leadership as the restoration of China’s territorial integrity (i.e. One-China policy). The fact that Taiwan is still not under the jurisdiction of the PRC is currently viewed as the main element of this problem.

Wei Fenghe essentially reiterated (albeit in somewhat stronger terms) the points on this issue from Xi Jinping’s speech, given three weeks earlier at an event to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The key obstacle (embodied by the United States) to resolving the China-Taiwan dispute was also clearly pointed out.

It is worth noting that representatives of a number of other countries were also critical (to different degrees) of U.S. actions. Still, the Global Times newspaper has denied that the event, by and large, had a pre-determined anti-American agenda. Apparently, some of the “smaller nations” were simply given a chance to express their views on the role played by this leading nation in the current world order.

The nation whose role became the target of criticism was represented by a fairly small delegation, headed by Robert McFarlane, the former National Security Advisor to President of the United States Ronald Reagan. However, a mid-level official from the U.S. Department of Defense was the one tasked with explaining the U.S. stance on a number of issues discussed at the Forum. He stated that the United States did not intend to isolate the PRC in any shape or form, and was not applying pressure on China’s neighbors to do so either.

The last statement is quite symbolic in meaning, as one of PRC’s most powerful neighbors is India, whose representatives were not, in fact, in attendance at the 9th Xiangshan Forum. And yet, the participants included the current Minister of Defense of Vietnam, a nation that China does not have the best of relationship with.

It is worth highlighting that India has not been very keen on taking part in other forums, organized by the PRC, including the BFA mentioned earlier. This illustrates the complex nature of the relations between the two Asian giants.

It is, therefore, noteworthy that during the aforementioned days in October, the 2nd US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) was held in the capital of India. John T. Chambers, a well-known American businessman in the IT sector, is the Chairman of this Forum, which was founded last year and will be held annually (with venues alternating between India and the United States).

The USISPF is also becoming a 1.5 track platform for dialogue, as the 2nd Forum (held in New Delhi) was attended not only by experts from both countries but also a number of Indian ministers, and the former National Security Advisor of the United States, Condoleezza Rice. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the opening of the Forum.

In addition to the USISPF, there is the so-called 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue of the foreign affairs and defense cabinet officials from the United States and India. The inaugural 2+2 meeting, which was held in September 2018, was a seminal event for both nations as they continue the lengthy process of fostering India–United States ties.

At this point, it is important to highlight that economic elements (i.e. their current state and growth prospects) of the aforementioned relationship are becoming of strategic importance for participants in the USISPF.
This state of affairs is a manifestation of the key feature of the radical transformation that the global political map is currently undergoing. And this metamorphosis stems, first and foremost, from the changes in economic relations (both bilateral and multilateral in nature) among leading world players. The New Eastern Outlook has covered the manner in which economic ties between the USA and PRC; the USA and Japan; Japan and the EU; the EU and the USA, and the PRC and the EU are changing.

As India continues on its journey to become a member of the “elite club”, it becomes increasingly important for all of its members to develop relationships with it in various spheres, first and foremost, in the economic one. As for the USA, foreign policy and defense ties with India are also being strengthened at the same time.

In 2018, trade volumes between India and the United States exceeded $140 billion, and expert speakers at the latest USISPF predicted that they would increase to $250 billion by the middle of the next decade. U.S. weapon systems ordered by India are estimated to be worth $18 billion. The number and scale of bilateral military exercises (with increased presence of Japan at the drills) are growing.

However, there are also some serious issues between India and the United States. One of them is linked to the hike in tariffs by both parties on each other’s goods in 2018. The aforementioned problems were among the key themes discussed during the 2nd USISPF, and its attendees expressed optimism about their resolution in the future and, overall, about the India-United States relationship.

Finally, we would like to note that both Forums, held at the beginning of the second half of October in Beijing and New Delhi, as well as the scheduled round of negotiations on trade issues between the United States and the PRC immediately afterwards, all point to continued maneuvers in the geopolitical space, with leading players in the Indo-Pacific region at each of its “corners”.

We can already talk about certain trends, as each of the “corner” players reveals its preferences and makes its selections in relation to the others. Still, the game is in full swing and each of its participants is trying to leave itself as much room to maneuver as possible in the future.

This means that the regional game will retain its dynamism and will, therefore, need to be constantly monitored and analyzed, in its entirety or in parts.

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