US Secretary of Defense Visits Vietnam and the Philippines

Two decades ago, it seemed utterly impossible to have a ceremonial reception of the US Secretary of Defense in Hanoi, as he visited Vietnam in late July.

Once again, illustrating the radical changes that have taken place in the world affairs since the end of the Cold War. In particular, for Vietnam, one of the main components of these changes was the complication of political relations with China (which, however, emerged in the late 1970s), that is, with one of its main allies in the long war on the Indochinese Peninsula. The other component was the gradual establishment of relations with the United States, that is, with the recent sworn enemy.

The defining motive of problems in Sino-Vietnamese relations today is the territorial issues in the South China Sea, and in Sino-US relations, the fact that China has become the main opponent of Washington’s global claims. The perception of China as a potential source of trouble helps to bring Washington and Hanoi closer together.

Noted, both of the world’s leading powers are among Vietnam’s top trading partners. Its trade with the PRC and the USA in 2019 was $131 billion and $78 billion, respectively. At the end of the "COVID" year of 2020, the volume of Vietnamese-Chinese trade increased (compared to 2019) by a "staggering" 19%.

But, as always, all sorts of political problems are a challenge to build mutually beneficial cooperation. The current
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin aims to solve such problems during his tour of the Southeast Asian region, which is becoming increasingly important in American global politics. Naturally, he is guided by the interests of his own country.

In Hanoi, where Lloyd Austin was received by the president and prime minister; he was quite comfortable with this arrangement for the reasons noted above. During talks with his colleague Fang Wang Zhang, the American guest made the remarkable remark that since the normalization of bilateral diplomatic relations (in 1995) Washington made no claims about Vietnam’s policy and did not ask it to make a political choice between the world’s leading powers.

Which is correct if guided by the strategy of attracting to its side a country with problems in relations with the primary geopolitical opponent of the United States. To achieve such a goal, one may not be very (or not at all) principled about, for example, "human rights violations" in the territory of a potential ally. But who are invariably positioned in the front line against Washington's main opponents?

In Hanoi, negotiations such as the US Secretary of Defense tend to have both an outwardly public shell and hidden real content. The first was Covid-19 and the search for the remains of American servicemen who died during the Vietnam War and those of the Vietnamese who went missing at the time. Lloyd Austin, in particular, “proudly” recalled the fact that the US government had allocated 5 million doses of Moderna vaccine to Vietnam and said he was ready to discuss further measures to cooperate in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

From the official report released after the talks, we learn that the topic of “dioxin cleanup” of the territory of Vietnam, which has, in the author's opinion, not a small destructive potential, was also touched upon. Both sides try to avoid the public-media “undermining” of the problem associated with this topic by mixing up the scale of the situation in every possible way.

There are all kinds of stuff written on this subject. Often, entirely speculative. But there is little doubt that millions of Vietnamese have suffered in one way or another from the use of Agent Orange by US aircraft. It has been claimed that the effects of the substance are also affecting the children now being born. At one time, the author came across reports about the futile attempts of American mechanics who were preparing planes carrying Agent Orange canisters for flight to get compensation for lost health. Most likely, not because of the greed of the Pentagon, but because of the need to conceal the problem itself.

The Pentagon, as mentioned above announcement about the chief's trip also reproduces a well-established meme about the "freedom and openness of the Indo-Pacific region," the adherence to which "brings the United States and Vietnam closer together". The defense ministers of both countries have not publicly identified a possible source of threats to both "freedom" and "openness."

But the Pentagon spokesman, John F. Kirby was less politically correct when he bluntly said that the region the chief was visiting was “part of a world where China continues to be very aggressive. ... And as you know, it's a vital region.” Of course, we do.

From Vietnam, Lloyd Austin went to another equally important country of the same "vital region," namely, the Philippines. But to answer the question of why it is significant to the US would also require some clarification. This is mainly due to a series of noteworthy events that occurred in 2016. In May of that year, Rodrigo Duterte took over the presidency as a result of the general elections, who allowed himself (almost for the first time in the country's post-war history) quite harsh remarks about the United States and declared his intention to improve relations with China.

However, two months later there followed a favorable decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague on the claim of Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, totally pro-American and anti-Chinese politician, which challenged the PRC claims to 80-90% of the South China Sea. Rodrigo Duterte refrained from commenting on this decision (obviously favorable for the Philippines), whose approval procedure fell on his foreign minister.

The new president's "extrajudicial" (to put it mildly) methods of combating the drug trade, the country's national disaster, have also contributed to a sharp deterioration in the image of the Philippines in the eyes of its recent overseas "guardians." The extravagant Filipino president responded to the criticism that arose with what he called "brinkmanship" on various fronts, including such significant ones as the UN Secretary-General and the President of the United States (then Barack Obama).

Soon, however, Rodrigo Duterte made significant adjustments to the initial "anti-Americanism" and even made
something akin to an apology to Barack Obama. Which, apparently, was the result of two strange incidents. First, a small armed incident in Mindanao Province that broke out immediately after his election turned into full-scale hostilities involving hitherto obscure terrorist groups. It is simply amazing how the "international terrorists" invariably manage to surface where tensions grow just on time. The operation to neutralize them dragged on for three months, and they had to rely on the same Americans to complete it.

In addition, a "space photo" of a Chinese sand barge arriving at one of the islands, subjects to a territorial dispute between the Philippines and the PRC, was published in the press.

In general, the pendulum of Philippine foreign policy swung sharply in the direction of the PRC had to be brought to a certain equilibrium position, in which it remains to this day (weakly swaying). Which, by the way, is more or less typical of all the countries of Southeast Asia. Their balancing in the field of tensions "radiated" in the region by the leading world players provides each latter with certain opportunities to shift these "pendulums" in their direction.

That is what the US Secretary of Defense was doing in Manila (and earlier in Hanoi). And, judging by the report of the American Embassy (with a curious illustration), not without certain success. In particular, the sides expressed their intention to strengthen the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. That is, it has not disappeared, despite all the twists and turns in bilateral relations in recent years.

In addition, Rodrigo Duterte announced the withdrawal of his own statement on the termination of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement, VFA. It seems that he was overly excited when he was making it, it happens to everyone every once in a while...

Finally, at the end of the defense secretary's trip to three Southeast Asian countries, the spokesman's thesis on the "vital importance" of the region was reiterated. US Secretary of State Antony John Blinken was scheduled to hold video conferences with counterparts from several ASEAN countries between August 2-6. Vice-President Kamila Harris is scheduled to visit Singapore and Vietnam in late August.

As the Chinese Global Times put it, senior US officials kick-off 'unusually frequent' visits to the region.

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