Ecological Aspect of the Conflict in the South China Sea

The territorial conflict in the South China Sea, smouldering for several decades already, has suddenly gained a new meaning: ecological. That is attributed to the China constructing artificial islands. From the point of the Philippines, this construction activity endangers the unique ecosystem of the sea basin, which is one of the richest in the world in terms of biodiversity, first of all, because of the variety of fishes and corals, and that can have negative consequences on the food security of millions of people who live in the region.

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Philippines has made a statement in which it condemned the Chinese policies on the assumption that “they take active measures on the land development which inflict irreparable damage to the biodiversity and undermine the ecological balance in the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea. China implements these projects unilaterally and ignores the interests of the people of other counties whose existence, historically, has been dependent on the sea. The following figures are given in support of the statement: in the process of creating artificial islands China has eliminated 121.4 hectares of coral reefs, which equals to the $100 mln of economic damage to the coastal counties annually. The data is based on the researches carried out by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and independent scholars.

China unilaterally puts a claim on 85.7% out of 3.5 mln hectares of South China Sea and plans to construct huge islands on reefs and subterranean rocks. For example, on the Mischief reefs (also known as Panganiban), which are situated within the 200 mile exclusive economic zone of the Philippines, the PRC has built an artificial island of 3.2 hectares which can be enlarged up to 500 hectares. All in all land development is performed on seven reefs of Spratly islands.

Why the Chinese land development activities are so dangerous for sea environmental conditions? According to scientific researches, organisms which are involved in the reef growth, tortoises and giant bivalves die in the process of dredging works and construction of artificial islands on reefs and rocks. The Philippines estimate that China has already destroyed 17 reefs on the Spratly islands during the land development activities. Reefs, main spawning area of valuable fish species and guarantee of ecological security for counties of the region, erode because of sand and sedimentary rocks.

And all this despite the fact that the countries of that sea basin, such as Indonesia, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam are the world’s largest fishing states which populations are dependant on the fish. However, a disturbance in the sea ecosystem and disappearance of reefs will lead to the 20% decline in the population of the fish which lives there and that will have a pernicious effect on the economic activity of more than 12,000 fishermen in the Philippines alone.

Besides, coral reefs not only attract tourists but they are also widely used for making medicine, they protect the population of the coastal regions from the impacts of natural disasters, being a natural barrier against waves and floodings. That acquires special importance amid the climate change.

The danger of the marine ecosystem destruction as a result of China’s construction of artificial islands is aggravated by the harm already caused to the marine environment by human activities. According to data, 70% of reefs in the South China Sea are in the process of decomposition, and the fish resources have declined by 40%. These are the
results of production and agricultural wastes being dumped into water, as well as of excessive fish capture which is often unauthorized and with the use of illicit fishing techniques. That became another subject for criticism towards China from the Philippines.

This country's government has been expressing its concerns over China's developing territories of the disputed islands. Before, however, the Philippines regarded it as a threat of China's building up its military potential in the region, of its unilateral refusal to comply with the China-ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, as a barrier to the free sea and air navigation. Now the Philippines are increasingly resorting to the environmental arguments as an additional lever of pressure on China, engaging wider public in the resolution of the territorial dispute.

The international arena is actively used to pursue these goals. In particular, speaking at a debate in the UN Security Council, the representative of the Philippines to the UN pointed to the existing environmental threat to the South China Sea as a result of Chinese current policy on the disputed territories. This summer the Philippines has made another attempt to draw public attention to this issue - it filed a suit against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague on the basis of violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. They accuse China of the destruction of coral reefs, illegal fishing, dangerous for wildlife. In fact, in this matter the Philippines can rely on the United States, which in 2015, following President Barack Obama's orders, created a rapid response team to counter “illegal, undeclared and unregulated fishing” And America's intention to surpress these illegal activities go far beyond its territorial waters.

China refuse to participate in the work of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, relying on its illegitimacy in the sovereignty issues. China persistently stands up for its claim of having "inherent and incontestable sovereignty" a major part of the South China Sea. The Court is going to deliver its judgement by the end of this year.

We should admit that alongside with China involved in the construction of artificial structures on the islands in the South China Sea are Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia. The only difference is the scale of the involment. According to the existing estimates, China developed 2 mln sq km, while Vietnam - only 200 thousand sq km.

The situation is quite complicated since China's military, economic and political interest in continuing fulfilling its plan of artificial isles construction on the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea is strong. According to Chinese data there are huge deposits of hydrocarbons - about 23-40 bn tons of oil reserves and more than $ 5 trillion cubic meters of gas. However, neither the natural resources potential of the South China Sea is the only (and the main) reason for territorial rivalries. Nor it is fish reserves, even though China is the sixth biggest importer of ocean goods, thus compensating the growing interior demand.

Both reasons are within the SEA countries' scope of interest. For China, this is first and foremost a strategic issue, a claim for military advantage in the region and control over one of the most profitable shipping lanes in the world, which will allow carrying out a project of creating the Sea Silk Road through the South and the South Eastern Asia to Africa and the Mediterranean.

That is why, there hardly is ground to hope that Chinese authorities will abandon its claims for the disputed territories, partially and by creating artificial isles. Undoubtedly, the ecological aspect of the territorial issue renders it to be more urgent and gets it beyond a regional conflict. But it is not realistic to believe that the "environmental instrument" will be effective enough to resolve the conflict.

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