February 28, 1972 was marked by a major event that would shape the development of global political trends for decades to come. We can still notice the impact that this event had today, but it is now viewed very differently by the major powers that were behind it some five decades ago.

The author is referring to the signing of the so-called Shanghai Communiqué by US President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai that represented the PRC. The document was but one of the three fundamental agreements that defined the development of bilateral ties between the US and China.

The other two were the joint communiqué signed on 16, 1978, which established full diplomatic relations between the US and China in two weeks' time. (in effect since January 1, 1979), and the communiqué issued on August 17, 1982, which regulated a rather minor issue (which has now become a stumbling block of the modern bilateral ties) of US arms supplies to Taiwan. It should be noted that official relations with the island (one of the most loyal allies of the US in the region) were severed by Washington at the time of signing the second communiqué.

All of these documents have a significance, but it was the first that marked a turning point in US-China relations,
putting an end to a period of confrontation to launch a phase of increasing (comprehensive, which should also be noted) cooperation. This cooperation undergoes radical changes since the second half of the 2000s, with these changes defining the nature of the current stage of the “Great Game”.

The signing of the Shanghai Communiqué was preceded by a brief period, when the parties were mapping each other's positions on key issues in both bilateral relations and global politics, a process known as “ping-pong diplomacy”. This period was marked by Henry Kissinger's visit to China, six months prior to the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué. The parties must have agreed on the contents of the communique in advance during Kissinger's stay in China. Visits to China paid by top US officials at six-month intervals since the early 1970s represented the first official tie established between the two countries since the founding of the PRC, that took place in 1949.

The principal notion of the Shanghai Communiqué was an acknowledgement of the need for a complete normalization of US-China relations based on respect for individual interests of the parties. This document already made a shift towards a radical change in the US position on the Taiwan issue, which resulted in the establishment of US-China diplomatic relations seven years later. The part of the text that reflects the US position on the issue acknowledges that all Chinese living on both sides of the Taiwan Strait agree that there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China. The US also announced the withdrawal of all US forces from the island, which finished by the time the diplomatic relations between the PRC and US were established.

The part when the parties opposed the establishment of a dominant force in the region was also noteworthy. Experts agree that this statement was influenced by a dramatic rise of influence that the USSR enjoyed in the Southeast Asia as a consequence of its all-out support of Vietnam against the armed US aggression. In fact the very signing of communique implied there were prospects of bilateral cooperation between the US and the PRC in the fight against the USSR.

This, in the author’s view, predetermined the negative outcome of the Cold War for the latter. It is important to acknowledge, however, that no one in the US at the time could predict the exact date of the final victory over the USSR. The process of rapprochement with the PRC outlined in the Shanghai Communiqué was therefore seen as a long-term strategy that was to last for decades.

Without taking the above mentioned facts into the consideration, it is impossible to understand the current neutral-negative attitude in the US towards the document that looks like one of the country’s biggest foreign policy victories. The current US administration paid no attention to the anniversary. At the regular press conference held on February 28, this year, Department of State spokesman Ned Price clearly wasn’t looking too confident when a persistent journalist tried several times to get an explanation for such a disregard towards such a memorable date.

But at the expert level, both Kissinger (who lived to this day) and Nixon are held in contempt, with the main accusations leveled against them being: “We have nurtured our strongest enemy with our own hands.” Putting emotions aside, those accusations are not without merit, since the US provided full support to Deng Xiaoping’s rapid economic development course, leaving ideological differences aside for the moment being. Nine months after the establishment of diplomatic relations, China already gained the status of “the most preferred trade partner of the United States.”

It is not uncommon in the American expert community to see statements like “we would never have made those concessions to the PRC (particularly on the Taiwan issue) if we had known in advance that our main opponent was to crumble in late 80s, early 90s.”

But it’s easy enough to say that with the wisdom of hindsight. It is not unusual for recent allies in the fight against a common enemy to find themselves opposing each other in the next round of the Great Game. The period of World War II is an illustrative example of this, and the decades that preceded it (including World War I) as well as a significant stretch of the post-war period should also be taken into consideration.

A striking contrast to the current attitude in the US towards this anniversary date was a massive celebration organized in the PRC. There was even a concert where ‘the young represent our shared future’ (. Moreover, a videoconference was held with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Henry Kissinger as the main participants. That is, China was represented at the event by one of the top government officials, while the US representation is difficult to describe in any meaningful way. These days Henry Kissinger is almost a hundred years old and he's no more than an exhibit in a museum of US diplomatic history.
In general, the commemorative events held by the PRC represented one of the signals from Beijing towards Washington that it wanted to restore the “spirit of the early 1970s” in the bilateral ties with the preservation, of course, of all the cornerstone positions that Beijing was able to secure at that time. This is particularly relevant to the One China Principle and the Taiwan issue. It should be noted that there are signals from US businesses, too, that the bilateral economic potential should be preserved.

As for the PRC, the report that the PRC-controlled Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is not about to go break the anti-Russian sanctions regime imposed by the collective West is particularly noteworthy. And there's no complaining about it, as Beijing has its own interests, and Russia's should be the one solving its own problems. In the current configuration, the countries are standing “back-to-back”, which not the same as standing “side-by-side” (with the latter posture being desirable).

What lessons can Russia draw from the 1979 Shanghai Communiqué? It should be noted that it's nowhere near the situation in which China found itself in the second half of the 1950s, which demanded very unorthodox and rather unexpected moves from its leadership.

It's noteworthy in its recent history there were moments where Russia was in a similar position (specifically, in the first half of the 1920s) to the one that China managed to escape. And the present situation requires as much diplomatic prowess from its representatives, as we're in the period of “inter-imperialist contradictions” yet again, and the divergences in the positions of the major players on virtually all issues of world politics (including the prospect of relations with Russia) are visible to the naked eye.

The current proponents of the USSR 2.0 project, however, should not lose sight of the role of the “external factor” both in getting out of the foreign policy blockade and the phenomenal process of industrialization of the USSR 1.0. The actors that played the role of the “external factor” back then were not only the US, but also its future enemy - Germany.

It cannot be ruled out that, for present-day Russia, contemporary China, its regional rival Japan, and India could all serve the role of an “external factor”. Generally speaking, this would be consistent with a process (seemingly irreversible) of shifting the focus of global political processes from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region. However, this trend would not be contradicted by the involvement of the US. All the more so since Washington itself is increasingly positioning itself as an “Indo-Pacific power”.

These are, in brief, the history and the modern interpretation (including for the Russian Federation) of the 1972 US-China Shanghai Communiqué, one of the most remarkable political documents of the second half of the last century.

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