Policy of the Soviet Union - Russia in Asia Pacific and in the conflict over the islands of the South China Sea

Soviet period

The role of the Soviet Union/Russia in conflicts, occurring in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, including the South China Sea over the past decades has changed quite significantly. The Soviet Union has long acted as one of the main sponsors of the communist guerrilla struggle, together with the PRC supported local communists. After the Soviet-Chinese break USSR became the military and political partner, and then the main political ally of Vietnam. The most striking example of this alliance and the role played by the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia, were the events associated with the invasion of the Chinese troops to Vietnam, which began on February 17, 1979. This is a little known, but on February 19 in Hanoi received a group of 20 advisers and experts on the main types of troops led by General of the Army G. I. Obuturov. The purpose of this visit was to provide support to the Vietnam Army in the face of the Chinese offensive. Following this, began rapid concentration of Soviet forces in the Far East and Mongolia. Just days there appeared transferred from the West and from Siberia Aviation Regiment, airborne, and tank units. In certain moments in the air at this time both were up to ten aircraft regimental tactical aircraft on their way to the border with China. In total, on the 12 of March 1979, in the areas close to the borders of China, were focused twelve armored regiments (nearly 100 tanks each). This armored armada concentrated in Mongolia, was able in a few days to reach the central regions of China. Regarding the South China Sea, there was introduced nearly 30 Soviet warships and deployed in positions submarines. Formed at this time 22th operational squadron provided not only control over the water area, but of ships with military and civilian goods. Since the beginning of the Chinese invasion and the end of March by sea from the Soviet Union were transferred to Vietnam more than 400 tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 400 artillery pieces and mortars, 50 units “Grad”, more than 100 anti-aircraft guns, 400 portable air defense systems and thousands of missiles for them, 800 antitank grenade launchers, 20 fighters, engineering equipment, - all that was needed to reflect the Chinese attack.

This clear demonstration of military power and political will to support the Vietnam allowed the Soviet Union for many years to be a major player in the field of international politics in Southeast Asia and impact on the situation in the South China Sea to limit the promotion of Chinese forces in the south. It should be said that, until 1987, there have been no serious attempt to establish China control over Spratly Islands. Specific relations between the USSR and Vietnam, and the existence of a Soviet naval and air base at Cam Ranh Bay were the most serious obstacle. Only in 1988, when Beijing was already firmly convinced that the Soviet Union is experiencing a deep internal crisis on the eve of its disintegration and in anyway will not protect its Vietnamese ally, the Chinese Navy began to move steadily to the Spratly Islands. One of the reasons of Soviet “no reaction” was the fact that in Gorbachev’s vision of the world to normalize relations with China came to the fore, as previously privileged relations with Vietnam now moved to the second.

Therefore, during the Sino-Vietnamese armed conflict in the Spratly archipelago in 1988, the Soviet ships did not leave its naval base in Cam Ranh Bay. Moreover, Gorbachev, increasingly losing touch with reality inside and outside of the country, has done nothing to even show his disapproval of the aggressive actions of China by the diplomatic line.

Legacy for Russia in Southeast Asia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the new Russian state, Russia was actually outside of the region, as invisible political and economic partner of almost all key regional countries. In addition to objective
reasons for this, because of deep internal problems, there were subjective reasons of this “no position”. The fact was that new people in the Kremlin had no government experience and tried to build its foreign policy diametrically opposed to the policy of the Soviet Union. They believed that Russia should go to Europe, where will be the future of the country, and close relations with Vietnam and countries of Indochina considered that as purely ideological communists friendship, which was to be discontinued.

Only in the beginning of the 2000s, after a large number of failures and disappointments in relations with Europe, once again began to line up the Eastern vector of Russia's policy. In Moscow hoped to put a serious political initiative for stable peace and cooperation of all countries as the basis of the return to the East and in Southeast Asia. Kremlin planned to do it together with China, perhaps the only Asian country with which Russia's relations in that period were better than during the Soviet eve. Assumed that China achieved the significant influence in the region in Moscow thought that China will agree to assist Russia in its return. According to the then Deputy Foreign Minister A.N.Borodavkin “we offer our partners a positive, unifying agenda. Russia did not seek unilateral advantages, does not tend to play on existing contradictions, and decided to assert its role as a willingness to cooperate with all countries with a reciprocal interest in such cooperation. Moscow, according to A.N.Borodavkin, was convinced that the Chinese partners are interested in Russia stronger position in the region. In particular he noted that “we really act as their close partners in many areas of the global agenda, the vision of the modern world, on issues of self security. The Chinese are interested to cooperate with us. In this case, we can not act as a competitor to China in Asia and the Pacific. Relying on the support of China, Russia as a contribution to regional stability requested a global idea to form a new security architecture in Southeast Asia. In Moscow believed that “this initiative will receive support in the region, because all countries are interested in that kind of a system of checks and balances”.

