Sino-Vietnamese Relations and the Mission of Russia

China and Vietnam are two countries with a common border of more than 1.2 thousand km and a very ancient history of relationship. Of course, there have been very difficult moments in the history: the gigantic Chinese empire, accustomed to considering neighboring states as its sphere of influence, and small Vietnam did not always find a common ground. In the first half of the 20th century, they were united by a joint struggle against European colonization and the Japanese invaders. In addition, the communist movement gained strength in both countries. The joint actions of the Chinese and Vietnamese communists played an important part in the victory over the Japanese and in the decolonization of South-East Asia. During the Vietnam War of 1955-1975, Vietnamese communist forces also received significant aid from the Chinese Communist Party, which by that time had gained the upper hand in the mainland of the Heavenly Kingdom and founded the PRC (People’s Republic of China). The Soviet Union provided no less significant assistance to the Vietnamese communists.

However, after the Vietnamese communists gained a victory, the Americans were driven out and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was established, the Sino-Vietnamese contradictions came to light. These were both the ancient claims of China to Vietnamese territories, and the reluctance of the PRC to get a new powerful state near its borders. In addition, a significant part was played by the points of difference, that occurred in the 1950s between China and the USSR, where Vietnam preferred the latter, as well as by the war between Vietnam and the Chinese allies - the Khmer Rouge on the territory of modern Cambodia. In 1974, the PRC captured the Paracel Islands. Formally, they belonged to South Vietnam, an ally of the United States, against which the PRC and the Vietnamese communists fought together. But when the communists won and established the existing Vietnamese state, the Paracel Islands still remained under the control of China, and for the SRV it was a considerable loss. In 1979, the PRC invaded the territory of the SRV and the Sino-Vietnamese war broke out, in which tens of thousands of people died on both sides. In 1988, after a naval battle in which 64 Vietnamese soldiers were killed and 3 Vietnamese ships sunk, the PRC captured a part of the disputed Spratly Islands.

In 1991, the USSR collapsed, and the SRV withdrew its troops from Cambodia. Sino-Vietnamese relations rapidly warmed. In 1991, two states resumed trade. In 1999-2000, they signed and ratified border agreements that resolved most of the territorial disputes at the time, and, in 2010, declared their comprehensive strategic cooperation. In 2012, Sino-Vietnamese trade flows reached $ 40 billion, and, in 2019, it amounted to $ 116 billion. According to this indicator, China is currently the key Vietnamese partner.

Nevertheless, some tensions in relations between the SRV and the PRC still exist. For instance, the two countries still argue over the ownership of the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands - the above-mentioned archipelagos in the South China Sea (SCS).

Each of these archipelagos includes over one hundred small islands. Both are located in an area rich in fish, under the seabed of which there may be significant reserves of oil and gas. In addition, the location of these archipelagos is such that the state, which will deploy its fleet, aircraft and missiles there, will significantly strengthen its position throughout the region.

Besides China, Taiwan and Vietnam, there are Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines which would also gladly own the Spratly Islands, but China is obviously the most active, as the richest and most powerful state in the region.

In 1995, the SRV and the PRC began negotiations on the joint development of Spratly resources, but they did not come to a mutually beneficial agreement: in 2007, when Vietnam, together with British Petroleum, was going to
build an underwater gas pipeline from the archipelago to its mainland territory, the Chinese side declared it an attack on their territorial integrity. An incident soon followed, during which a Vietnamese fishery ship was attacked by the Chinese military. One Vietnamese sailor was killed.

Since then, there have been many diplomatic scandals and protests, but the question of ownership of the Spratly Islands has not yet been resolved. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration found the Chinese claims against Spratly unjustified (the claim was filed by the Philippines). The Chinese authorities replied that they defied this court judgement. Soon after the judgement was announced, the mass media reported that Vietnam, in addition to the units of its armed forces already there, secretly deployed missile systems on the part of the Spratly Islands under its control. In 2018, the PRC also deployed anti-ship missile systems and hangars for combat aircraft on the Spratly part under its control.

Thus, despite the fact that relations between China and Vietnam are basically developing harmoniously, they have a vulnerable point, which, under a certain set of circumstances, can turn out to be quite explosive. On the whole, there can be no complete trust between the PRC, that claims to be regional and world leader, and the Vietnam that values its independence and is quite developed militarily. Realizing that in the event of an open confrontation with China, it will have a very difficult time, Vietnam is developing relations with other regional players, trying to involve them in resolving disputed issues with China. For example, despite the above-mentioned Sino-Vietnamese negotiations on the joint development of Spratly resources, Vietnam avoids cooperation with PRC in the oil and gas sector, giving preference to partners from the UK, Russia and Japan (as mentioned above, it was British Petroleum that the CRV had previously tried to engage to the construction gas pipeline to the SCS). On the one hand, for China, which is constantly in need of hydrocarbon energy sources, this is an irritating factor pushing for more active actions in the SCS, on the other hand, if the interests of other powerful states are involved, the PRC will have to be more restrained. For one, Vietnam is actively cooperating with the Russian oil and gas company Gazprom, which, among other things, is also involved in the development of Vietnamese oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. This causes some dissatisfaction with the PRC, however, in its statements on this topic, Beijing is still rather restrained. It is implicit that no one talks about Russia’s engagement in any theoretical armed conflict on the side of Vietnam, but the Russian Federation is an important Chinese partner, and China does not need to spoil relations with it.

It is potentially the Russian Federation, as an intermediate party and common partner of the PRC and the SRV, that will play a part of a buffer between these countries and keep them from further escalation of tension.

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