Current Situation in South China Sea and Vietnam’s Policy

“We see that, with the changing world order, the rivalry between the current centers of power continues to intensify and so does the battle for leadership in the future. Unfortunately, the threat posed by the novel Coronavirus has not reduced these geopolitical tensions, exacerbating them instead. We would like to reiterate that, from our point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an additional catalyst speeding up these changes...”

The aforementioned statement, made by Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Ryabkov, describes very accurately the way the situation is shaping up in the South China Sea (SCS). And even during the spread of the novel Coronavirus throughout the world, which, to some degree or another, has had an impact on all the nations of the SCS, the situation in the region is becoming more volatile and tense. Washington’s actions are especially alarming as US Navy ships, in great numbers, sail throughout the South China Sea. Recently, clearly with the aim of provoking China, amphibious assault ship USS America, guided-missile cruiser Bunker Hill and destroyer USS Barry sailed in the SCS. They were accompanied by Royal Australian Navy’s frigate HMAS Parramatta. According to the US Department of Defense, the American vessels and their Australian ally were not flexing muscles but conducting “combined exercises”.

Amid tensions that have arisen as a result of the confrontation between the two global powers, the United States and China, which is also unfolding in the South China Sea, policies that Vietnam, the most influential nation in the region, is following and its response to the ongoing events are all of the utmost important. After all, the stance that Vietnam, with its powerful military, decides to take will have a substantial impact on the way the conflict will proceed and whether it will lead to a new full-blown war.

Naturally, there is no point in comparing the might of Vietnam People’s Navy with that of People’s Liberation Army Navy or of US naval forces, nevertheless, it is clear that Hanoi is certainly capable of defending its interests and of inflicting considerable losses on its enemy during an armed conflict. As for the policy in relation to the South China Sea confrontation, the Vietnamese leadership has decided to act responsibly and preserve peace and stability by attempting to resolve the ongoing confrontation by peaceful means only.

In fact, the chosen path forms the basis of Vietnam’s foreign policy. Another important aspect of its external policy course is Hanoi’s willingness to depend on partners from afar in order to confront foes closer by, a strategy that has worked for it in the past. During the war against the United States, Vietnam’s ally “from further afield” was the USSR, which, later on, in 1979, fully fulfilled its obligations towards Vietnam. At present, Washington is seeking to partner with this Southeast Asian country, which it has been actively collaborating with in the economic and defense spheres. Still, Vietnam clearly understands there are limits to such cooperation, which, nonetheless, from the perspective of maintaining a certain balance of power and interests as far as Hanoi is concerned, plays an important role. The nation needs to exercise caution as it develops closer ties with the US. After all, Washington is capable of using the current situation to its advantage, in particular, by pressuring the Communist party and government leaders to adopt a tougher stance towards the PRC and to cooperate even more closely with Washington in the defense and security sphere.

Vietnam’s complex policy in the South China Sea also entails full involvement of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states in order to encourage stability and reduce volatility in the SCS region. In this regard,
much hope rests on the signing of the South China Sea Code of Conduct in the future. Drafting of the document has taken a long time, clearly due to difficulties encountered in the process. Still, Vietnam has consistently advocated for its completion and adoption.

Hanoi deems it crucial to cooperate with other powerful nations in Asia and outside of the region, which can also help ease the tensions in the South China Sea. The author is referring to India, Australia, Japan and Russia, countries that Vietnam is currently enjoying a high level of cooperation with. Their political and economic involvement in the SCS state of affairs can tip the balance towards peace and stability.

As we can see, Vietnam’s policies in the South China Sea are in many ways aimed at the internationalization of the conflict and its resolution via a collaboration with regional and global powers as well as international organizations. All of these efforts, in large part, are playing a decisive role in preserving peace and preventing a full-blown war from breaking out in the region. It is impossible not to commend the Vietnamese leadership for its perseverance as it continues to follow a path towards peace despite all the challenges, such as pressures from within and provocations from without. Key provisions of this policy course are included in many documents. They are described in especially great detail in the famous joint statement, issued at the end of the visit by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam to Russia in September 2018. According to this document, both parties were united in their belief “that every dispute, including territorial, border and other ones in the Asia-Pacific region” had to be “resolved peacefully without resorting to force or the threat of using force, including through the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to support peace and stability as well as free and safe sea and air navigation in the region”. The joint statement also said that Russia and Vietnam supported and advocated “the full observance of the Declaration on Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea”, and spoke in favor of a prompt adoption of this Code of Conduct of the parties as a legally binding document. In addition, both sides agreed that international security had to “be comprehensive and indivisible, based on the principle that a country” could not achieve security with acts detrimental to that of others, and “that maintaining peace, stability” and mutual trust were “the basic factors in securing stability and development in the Asia-Pacific region”.

Since the release of the statement, events that greatly increased volatility in the South China Sea and made a full-blown conflict, at times, seem inevitable have occurred in the region. Despite facing the toughest challenges, the Vietnamese leadership has managed to stay true to its core policy of promoting peace and stability, thus demonstrating their full commitment to preventing conflict, easing tensions and finding a just resolution to existing disputes. Such a stance makes Vietnam one of key guarantors of peace and stability nowadays in the South China Sea region.

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