Eastern vector of Russian policy was complemented with new ideological concept of national development of Russia as a Euro-Pacific power. Some Russian political scientists stressed that this doctrine "is a much more promising than the previous - "Russia – as a European country "or" Russia is a Eurasian country". Serious advantage of the new political doctrine they saw in the fact that, the Euro-Pacific orientation increasingly aims at cooperation with major power centers of the modern world".

As part of his return, Russia increased it's participation in APEC, then, with some problems entered the mechanism of the East Asia Summit, joined the dialogue of the Asia-Europe forum. However, its global initiative on security architecture in Southeast Asia received no support even in Beijing and Moscow still remained on the periphery of political processes in the region. This clear failure showed one of the most challenging problem for Russia in Asia Pasific. On the one hand, it still continued to be perceived as a political superpower with great potential to influence political processes, as opposed to other possible political (and not only to the political) superpower in the region. But at the same time economically Russia was present too weak, which drastically reduces its ability to actively influence the events there.

Another discovery, which also affected the development of the relations was that Russia in Southeast Asia treated, and continue to be treated as a European power, and not as an integral part of the Asia-Pacific family. This situation is well understood in Moscow and recently the first deputy prime minister Igor Shuvalov said Russia will have to improve the image, which often does not correspond to the real situation.

But, the challenges and disappointment faced by Russia in returning to the region, had some positive value. Wary of ASEAN attitude on the one hand and the almost complete absence of any practical help from China on the other, Russia received a free hand to conduct a separate and independent policy, which with increasing Russian economic and military power gradually began to improve in all three dimensions of power - political, economic and military.

Evidence of such a free and independent course in Asia-Pacific and the South China sea was the restoration of a special relationship between Russia and Vietnam, despite the complexity of its relations with China in the Conflict over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Another example was the release of Russian private and state oil and gas campaign to the shelf of the South China Sea, despite the rather explicit warnings of the Chinese authorities not to do so. Even more impressive was the demonstration of freedom in the choice of partners for military maneuvers and military cooperation. In the spring of 2012, for example, the Russian navy with Chinese warships conducted exercises in the Yellow Sea.

This freedom of choice is complemented in recent years with the restoration of the naval potential of the country in the Pacific Ocean. In Russia today launched a large shipbuilding program, which provides construction of dozens of ships for various purposes, including the four strategic nuclear submarines, two multipurpose submarines with
cruise missiles. According to the Commander of the Navy, Admiral Chirkov first two purchased in France helicopter type ships "Mistral" will be sent to the Pacific Ocean. "Place-based of the "Mistrals" is defined, the admiral said recently in a city of Vladivostok. There are shipyards, there we will train the personnel". Due to the significant increase in the Russian Pacific Fleet, he also said the following: "In the new environment, we continue to work to ensure the deployment of naval forces outside the Russian Federation. As part of this work at the international level working on the creation of points of logistics in Cuba, Seychelles and Vietnam".

Strengthening of the naval force of Russia developed in parallel with the formulation of the complex of Russian interests in the South China and the deepening of multifaceted cooperation with Vietnam.

The significance of that relations to Moscow can be judged, because on the fact that in his policy statement on Russia's policy in the East, President Putin allocated the most important for Russia states in Asia - India, China and Vietnam. Moscow finally understood that friendship with Vietnam in 60-80s was not only ideological, but a geopolitical alliance and partnership between them strengthened security of both countries. Based on this fact it was logical, that military-technical cooperation has become one of the key areas of mutual relations. In co-operation with Russia, Vietnam has considerably strengthened its naval and military - Air Force, acquiring the most advanced weapons systems from subsonic missiles "Uranus", ship borne helicopters Ka-27, multi-role Su-30MK, and upgraded to class attack submarines "Kilo" class, corvettes "Cheetah" missile boats "Molniya", equipped with supersonic anti-ship missiles "Mosquito", and so on - everything that contributes to its safety and ability to repulse any aggressor.

Beside this relations with Vietnam rapidly developed in other areas-nuclear power, exploration and production of oil and gas together, not only on the shelf of the South China Sea, but also in Western Siberia. Two countries plan to create a free trade zone and even to create some logistics for the Russian fleet at Cam Ranch Bay.

