China and South-East Asia. Part 3

Threats to regional security

China’s offensive policy obviously has a very negative impact on security in the region and, above all, intensifies the US-Chinese rivalry and the arms race in China itself and in the countries adjacent to it.

China has been consistently and steadily strengthening and modernizing its army, air force and navy combat units in areas adjacent to Southeast Asian countries. Beijing views this process as an important supplement to its “peace initiatives” in politics and economics. The military component of Chinese policy in the region has expanded remarkably since China resumed applying military pressure on its borders with Vietnam and the Philippines in the disputed areas of South China Sea. A map included in a special letter that Chinese representatives sent UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in May 2009 can be seen as a tentative step towards international recognition and justification of China’s rights to the waters and islands of the South China Sea. That map depicted official Chinese claims with the southern boundary of its planned holdings encompassing the reefs on the coast of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, which is located in Kalimantan more than 1500 km from the Chinese mainland. China indicated in the letter that it has indisputable sovereignty over those islands and the waters adjacent to them. Beijing subsequently issued statements saying it views the South China Sea as a “key national interest” — like Tibet or Taiwan.

The letter containing the detailed map of “Chinese possessions” sent to Ban Ki-moon and the subsequent declarations about “China’s indisputable ownership of the islands” marked a new stage in Chinese activities in the South China Sea. The Chinese military tried to fit deeds to words by moving competitors from adjacent Southeast Asian countries off the newly acquired territories, which China says it lost during the period when it was weak. In 2009, China banned fishing in the disputed waters, and the Chinese military made a show of capturing 22 Vietnamese fishing vessels that refused to comply with the ban. China’s military supported Chinese fishermen in June 2010 by machine-gunning Indonesian navy ships in the economic zone claimed by Indonesia.

In August 2010, Chinese naval and air forces held large-scale exercises in the South China Sea, after which Rear Admiral Zhang Huachen said China’s naval strategy is changing: “We are going from coastal defense to far sea defense.” Meanwhile, according to the Japanese Kyodo news agency, China has deployed state-of-the-art, nuclear powered, Shang class attack submarines to the newly constructed naval base on Hainan Island near the city of Sanya, China.

In summary, it is quite obvious that China’s current policy of achieving supremacy in Southeast Asia is becoming increasingly imbued with a military component. None of Beijing’s political strategies aimed at achieving political
dominance have proven successful. China has been unable to oust the United States from the region, nor, more importantly, has it succeeded in making mutual political and economic cooperation attractive to local elites.

All of this creates a real threat that in striving to dominate Southeast Asia and exploit the region’s natural resources to the maximum, especially the oil and gas fields in the South China Sea, China will choose the simplest and toughest method of expansion — it will send its rapidly growing navy, which is already far superior to its neighbors, to seize the islands. It is no secret that China’s military budget has grown at an average annual rate of 10% for 20 consecutive years. In 2009 it grew by just 7.5% to reach $78 billion, which some observers called “a gesture to calm its neighbors.” By the way, the effort to calm its neighbors was very short lived. In 2011, China’s defense budget was $91.7 billion — and that was the official figure. No one knows how much China spends unofficially in addition to that amount,. but to all appearances its total defense spending has been over $100 billion for a long time.

It should be noted that the perception of China as a great friend and lover of peace that Chinese leaders love to promote is greatly damaged by China’s constantly growing naval and air forces and the rearming of its ground forces, which are the largest in the world. The more the Chinese either deliberately or accidentally allow leaks to the press, the more easily the concerns of its neighbors can turn into fear. In an interview with China Central Television, for example, Rear Admiral Zhang Shaochun said that the main mission of China’s first aircraft carrier will be to secure China’s interests on its distant maritime borders and in its exclusive economic zones, primarily the Nansha (Spratly) Islands. Because of their remoteness, Chinese aircraft have difficulty flying in that region. According to China Daily newspaper, by 2020 there will be 15,000 personnel in the Chinese naval forces patrolling the South China Sea and the waters around the Spratlys, compared with 9000 now, and the patrol fleet will have 350 vessels there in 2015 and 520 in 2020. The newspaper reported that in the meantime Chinese authorities plan on assigning 16 patrol aircraft to the area for border security for four years.

The changing balance of power in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region

Aware of China’s growing military power and ambitions and the improved Chinese missiles that threaten US military installations in Northeast Asia on military bases in South Korea and Japan, Washington is closely monitoring the Chinese Navy’s efforts to rearm and build up its forces and gradually increase its capabilities in the Pacific. Special US congressional hearings on the issue held in July 2005 took note of the rapid development of China’s defense industry. Among the achievements mentioned were the development of a new long-range cruise missile, the commissioning of new warships equipped with the Chinese equivalent of the American Aegis fire control system, and the appearance of the new Yuan class attack submarine and five new nuclear-powered submarines capable of carrying 12 ballistic missiles with ranges up to 8000 km. US media report that China has developed precision-guided weapons, including new air-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles intended for intended for attacking US aircraft carrier groups. All together, this greatly increases Chinese force capabilities both around Taiwan and in the South China Sea and throughout Southeast Asia. In its annual report to Congress in 2011, the US Department of Defense stated that China has recently been devoting increased attention to upgrading its navy and has invested large sums to develop high-tech weapons, thereby expanding its military influence far beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

Shifting our attention from the military balance of forces in Southeast Asia to political issues, we note that the situation is becoming increasingly unstable there, also. Sensing real concerns about the growth of Chinese power on the part of political elites in most of the region’s countries, the Americans have intensified their policies and are now positioning themselves as a real counterweight to Chinese ambitions. That has only exacerbated the US-Chinese rivalry and begun involving the countries belonging to ASEAN. The Straits Times of Singapore notes that ASEAN positioning themselves as a real counterweight to Chinese ambitions. That has only exacerbated the US-Chinese rivalry and begun involving the countries belonging to ASEAN. The Straits Times of Singapore notes that ASEAN countries are concerned that the deterioration of key US-China relations will force them to choose sides in the conflict.

To sum up, we can say that the emerging conflict in Southeast Asia and the growing differences and threats arising from it are undermining both security and the balance of forces in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. This entire complex aggregate of interests and relations is creating a very tense situation that is intensified even further by the great emotional strain felt by the countries that could become involved in the conflict and by the interweaving of both traditional stereotypes and purely pragmatic interests and goals into their political perception. Russia’s leadership should take all of this into consideration in making decisions about the nature of our presence in the Asia-Pacific region and Southeast Asia and about increasing the country’s involvement in economic, political and military cooperation with countries in the region.

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