On Speculations about the Similarities between Taiwan and Ukraine

There is a growing discourse about the striking parallels in the situations around Taiwan and Ukraine.

Proponents of geopolitics revive the basic tenet of its modern edition, which was originated by Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder. With certain variations, both of them had, over a hundred years ago, proposed the hypothesis of an irreducible and fundamental contradiction between the world’s “land” (the “Heartland”) and the “sea” surrounding it. However, we should note that the role of geography as a whole in global political processes has never been denied before.

In terms of geopolitics, the ever-closer rapprochement between the PRC and the Russian Federation can be imagined as another strengthening of the “Heartland”, which is a source of growing concern for the major maritime powers, like the United Kingdom and the US, which have, however, swapped places in terms of maritime importance since the early days of the basic geopolitical theory.

The leaders of the geopolitical “sea” are attempting to create an “anaconda ring” as they grapple with the strengthening “land”. AUKUS can be considered its founding. The “sea” leaders are starting to “surround” their opponents with the said “ring” in the most sensitive places for the latter, which are Taiwan for the PRC and Ukraine for the Russian Federation.
The geopolitical picture looks logical at this point. But the author of this article likes another hypothesis about the nature of large-scale international conflicts, going back to Thucydides, who linked the main cause of the Peloponnesian Wars (which had disastrous consequences for the peoples at the time) with the growing role that Athens played. The latter was perceived by the then regional hegemon Sparta as a rising challenger threatening its vital interests.

Within this vision of the nature of conflict, “sea” and “land” (and geography in general) are important but concomitant factors. The continuing validity of Thucydides’ hypothesis was recently demonstrated by the American political scientist Graham Allison, using the wars of the last few centuries (including the no less catastrophic World War I) as examples. He also showed the relevance of the “Thucydides trap” to the central conflict of the entire 21st century, with the US and the PRC as the main actors.

Within Allison’s interpretation of Thucydides’ hypothesis, the main opponents and sources of threat to global peace are not the abstract “sea” and “land”, but rather the very specific two major world powers. There is no geographical mysticism in their growing confrontation. Instead, the rapid economic development factor of the incumbent world hegemon’s competitor is evident (as it was at the beginning of the last century). The hegemon is still at the top of the global political hierarchy that developed with the end of the Cold War.

But the US already has nothing to counter its main opponent (the PRC) with, which is rapidly spreading influence in the world through the Belt and Road Initiative, a key political-economic project. Apart from vociferous declarations and beautiful acronyms for their own (alternative to the BRI) projects, neither the US nor the EU have so far demonstrated anything more or less effective.

The only thing left to do is to step on the geopolitical “calluses” of the main opponents, with the most painful of them being the Taiwan issue. NEO has been following the chronicle of related events of any significance on a fairly regular basis. Of the latter, the visits to the island by two very high-profile individuals deserve special attention (and quite expected assessments) from the PRC. These are Mike Mullen, who was Chief of Joint Chiefs of the US Armed Forces from 2007 to 2011, and Mike Pompeo, who until recently headed the Department of State. Each of them (seemingly independently of each other and a day apart) arrived in Taiwan in early March and they were received by President Tsai Ing-wen in turn.

The arrival on the island of the former US military chief was meant to demonstrate Washington’s readiness to provide the necessary assistance to Taiwan, should the PRC do something similar to what Russia did in Ukraine with regard to the island. Incidentally, the same “Ukrainian” factor (among others) can also be seen in the demonstration passage of a US missile destroyer through the Taiwan Strait on February 26.

As for the level of importance for the US of what is happening around Taiwan and Ukraine, the speech of Kurt Campbell, one of the architects of US policy in the Indo-Pacific region and current White House adviser on emerging issues in the region, on February 28 drew the attention of experts. He questioned in particular the validity in the present context of the decade-old doctrine of the US being able to fight two (subsequently modified into one and a half) wars at the same time. This included a reference to the need to focus US efforts in the IPR “despite the Ukrainian crisis.” Incidentally, the illustration to the Global Times article commenting on the above speech delivered by Campbell is noteworthy.

It should be noted that Taiwan today has one of the world’s most advanced economies, with the world economy relying on its success to a certain extent, whereas Ukraine is a parasitic, festering abscess on the body of Europe, whose representatives seem preoccupied with one problem, namely that of finding places whose owners are bad at keeping their own money safe.

The current Ukraine is a territory with two (essentially interrelated) strategic objectives. The first boils down to the role of a quagmire in which the Russian Federation has to get bogged down so that it will have no time to strengthen relations with China, and to fulfill a badly needed “eastward shift.” At the same time, Ukraine should be a major element of the wall designed to prevent the formation of a no less mutually beneficial system of relations between Russia and the Old World. Generally speaking, the latter goal has been a traditional British preoccupation for the last few centuries. The said wall is being built out of the political rubble that was formed after the collapse of the USSR.

Until recently, the author believed that the ideological successors of Mazepa who seized power in Kiev and traded on the global political market in the strategic importance of the territory they controlled should be left to the natural course of events, with major powers cutting off all relations with them completely.
But the Russian leadership, which undoubtedly has incomparably better intel, seems to have decided that it cannot tolerate this rotting wound any longer without performing a radical surgery. The act of said surgery should only be welcomed by the same Old World, for the abscess that is being removed has long been poisoning all aspects of its life above all.

However, the author has never been fond of the not infrequent maxims about “Europe and Japan suppressed by Washington.” Those are some dodgers who rode comfortably throughout the post-war period on other people’s security guarantees.

And their current stance on the crisis in Ukraine is a deliberate and voluntary choice. There is no need to have any illusions about this, which seem to persist among some supporters of the project of embedding post-Soviet Russia into Europe, “freed from its unnecessary territorial fringes.” By the way, those fringes played the role of a bomb that blew up the USSR.

But it seems that the scale of such illusions is much larger among the Ukrainian population, something that is being successfully exploited by its current thieving puppet leadership.

Against the background of the general shift in the focus of the “Great Political Game” to the Indo-Pacific region, the assessment of the Ukrainian events by the three leading Asian powers, i.e. the PRC, India and Japan, deserves special attention. But that is a subject for a separate commentary.

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