An important and in many ways remarkable event at the present stage of world politics were the negotiations held on March 18-19 in Anchorage, the capital of the American state of Alaska, by representative delegations of the two leading world powers. The US was represented by Assistant to the President for National Security Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken; the PRC was represented by Yang Jiechi, who is in charge of the CPC Central Committee’s overall foreign policy, and by Wang Yi, head of the PRC Foreign Ministry.

The first day of the negotiations began with a fierce mutual quarrel, which brought the whole meeting to the brink of collapse. As far as one can tell, the mutual verbal outbursts stemmed from the new US administration’s focus on human rights in its foreign policy. Which rights, according to American rhetoric, “are generally violated in the PRC, especially egregiously so in the national fringes and Hong Kong.” In particular, on the eve of the meeting in Anchorage, the US imposed sanctions on a number of senior PRC officials directly or indirectly related to the adoption of the new electoral law in Hong Kong.

It is important to note a few points here. First, according to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, the meeting was held at the initiative of the American side. However, it should be noted that an agreement in principle to hold it was reached as early as February 11 during a telephone conversation between the leaders of both countries. Second, Anchorage turned out to be the first negotiating platform where the new US administration had
an opportunity to discuss the whole range of (very complicated) relations with its main geopolitical opponent.

Third, the refusal of Secretary of State’s spokesman Ned Price to comment in any way on what happened on the first day of talks was rather noteworthy. In this connection, it seems quite appropriate for the Russian Foreign Ministry to draw an analogy with the well-known attack on the Russian president by his American colleague and, in particular, with the refusal of Jen Psaki, i.e. the official representative of the former, to make any further comments.

One can not help but wonder: is this now the style of behavior in the international arena of the world’s leading power? Is it really the extent of the “America is back” meme? Something similar, apparently, was foreseen in the PRC. Note the facial expressions of “Merkel” and “Macron” in the illustration for the Global Times article, watching the “returning Biden” (“please, not you again”). Indeed, so far for Europe such a “return” is just a source of yet another headache. They already have enough of their own.

However, the use of categories from the field of everyday etiquette to some actions that are entirely in the realm of “realpolitik” is questionable. As a rule, the latter are carefully thought out and are a beforehand prepared “impromptu” with a well-defined vulnerable target. In the case of the Russian Federation, such a goal was the (dubious) thesis: “There is Putin – there is Russia”. It is counterproductive to react emotionally to this kind of action akin to a child, crying in a sandbox, or a noble maiden student with multiple and constantly insulted “feelings”.

Such a reaction should be completely absent from responsible politicians, which undoubtedly includes the current leadership of China. The evident provocation in Anchorage was followed by the above-mentioned one-time statement by a representative of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. He actually did not rule out the possibility of a constructive continuation of negotiations on the second planned day.

After all, their goal (for both participants, it should be stressed) was to overcome the highly controversial legacy of the previous administration’s China policy.

In general, “positivity” in the foreign policy arena has little to do with art in diplomatic symbolism. Because, according to the popular formula, foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. The success of the latter is ensured, as was said even relatively recently, “in the fields, factories, and scientific laboratories”. All this is quite present in today’s China, which can afford to ignore its opponent’s rhetorical taunts and not beat itself up in a huff after certain “hurtful” words.

The differences in the parties’ preparations for the upcoming negotiations are also rather noteworthy. All preliminary events in the US were intended to reinforce the “position of strength”, which is how the new administration intends to deal with the outside world in general and with leading opponents in particular.

These included the appearance at the Senate hearings of retired General Herbert Raymond McMaster, former national security adviser to President Trump, the first video summit of the Quad, another US-Japan meeting in the “2+2” format. In the latter event, the US confirmed the extension to the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands of its defense commitments to Japan.

Note, however, that the foreign policy actions (so far, mostly at the level of rhetoric) of the new administration are also of an internal nature. Anthony Blinken is an experienced diplomat, well aware of how to behave in important negotiations. But the House Foreign Relations Committee recently put him in the position of a recruit (“Mr. Pitkin”) listening to his sergeant’s instruction on the art of the foot attack: “Show me your war face. Show it! Show it!!!”. And what’s left for Blinken to do in Anchorage but to show that very “face”?

Preparations in China for the upcoming meeting with representatives of the main geopolitical opponent were of a completely different nature. In addition to stating the intention to firmly oppose attempts to interfere in domestic affairs, there was a willingness to improve (to a certain extent to restore the state before the “Trump-Pompeo period”) bilateral relations. In a similar vein, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke to reporters on March 11.

There has also been some practical constructive movement in bilateral relations. This is about the creation of a joint group of “experts” to remove restrictions on the development and trade of semiconductor element base, that is, in the most advanced area of modern industrial production.

However, along with these positives, the negatives that were particularly evident during the previous US administration continued. In particular, US government officials were banned from using the equipment of Chinese IT giant Huawei because of the possible leakage of “secret” information through it.
In response, Chinese officials were restricted from using Tesla electric cars. All despite that China is one of the main producers of this very Tesla, and its owner Elon Musk was forced to declare that his company’s products do not contain any “spy taps”.

Once again, a series of apparently rhetorical questions arise involuntarily. Who needs all this mess? Why shouldn’t the US become as significant a participant (as the PRC) in the global Community of One Destiny project? Why is it seen as a “challenge to the national interest”? Does the US have any interests of its own that are different from those of humanity? What are these interests, who are their spokespeople, and what do the American people know about them?

Let us not bother answering them and simply state the extreme timeliness of the planned visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to China. One should note three fundamental points in this connection.

First, Beijing should not give the impression that Russia’s current interest in deepening cooperation with China is due to current foreign policy problems. This trend is long overdue and is motivated mainly by the general shift in the focus of the “Great World Game” to Asia. Asia has its own extremely complex and dangerous problems. But this is an inherent characteristic of real life, which “continues” (after the “end of history” in the Euro-Atlantic) precisely in Asia. Therefore, the Russian Federation’s desire to strengthen ties with the leading Asian power looks completely natural.

Second, the new stage of Russian-Chinese rapprochement should be based on a coordinated conceptual framework in which the defense component may be present, but not necessarily in the first place. For in the focus of today’s global game are other highly topical issues and problems. Although right now it would look rather good, for example, if a group of ships (especially the newest) of the Chinese Navy entered the Black Sea (with a visit to Sevastopol and Novorossiysk). A similar action three years ago in the Baltic had positive-peaceful consequences.

Thirdly, one of these basic concepts should be that of the struggle not “against” but “for”: India, Japan and even, let’s not be afraid of these words, the United States. The text and illustration in the same Global Times show that China does not regard the latter perspective as a fantasy.

For, as one of Russia’s most prominent statesmen used to say, someone comes and goes, but the people (in this case, the American people) stay.

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