Taiwan Remains on the Region’s Policy Agenda

The significance that the overarching “Taiwan problem” is acquiring in the political game unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region continues to grow steadily. Without exception, all recent events directly or indirectly related to Taiwan, have only contributed to exacerbating the already complicated relations between the two global world powers: the USA and the PRC.

As far as involving the United States in the range of problems associated with Taiwan goes, while it used to manifest itself mainly in the form of various kinds of political symbolic acts (the US Congress passing acts allowing contacts to resume between officials in Washington and Taipei, the frequent visits made by US administration representatives to Taiwan, in the last month or two American-Taiwanese relations have begun to develop to include quite a “material” component.

First of all, this refers to a series of acts that allow the sales of American weapons with various purposes to Taiwan, which is a sure sign of a sharp deterioration in relations between the United States and China. In the middle of August this year, the long-term process of coordinating the terms of sale for 66 F-16 fighters with the latest modifications to Taiwan - for over $8 billion - ended with a positive decision.

In the middle of October, information arose about five upcoming new deals involving the delivery of a variety of American weapon systems to Taiwan. And on October 22, Reuters agency reported that the previous day the US
Department of State had approved the sale of “sensor equipment, missiles, and artillery systems” to Taiwan for a total of $1.8 billion.

This means that Washington is quite tangibly implementing its recently announced course of turning Taiwan into a “porcupine” that will wind up being inconvenient food for the “Chinese lion”. Beijing, however, is making it clear that all American activities geared toward this only whet its appetite.

Moreover, on October 26 a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced during a regular press conference that Beijing is introducing “retaliatory” sanctions against three US defense companies for the first time (Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and Boeing Defense), whose products are on the list of planned arms shipments to Taiwan. These sanctions will also affect the organizations and individuals that participate in these transactions.

It is worth paying attention to the last of those three companies indicated above. This involves the “defense” component of the Boeing Company conglomerate, which gained prominence in its business (from one third to one half) only in the mid 1990s due to a radical reorganization of the American military-industrial complex, which was undertaken back then by the Clinton administration. One of the main results of the measures that were taken was Boeing acquiring one of the largest companies in the military-industrial complex, McDonnel Douglas, after which Boeing became one of the main contractors for the Pentagon.

This point seems appropriate due to the fact that the PRC has been quite successfully developing cooperation with the “original” (“traditional civilian”) part of Boeing for decades. At the end of 2018, in the area of Shanghai, a procedure was held to open an assembly plant for the company, which is supposed to produce the latest models of passenger airliners there. They will be sold in China as well, but naturally under conditions where it competes with the European company Airbus, which has had its own assembly plant in China since 2008.

Boeing management has consistently been among those representatives from the American business community that are in favor of ending the bilateral “trade war”, and further developing relations with the PRC. The company also unfailingly takes part in the China International Import Expo (CIIE). Since the autumn of 2018, CIIE exhibitions have been held annually in Shanghai, and the leader of the PRC, Xi Jinping, inevitably attends when they open.

The above comment regarding Boeing is further evidence that the United States and China are by no stretch “burning down all their bridges” in relations with each other, and, on the contrary, are leaving a “window of opportunity” open to help reverse the current negative trend.

However, the acridity of this current issue in US-China relations should not be underestimated. That is particularly underscored by the fact that at the same time, on October 26, restrictions were imposed on the activities of six American media bureaus operating in the PRC. The action was a response to similar restrictions previously imposed by Washington against six Chinese media outlets.

Commentators on Beijing’s unprecedented anti-American sanction measures have been drawing attention to two circumstances. First, those were introduced one week before the US presidential elections. Second, this proclamation was made against the background of unprecedented celebrations that marked the milestone (70th) anniversary of starting to deploy units called “Chinese People’s Volunteers” on the Korean Peninsula. It should be noted that the event took place under the cover of the Soviet Air Force. The joint actions taken by the PRC and the USSR then averted the defeat of the DPRK in the Korean War, which seemed to have effectively occurred by the autumn of 1950.

The fact that the US-China confrontation in this “tit for tat” format is not stopping is evidenced by the statement made by Washington on the sale of another shipment of arms to Taiwan in the amount of $2.37 billion, which was announced immediately after the aforementioned press conference held by the PRC Foreign Ministry representative. The main component in the deal this time will be Harpoon anti-ship missiles, developed by the same McDonnell Douglas company. These missiles were originally intended to arm warships, but their land-based version will be delivered to Taiwan to help ensure that the coastline is protected from a possible attack from the sea.

The most positive emotions that had to do with the latest decisions made by Washington could be observed in Taipei, where it seems that they no longer know how to respond to please their overseas benefactor. In particular, there is talk about the willingness to purchase American pork (of suspicious quality) along with the missiles. Apparently, this is how the statement should be understood delivered by the Taiwanese Ministry of Health and Welfare that starting on January 1, 2021, issues concerning the ractopamine content in imported pork will be transferred from the local level to the jurisdiction of the central authorities.
Since the author’s strong point is not industrial livestock production, it was necessary to turn to the Internet for some elucidations where many unfavorable reports have been penned on ractopamine, but this is not the place to cite them. But the meaning of the aforementioned statement from the ministry, if translated into plain language, became more comprehensible: “So it goes like this: everyone needs to shut up. Starting January 1, we will cheerfully eat the pork that our dear patron brings to us.”

Finally, it is worth highlighting new signs that India and Japan (that is, the other two leading Asian powers) are gradually being pulled into the Taiwan issue’s orbit. Against the backdrop of the scale of the US-China confrontation that goes along with it, the salience of these signs seems to be of secondary importance. But they do seem remarkable in terms of assessing the development of relations in the “China-India-Japan” triangle.

Previously, NEO has called attention to the contribution made to the overall deterioration of Sino-Indian relations by both the content of an interview, and the fact that it took place at all, during which on October 16 Taiwan’s Foreign Minister Joseph Wu spoke with the privately run TV company India Today.

In that same vein is the statement made on October 31 by Taiwanese Minister (a “Minister without Portfolio”) John Deng. Introducing India as “the only Asian country that openly challenged China,” he outlined different directions for the development of Taiwan-Indian relations. In particular, plans were highlighted for December 16-18 this year to hold a two-sided “video exhibition to exchange” certain achievements.

Previously, information had arisen about India’s initiation of negotiations on trade relations with Taiwan. The expected negative reaction ensued from an official representative of the PRC Foreign Ministry.

Over the past month, Japan has “made an appearance” on the Taiwan issue on a more modest scale. There was a report about an agreement, that was signed in Tokyo (although it is not very clear with whom), and entered into by a “Taiwanese delegation”, about transferring some artifacts from the colonial period of Japanese-Taiwanese relations.

To sum up, it is worth noting that the different levels of significance for recent events that revolve around the overall “Taiwan problem” confirm, unfortunately, that there is a trend of the political situation becoming progressively worse, both in the area around the island itself and in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

**Vladimir Terekhov, expert on the issues of the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.