Subrahmanyam Jaishankar’s Trip to the United States

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar’s nearly week-long trip to the United States, commencing on May 24 this year, encompassed two distinct parts. Of these, the first was participation in the UN Security Council, to which India was elected for a two-year term in the summer of 2020 (during the UN General Assembly), along with Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, and Norway.

The second part (which is of primary interest for this article) was the negotiations with the upper leadership of the US itself. First of all, on the very topical issue for India today of providing various kinds of assistance in fighting (as well as overcoming the consequences of) the “second wave” of COVID-19, which began in March of this year and has taken on a disastrous quality in the country. A curve of the number of infections with this virus detected daily can be found here.

In India itself, everything about the “second wave” comes with important comments. First, it is pointed out that the real picture may look even worse than the official data. The latter seems incomplete and not so much “by design” as by objective circumstances. For example, because of the impossibility of rapid testing (which often there is simply no one to do) in difficult to access parts of the country, where said picture can take on an absolutely horrifying appearance.

In addition, virologists in the country have discovered some new particularly dangerous strain of COVID-19, which has been labeled “Indian” in social media. This definition was strongly opposed by official representatives of the Indian leadership. For understandable, primarily political reasons. To top off the loss of the exemplary role in the
eyes of the “world community” in the fight against COVID-19 (worthy of being followed), which India enjoyed at the 
beginning of the year, India’s position was only worsened further when it was presented as the source of a particularly hazardous strain.

On May 31, WHO assigned “neutral” names to two COVID-19 strains detected in India. This is important to note 
given that these are the very ones that have recently been spreading rapidly in other countries, including those that 
until now have looked fairly “safe” in terms of the scope of this pandemic. The impact on Asian communities in the 
US caused by the prior American administration’s designation of this infection as “Chinese” is well known.

However, all such (“political game”) points are, generally speaking, hardly important against the background of the 
fact of the catastrophe that has struck one of the world’s leading powers with a population of 1.3 billion people, 
which found itself in dire need of urgent outside help, accepting all and any aid it could. Such assistance originated 
from countries of very different political and economic “weight classes”.

Note, however, that one can only speak of the secondary importance of the political factor in this matter from the 
very “general” positions. Particularly important, however, are the specifics and details, hiding you know who. In fact, 
politics itself, as one of the manifestations of the imperfection of our world, is the sphere and product of the active 
activity of the same “somebody”.

It is difficult to explain in any other way the complexities (which from time to time take quite a dangerous character) 
in the relations of the two Asian giants India and China. A year ago there were several clashes between border 
guards over a mountain lake five kilometers high, fortunately without the use of firearms, which brought the 
relationship to the brink of a serious military conflict.

Although the parties have taken measures to curb it and subsequently reduce tensions, their negative consequences 
continue to affect all spheres of bilateral relations. Even though China had turned out to be the main source of the 
 aforementioned emergency aid to India. It is important to note that it came at a time when Washington, that is now Delhi’s main foreign policy partner and Beijing’s main geopolitical opponent, did not exhibit the same timeliness.

Today, India’s leadership is subject to a variety of criticisms for everything that accompanies the “second wave” of 
COVID-19. Most of the complaints refer to the “loss of precious time” in the process of vaccinating the population. In 
order to meet such a challenge, supposedly, it was only necessary to “increase the production capacity” of 
pharmaceutical companies in India.

However, this would unlikely solve the problem of prompt vaccination of the country’s gigantic population, because 
there would simply be nothing to load these “capacities”. Mainly because of the US export ban on certain raw 
materials needed to make the anti-coronavirus vaccine. Which was not, obviously, introduced with the intention of 
harming an extremely important (potential) ally. The situation with the coronavirus epidemic does not look better for 
Americans themselves.

Be that as it may, in an extremely relevant aspect of US-Indian relations, they paint an ugly picture. Just now (but 
before the “second wave” of COVID-19 infections in India broke out) there was a summit of the Quad forum 
configuration with an obvious anti-Chinese focus. Its members, to recall, are the United States, Japan, India and 
Australia.

The central theme of the event was the “coronavirus” problem. And not so much from the standpoint of the joint 
fight against the pandemic, as from the general context of opposition to China’s increasing role in world processes. 
That is, the nature of the actualization of the topic at the Quad summit was clearly political. Even though it is China 
and Russia that are generally accused of politicizing the “coronavirus” issue.

In particular, as argued at the summit, both countries, in pursuit of certain political goals in the international arena, 
use “vaccine diplomacy,” thus creating a new source of “threats” to the positions of opponents (represented, for 
example, by Quad members) and above all in the “Third World”. To counteract it, it was proposed, first, to target 
India, close to these countries, and, second, to produce about one billion doses of anti-coronavirus vaccine by the 
end of 2022.

In enforcing both of these points, the task was to restore the “supply chains” (materials and components) affected by 
forced restrictions on transportation hubs. Because of the same coronavirus, too.

But no sooner had the ink of the signatures under the final document of the Quad summit dried, as it was dealt a 
heavy blow by the fact of the subsequent rapid development in India of the “second wave” of COVID-19. This
required an urgent solution to the very problem of “supply chains,” a key element of which, again, turned out to be a ban on the export of US vaccine materials by Indian companies.

Already at the end of April there were reports of the first emergency deliveries of materials and equipment from the United States, including from certain American “military bases”. On May 7, US Vice President Kamala Harris, speaking at a State Department-sponsored event attended by representatives of the (very influential) Indian community in the United States, declared her readiness to provide necessary assistance to India due to the “dire” nature of the coronavirus epidemic in that country.

But the issue required a comprehensive solution at the international level, which is what the head of the Indian Foreign Ministry was doing a month later in the US capital (after moving from New York, where the UN headquarters is located). Here he met with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, as well as leading representatives of the American business community.

The topic of the talks, of course, was not limited to the “coronavirus” issue and included all aspects of bilateral relations and the situation in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. It is the complex nature of Jaishankar’s trip to the United States that India’s leading political scientists draw attention to.

Its course, of course, was closely monitored in Beijing. Note that the Chinese leadership (apparently with the support of Moscow) has recently been taking effective steps to prevent India from slipping into the very close “friendly” embrace of Washington (as well as London and Paris).

A suitable occasion for direct contact between the foreign ministers of China, India and Russia to discuss the full range of relations between these countries was provided by the June 1 video meeting of ministerial-level BRICS countries.

Let’s hope that the “Moscow-Beijing” tandem will demonstrate a grandmaster’s skill in playing with the “Indian” component (that is, one of the key components) of contemporary global politics.

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