The list of several major plot arcs of the current stage of the “Great World Game” includes the Sino-Indian one. For fairly obvious reasons, its importance will only increase over time. Therefore, the transformation of relations between the two Asian giants deserves special attention in the context of other similarly important subjects, one of the main actors of which remains the United States.

As the NEO has noted many times before, relations between India and the PRC are subject to sinusoidal fluctuations. Since the early 1950s, when India became fully independent and China underwent a radical change in its social and political structure, there have been several periods of the aforementioned fluctuations. The “US factor” was invariably present in one way or another in each change of vector in the development of bilateral relations.

The beginning of the current period of their cooling (to the level of a dangerous freeze) can be fairly confidently tied to the September 2018 US-India meeting in the “2+2” format, that is, with the participation of foreign and defense ministers. This trend peaked last spring and summer during the unfolding conflict in the highland section of the Union Territory of Ladakh, that is, a separate administrative unit (from 2019) within the state “Republic of India”.

The scale and duration of the conflict in Ladakh far exceeded that of the previous summer and fall of 2017 on the Doklam Plateau, another section of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) established after the 1962 war. Note that since then the LAC has never become a full-fledged border, although both sides have made numerous and varied efforts to do so.
Despite frequent speculation, there is no evidence that the current conflict was the result of someone’s deliberate plans. Most likely, its emergence was accidental and resulted from the unresolved problem of mutual territorial claims and the absence of an interstate border in the accepted interpretation of this category.

The territorial and border problem, as well as the general dysfunction of bilateral political relations, predetermined that after very localized incidents in Ladakh using “improvised” means (without the use of firearms), the sides quickly began to build up their armed forces in the area. Note the extreme difficulty of deploying units equipped with heavy military hardware: the altitude of 4-5 kilometers, the lack of roads, and the most necessary engineering structures.

The exceptional importance that the parties nevertheless attached to these activities (which must have been extremely costly) was evidenced by the visits of the leaders of both countries to these areas.

After a particularly serious clash of the border guards on June 16, 2020, the negotiation level (with the ultimate goal of resolving the conflict as a whole) rose to the district command of the parties, with representatives of the foreign ministries involved. On June 17, 2020, there was a telephone conversation between Ministers Wang Yi and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. On September 10, they also met during a visit to Moscow on the occasion of the regular meeting of SOC foreign ministers.

Up until early February of this year, the only positive outcome of all these efforts was the prevention of clashes on the scale of those that occurred on June 16 of last year. At the same time, construction continued on the infrastructure to house the new military units. In conditions of general political tension in bilateral relations, this put the issue of conflict (on a much larger scale and at a completely different level) into the realm of high probability.

But lately there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel, and it’s clearly not the oncoming train. On February 10-11, world news agencies disseminated information “from the defense ministries” of India and China about the beginning of the disengagement of units in the area of last year’s clashes.

Another day later there was a report about the withdrawal of “over two hundred tanks” (by the way, about the scale of the deployed forces) from the conflict zone by the PLA. On February 17 there was already talk about the “2nd round of disengagement” of the troops.

It is to be hoped that this is not simply a question of exhausting the most dangerous conflict between the two Asian giants in recent decades, but of reaching the bottom of the “sine wave” decline curve and the subsequent next period of improvement in bilateral relations. Such hopes are reinforced by hints of positive developments in the trade and economic sphere of Sino-Indian relations. That is, we can expect a reversal of India’s contraction of the framework of this sphere, which coincided (hardly coincidentally) with similar attempts by the former US leadership.

And this is where we come to the factor of possible shifts in the foreign policy of the world’s leading power under the new leadership. The main role in the return of the situation in Ladakh to its “original” state (which we would like to emphasize again) is undoubtedly played by the awareness of the conflict participants themselves of the danger of its uncontrollable development. The same second factor previously played a decisive role in the resolution of the incident on the Doklam Plateau.

Nevertheless, the factor of a power change in the United States deserves attention. India’s until recently hardline position on the PRC relied heavily (again, in the author’s view) on unequivocal US support. In words such support is also expressed by the new American administration. In India itself, however, the situation in the triangle involving the US and China is now defined as “unclear”.

New Delhi must also take into account the fact that placing the “human rights” issue at the center of US foreign policy could have unpleasant consequences for India due to the recent sharp deterioration in the domestic situation. First and foremost, because of the continuing protests by farmers demanding the repeal of the three agricultural reform laws passed last fall. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the farmers’ protest movement is beginning to identify the presence of carriers of India’s other (numerous) domestic problems.

Thus, the main participants (and, apparently, the initiators) in the storming of the Red Fort during the “tractor parade”, held on January 26 in Delhi on the occasion of the main national holiday, were Sikhs. This shows that the idea of creating an independent state of “Khalistan” on the territory of the current state of Punjab (with a claim to part of the Pakistani province of Punjab) as well persisted among them.

And how long can the new Vice President of the United States, the half-Indian Kamala Harris, remain silent about
the “egregious wrongdoing” in her historic homeland? It is clear that the “human-rights” cudgel is not used universally by Washington, but very selectively. Not among those targeted is, of course, India, which is very important to the US.

But in realpolitik, a game played by someone almost never develops according to a “planned” scenario. Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau has already had to tell his colleague Modi all sorts of nice things (particularly about the Indian vaccine against SARS-CoV-2) after the noisy anti-Indian demonstrations of the Sikh community in Canada.

Meanwhile, the “Swedish Greta” has emerged in the “farmer” issue in India, a weapon of very serious caliber in the current “human rights and environmental” movement. The Filipinos so far are turning to the authorities in Delhi. Well, what if she said something to Kamala Harris for her silence? The latter will not be happy.

So it was very timely that Delhi decided to remove from the current agenda an absolutely unnecessary problem today in connection with the situation around some lake in the Tibetan highlands. Neither does Beijing, which has its own internal ills. And in general, both Asian giants need to solve bilateral problems without much regard to external factors.

Though, this kind of thing is easy to say, but not easy to do. As evidenced by another (video) meeting of the foreign ministers of the (clearly anti-Chinese) Quad. However, this event deserves a separate comment.

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