Joe Biden on Relations with China

It hardly needs explaining that the nature of relations between the two leading world powers under the new American administration (during its next four years in power) will be at the center of the global political process.

The last time we touched on this topic was in connection with the February 5 phone conversation between the new US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Yang Jiechi, who is responsible in the CPC Central Committee for the whole range of relations of the PRC with the outside world. The content of this conversation, as it was reflected in the official report of the State Department, gave no reason for any positive forecast of the development of US-Chinese relations in the near future. It seems that Michael Pompeo’s case (resolutely anti-Chinese) continues to thrive, even though he himself is no longer at the helm of American diplomacy.

Again, it should be noted that in this conversation Blinken outlined the position of his country (which, incidentally, is also not completely obvious) in relation to only the political and diplomatic sphere of relations with the PRC. The trade and economic sphere occupies an extremely important place in them. There are also other areas of interstate interaction (such ideological and cultural). But mostly with the trade and economic are hopes to keep the process of development of US-Chinese relations from following the bad, going back centuries, logic of the predetermined conflict between the "aging" and "emerging" superpowers.
Generally speaking, the US position in the complex of relations with its main geopolitical opponent can only be considered as the one that is voiced by the first person of the country, that is, its president, which since January 20 this year is Joe Biden. As the incumbent president, it was touched upon in one way or another both in his public speeches and in the course of his contacts with his foreign colleagues. The speeches, which were to a certain extent "orientation" in nature, were delivered at the headquarters of "relevant" departments, such as the State Department and the Department of Defense.

The first one under the general title of "President Biden's Remarks on America's Place in the World" was held on February 4. The central message of the speech was a statement to the outside world that "America is coming back," not to solve yesterday's problems, but to respond to today's and tomorrow's. The main sources were "China, which has challenged the US with its growing ambitions" and Russia, which "threatens our democracy".

China was promised "confrontation" over its "economic abuses" and "attacks on human rights, intellectual property and world order". At the same time there was expressed a "willingness to work with China when it suits American interests". Indirectly, "(anti-)Chinese" motives were present in other parts of this speech as well, for example, in the passage about the plans to hold a "Summit of Democracies" in order to protect the process of "global democratization from authoritarianism". Apparently, the symbol of this process will be the promotion of (specifically noted) LBGT rights.

One of the main points of Joe Biden's February 10 speech at the Pentagon was that the US should be strong "not so much by example of power, but by the power of the example." Further promising "no hesitation" in using the armed forces to protect the vital interests of "the American people," he nevertheless noted that it was a "last resort" in dealing with one or another of the country's external problems.

In general, this thesis is a variation on the theme of the ancient Roman meme Ultima ratio, which in the early 17th century in France (and a hundred years later in Prussia) was even cast on the royal cannons. In view of the monstrous power of modern "guns," Joe Biden's above thesis can only be welcomed and seen as a positive signal to the outside world. It's just a matter of filling this signal specifically.

And in this case, too, there are several "options". Is the appearance in early February in the South China Sea of two aircraft carrier strike groups of the US Navy a pre (or pre, pre, pre...) final argument of "King" Joe Biden? One thing is certain: this action, like the earlier passage of the missile destroyer John S. McCain through the Taiwan Strait, is an extremely dangerous game. Given the exceptional importance that China, i.e. the main opponent of the United States, attaches to the situation in the waters of both the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

In the time between these two speeches there was a remarkable interview of Joe Biden with a journalist of the CBS television and radio company. The key thesis was the president's prediction that in US-China relations we should hardly expect conflict, but rather "tough competition". Apparently, the latter may be a consequence of his own intention to encourage China to adhere to certain "rules" of the international arena.

Joe Biden's telephone conversation with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on the night of February 10-11 was unprecedentedly long (two hours) for such a form of communication. There is no full text of the conversation in the public domain and we have to rely solely upon very general comments. In particular, the following remarks by the American president who emphasized that he is "well acquainted" with the Chinese leader because he met with him many times while he was vice-president in the Obama administration can be regarded as such.

So far, it is difficult to interpret in any meaningful way Joe Biden's words concerning the fact that if the US does not hurry up with the development of its own infrastructure, the rapidly developing China will "snatch our lunch". The "gratitude" expressed on behalf of the President of Taiwan to Joe Biden for the US concerns (allegedly indicated by him) about the "pressure" on the island by the Chinese leadership seems remarkable.

As for the comments in the PRC on this conversation, they are cautiously optimistic. In particular, they believe that the very fact of such a conversation is "evidence of the Biden administration's goodwill toward the people and the government of China".

Joe Biden's telephone conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 8 had the most direct relevance to the issue of US-Chinese relations. The commentary published by Modi of the past conversation does not explicitly mention China. But there were established symbolic expressions used, indicating the concern of both interlocutors to ensure "peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region," for which there is a clear threat posed.

At a press conference the next day, State Department spokesman Ned Price called India "one of the most important
partners" in the region and expressed satisfaction with the country's transformation into a “global power”. The Quad of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia has been identified as potentially the main instrument for securing US interests in IPR. The complex twists and turns of the process of its formation are under the constant attention of NEO.

On the whole, the recent rhetoric of the new US president and his administration officials regarding US-China relations has so far been a hard-to-digest mixture of rather contradictory talking points. It strongly resembles the public actions of a professional boxer on the eve of their upcoming fight against a looming opponent. As a rule, all this preliminary “hype” has nothing to do with the boxer's subsequent behavior in the ring, let alone with the results of the fight.

The author of this article is not the only one who is somewhat perplexed about the further development of US foreign policy. Its continued "ambiguity" after the US president's State Department speech is reported by one of India's leading newspapers, the Hindustan Times.

So now we await the first real actions of the new US administration in the "sensitive" areas of relations with its main geopolitical opponent. We will be watching Washington's activities in trade with the PRC and relations with Taiwan, as well as further actions in the Quad configuration, with a particular attention.

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