China's reaction on Russia policy in the South China Sea

Apparent return of Russia to Southeast Asia, creation there the expanding sphere of its national interest is, judging by the publications in the Chinese press, cause quite frank irritation in Beijing. Chinese authorities are closely monitoring the growing weight of Russian participation, particularly for strengthening ties with Vietnam and through it more involvement in the situation in the South China Sea. So the newspaper Huanqiu Shibao "indicates that Russia is the largest supplier of weapons to Vietnam. From 1950 to 2010, the volume of Russian-Vietnamese trade weapons totally exceeded 23.6 billion dollars - 90% of imported Vietnam weapons. Moreover, Russia consistently delivered Air Force fighters in Indonesia and Malaysia. Even Brunei, which had always imported weapons from countries such as Britain, France and the United States began to choose Russian weapons. Defense system from low-flying air targets of Singapore is fully equipped with the Russian complex "Igla-S". (Today Russia weapons is a "hot commodity" in the markets of South-East Asia. Moreover, in recent years, Russia in this region is gradually penetrating into the sphere of economy and resources).

According to the newspaper Chinese response on all these changes "should be a certain pressure on Russia, since in any case, compared to China, Vietnam and other countries in Southeast Asia account for only a tiny fraction of global strategic Russia's interests.

Obvious discontent of Russia's actions in the South China Sea is shown on the official Chinese level. After it became known that the Russian state campaign "Gazprom" will work on two blocks in the South China Sea, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin allowed himself a veiled attack on Moscow. Responding to a question about the agreement between "Gazprom" and the Vietnamese state company PetroVietnam to jointly develop the licensed blocks offshore Vietnam? Chinese representative demanded that a "company from a third country that is not related to the South China Sea , stay away from the disputed areas, and not to participate in their development before the territorial issue will be resolved".

Negative position of China in respect of Russia's participation in the development of the resources of the South China Sea has been disclosed in detail in the famous publication in the "People's Daily". It was pointed out that China and Russia should be aware that the stability of Sino-Russian relations are important for the protection of strategic interests of the two countries, South China Sea - the most sensitive question in China's geopolitical conflict zones, stressed this newspaper, - Vietnam, the Philippines hopes to attract outsiders to involve in a dispute over the ownership of islands with China, thus, form a "coalition" of several countries against one of the PRC. In this regard, China is bound to be vigilant with respect to the actions of outside countries.

"Gazprom", stated later in the article - is the state holding company, and with its policy. Russia should not at this time give wrong or strange signal in the South China Sea. On the one hand, it increases the difficulty of China in the
region, on the other hand, will cause speculation about the real intentions of the Russian Federation. All this will make a direct impact on the positive attitude of Chinese to Russia”.

Russia and the South China Sea - conclusions and prospects

The obvious public charges of the Chinese press on Moscow policies in the South China sea raises many questions. Why, for example, the Chinese opinion was not brought to the Kremlin by the closed informal channels. Why Foreign Ministry statement was added by an article in “People's Daily”, full of emotional irritation and charges on Russian policy in the region. The goal, of all this, as I suppose, was to put the Russian government in an awkward position, effectively forcing him to make a quick choice in the conflict in the South China Sea.

Moscow acted as if had not noticed Chinese irritation and gave no reaction to the Chinese accusations, showing that it is not going to get involved in the propaganda war. It was the only right position, because it would be strange if, under pressure from Beijing, Russia decided to withdraw from the South China sea. Price issue for Russia is not only a “loss of face in Asia”, but the loss of a very lucrative contracts worth billions of dollars to domestic campaign can get working on the shelf.

By the way, the recent official visit of the President of Vietnam to Moscow was further evidence that there is no major impact from propaganda campaign of Beijing on the change in Moscow policies. "As for Russia, with it we have long-standing cooperation and strategic partnership, stressed in an interview to Russian media Nguyen Tang Shang. This partnership will continue to develop. Therefore we provide the advantages of Russia in Cam Ranh, including development of military cooperation", As for Russian side according to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov at least 50% of Russia’s foreign trade must occur in the Asia-Pacific Region. That it is not just a statement confirms the fact, that only for the last year Russian investment in oil and gas sector of Vietnamese economy accounted for about $1 billion, and the total turnover for the year grew by over a third.

So as we can see Russia will continue it’s policy "turning to the East” and in future will play more important role in international affairs in the Asia Pacific and South China sea.

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