Central Asian Countries Keep Maneuvering amid Regional Powers

The NEO has already raised the issue of the optimal positioning of the Central Asian countries in the field of power that is being shaped by the world’s leading players, who have in varying degrees been involved in the processes that have developed in recent years in the sub-region.

The change of power in Afghanistan, as well as the changing nature of the presence of the world’s leading power, the United States, in the country brought a major novelty to these processes. It should be stressed that a military withdrawal does not mean a complete loss of Washington’s leverage in Afghanistan. First, there must be some “secret protocols” to the public agreements with the Taliban. Second, US banks hold significant financial reserves created by the previous Afghan government, access to which is becoming increasingly urgent for the new Kabul authorities. Third, the US retains diplomatic leverage in the region, which was recently exercised by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, during her trip to India, Pakistan and also Uzbekistan.

Therefore, the list of countries that create the “field of power” mentioned at the beginning undoubtedly includes the United States, along with China, Russia, India and Pakistan. Meanwhile, Iran bordering the sub-region, Turkey with its claim to be the center of the “Great Turan” (a project that is unlikely to go beyond the conceptual framework) and, judging by certain signs, the United Kingdom shouldn’t be counted out. Germany and Japan have every chance of joining the significant actors as well.
The optimum strategy for countries lacking their own agency (that is, virtually all Central Asian countries), which have found themselves in such a “field,” has always been to perform a balancing act, with slight preference given at times, for one reason or another, to one of the creators of the “field.” In the case of non-threatening misunderstandings between said creators, such a strategy (with some skill) can be very profitable. An example of its quite successful implementation is the behavior of countries in another critically important sub-region, i.e. Southeast Asia, which is constantly monitored by the NEO.

A directly opposite strategy is being pursued by some Eastern European limitrophe states, which, for the dubious pleasure of sticking their tongue out at their former overlord, are unconditionally choosing one side of the escalating political confrontation in Europe. A questionable strategy, to put it bluntly, and one fraught with serious consequences at that. Who knows what can happen in our highly volatile world? With NATO, for example.

But Central Asia is home to people of a much older culture who do not allow themselves this kind of nonsense. An example of their most recent behavior was the (video) conferences the presidents of the five Central Asian countries held with the leaders of one of the major actors (China) first and the other (India) two days later. Even though the relationship between the latter two countries is still, as they say, not really working out.

However, the author was surprised to read at the last moment that the meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was preceded, first, by a video conference with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and, second, that it (the meeting with Modi) was also held in an online format. Just a month earlier it was reported that the leaders of all the five Central Asian countries were scheduled to travel to India as guests of honor on the country’s main holiday, Republic Day, which is celebrated annually on January 26. The agreement to arrange this trip turned out to be the main outcome of the so-called Delhi Dialogue between the foreign ministers of all the six countries, which took place on December 18-19, 2021, in an offline (let’s stress it) format.

The author believes that at a later point some of the Central Asian participants in the upcoming summit may have realized that the planned summit in New Delhi would be regarded as an act of disrespect or even a challenge by their crucial neighbor, China - something the Central Asian Five do not need at all, neither as a group nor individually.

It was the good old COVID-19, whose contagion curve in India has skyrocketed for the third time since the end of December, that helped to break the ambiguity. A perfect excuse for Central Asians to a) not go to New Delhi; b) use the one-month pause to arrange a similar event with Beijing; c) hold them all in the same online format; d) keep the “right” hierarchy in the order of the two events.

However, New Delhi is hardly upset, since there is nothing offensive about Beijing’s current immeasurably greater all-round presence in the Central Asian sub-region. For instance, China’s trade volume with Central Asian countries alone is an order of magnitude higher than that of India. In addition, the task of improving India’s relations with China is becoming increasingly urgent. The need to reduce turbulence across the whole of Central Asia, which is only possible by aligning the efforts of all leading actors, provides an excellent opportunity If the practical follow-up is in line with what was said at both summits, things could turn out very positively for the Central Asian partners of Beijing and New Delhi.

That is truly some mastery many independent Eastern European limitrophes could learn from. While they still have the time, that is - as the poor example of Lithuania has shown, which in its zealous - and not particularly smart - affection for Taiwan clearly overdid it.

A good excuse for Central Asian countries to hold summits with each of the two Asian giants was the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with both of them. In his speech, the Chinese leader developed the main points of China’s policy towards Central Asia, which he had already announced three weeks earlier in a spoken address to Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev in connection with the notorious events of early January. This time they were presented in the form of five theses, most notably, once again, the fierce opposition expressed by Xi Jinping towards attempts by external forces to provoke “color revolutions” in the region and interfere in internal affairs under the pretext of “protecting human rights.” In addition, the promise from the previous “address” to provide “feasible assistance” in the areas of health and training in various fields of activity of Central Asian countries has taken concrete shape.

The editorial of the Chinese Global Times also drew attention to a number of points. In particular, the US strategy of containing China and Russia “simultaneously” in the sub-region, and the refusal to invite them both and all five Central Asian countries to the just-ended Forum for Democracy.
Again, just two days later (and this is highlighted in the Indian media), a similar event was held in the same format with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the leaders of the five Central Asian countries. From what can be understood, the Indian side has focused its interlocutors’ attention just on the problem of dramatically increasing trade and economic relations, an area in which it still lags far behind China.

As for Russia’s role in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole (and in its individual sub-regions), it is seen as a kind of political damper designed to reduce problems between all the countries in the region, but primarily between the leading countries, which in addition to China and India also include Japan.

The years-long process of chewing Euro-Atlantic “cud” (in which the “Ukrainian” part has an absolutely unjustified place) should also be stopped and from now on, all the attention should be focused on the region, where the fate of humanity will be decided.

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