Indian Intellectuals on How the Country is Positioning Itself on the International Stage

India has already been included in the pool of several participants that are taking the lead in the current stage of the "Great World Game". Occupying the fifth place in the world in terms of GDP (the country reached that at the end of 2019, displacing its former mother country from it), with a population of 1.3 billion people and a strategically extremely advantageous geographical position, which is becoming increasingly important in the face of a shift in the focus for global world processes to the Indo-Pacific: all of this imparts particular importance to the issue of how India positions itself in the foreign policy arena.

As everywhere, the country has been severely, and in a variety of ways, affected by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. While during the initial stage the situation looked much better than in most countries of the world, by the end of August this year the number of cases identified daily in India had crept up to 100,000. The consequence of the restrictive measures (which were extremely harsh at first) on how people communicate, and for the operations of the facilities involved in the economy, was a drop in GDP in the second quarter by almost 24% compared to the previous year. For now, the forecasts made by the Asian Development Bank predict that the extent to which the Indian economy will contract over the year will be limited to 9%. This is versus forecasted growth of 4-5% before the pandemic struck.

The country found itself right in the center of a deteriorating global political situation that began several years ago, but has accelerated sharply since the beginning of 2020, which (strangely) coincided with the outbreak of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. One issue that is always pressing for India is choosing the optimal political course in the face of growing competition between the two leading world powers (the United States and China); that has become acutely aggravated after the well-known events in early May in the highlands along the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh.

Following 6 rounds of negotiations between representative delegations, and on the eve of the 7th one (which had been tentatively scheduled for the second week of October), the situation looked approximately like this: the standoff as a whole is now suspended, and no new clashes involving the participation of any border guards have been recorded, but the parties have amassed army support forces that have heavy weapons, and those will remain there (at an altitude of over 5,000 meters) "for the winter".

In relations between these two Asian giants, what is not yet visible on the horizon is the prospect of something similar to a meeting in the style of a "new Wuhan", which was held after the dangerous previous border conflict on the Doklam plateau.

Although Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, continue to use rather vaguely worded formulas regarding India’s position (using turns of speech like the “end of the era of global agreements” and, conversely, the relevance of “group agreements with the aim of solving specific problems,” and about the necessity of “strategic autonomy”), anti-Chinese and pro-American trends in the country’s foreign policy are becoming more and more noticeable.

Which, taking into account what has been stated above, as well as the entire history that runs through Sino-Indian relations, seems quite understandable. In addition, there is the fact that the country’s leadership today is in conditions of a tough, internal, political, interparty struggle, and public opinion, which has been “heated up” by descriptions of the shocking details involved in the clashes in Ladakh.

Therefore, what is of particular interest is the opinion held by heavy-hitting Indian political analysts, who are quite
capable of objectively, that is, without undue emotion, assessing the history of relations in the configuration formed by the PRC-India-USA-RF, their current state, their development prospects, and what is generally the best way for the country to position itself in the context of a deteriorating international situation.

These undoubtedly include Brahma Chellaney and Raja Mohan, who are world-renowned experts that are well-known ones in Russia. Out of these two, the former even back in 2010, quite clearly and rigidly designated the PRC as a “threat in Asia” that a coalition formed from the United States, India, Japan, and Russia is meant to fend off. It is worth noting right off that these kinds of statements in India are anything but new. In addition, even way back in 1998, China was pointed to as “threat No. 1” not by some expert that did not have to take any responsibility, but by the then-Minister of Defense George Fernandes, meaning by someone who is definitely an official.

Since 2010, the same Brahma Chellaney has repeatedly, and on various occasions, revisited the topic of China's role in regional affairs. At the same time, his value judgments have not fundamentally changed since 2010. The last time he addressed the abovementioned topic was on September 18th this year, in an article published by the Hindustan Times that was received with critical commentaries in the PRC.

The key message of the article boils down to characterizing Indian policy toward China (during the entire period that both countries have been independent) as a series of continuous mistakes, and the reason for those, according to the author, is that Indian leadership has always “relied more on diplomacy than on its armed forces”. Even worse, the author continues, in the course of resolving subsequent conflict situations that arose in relations with the PRC the necessary lessons were never derived from the mistake made before that situation.

Referring to the current situation in Ladakh, Brahma Chellaney - in extremely harsh terms - describes not only the behavior of Beijing during this conflict but also that of Delhi. There is a series of rhetorical questions posed by the author, but we will cite only one (due to the appropriateness of the wording used in it): "Why was Indian diplomacy rushing to believe what it wanted to believe?"

Events in Ladakh served as a pretext for a series of articles by Raja Mohan, published in the summer of this year in another reputable newspaper, The Indian Express. This author is more accurate in the expressions he uses, but the substantive side of his assessments is not much different from what Brahma Chellaney wants to convey to readers. First, Raja Mohan draws attention to the fact that India has forfeited its positions to China in its relations vis-a-vis virtually all its neighbors. Which, it is worth adding, it quite explicable since China, whose economy is five times larger, can (and does) provide necessary assistance to these countries to help resolve their economic woes.

The term “forfeit” means that the country once occupied a high position, and the author indicates just when that was: in the days of “British India”. Back then, based on the Indian subcontinent (“in the space from Aden to Hong Kong”), the precursor of the current Chinese Belt and Road Initiative was implemented. Owing to this, once again it is worth highlighting the increasingly approving attitude of a certain part of the Indian establishment toward the “colonial” period in the country's history.

In another article Raja Mohan comments on the recent remarks made by Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on the substance of “strategic autonomy”, which was born in the early 1990s, meaning after the end of the Cold War. Nowadays, this strategy is seen as the consequence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi switching the setting of foreign policy objectives to the need for India to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Following in the footsteps of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Raja Mohan argues that while in the 1990s "strategic autonomy" manifested itself in rapprochement with the PRC, and in holding to a similar course towards Russia (and keeping a certain distance from the United States), the current realities stemming from the “Chinese factor” are pushing India towards closer cooperation with “the United States, as well as Europe, Japan, and Australia”.

China is not ignoring the speculation from leading Indian political analysts. The reaction that was expected was caused primarily by the statements made by Brahma Chellaney. Because of both the prominence this expert has in world political science and, it is worth reiterating, the sharpness of the turns of speech used by him in assessing Chinese foreign policy, a separate article was devoted to criticizing Brahma Chellaney in the newspaper Global Times.

Ultimately, it seems appropriate to make an assumption about the prospect that Russia will be completely excluded from participating in certain configurations set up against China. If you will, Russia's mission in a key region of the world lies in something completely different, and namely, in using the potential it has to (at least) reduce the level of tension in relations between Asia’s leading players. Those would be China, India, and Japan.
And that was the action taken during the SCO ministerial meeting held on September 9th in Moscow.

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