Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam and Singapore

From 5 to 8 November President of PRC, Xi Jinping, made a visit to Vietnam and Singapore - two important countries in the Southeast Asia. His trip took place against the backdrop of a rather visible reinforcement of US military presence in the subregion - the main geopolitical opponent of China.

Let's recall that on October 27, an American warship, Lassen, entered the 12-mile zone surrounding one of China's artificially enlarged islands in the South China Sea (SCS), which caused outcry in Beijing.

Then, only a week later, the visit of US Defence Minister, E. Carter, (accompanied by his Malaysian counterpart, H. Hussein) to the deck of the aircraft carrier, Theodore Roosevelt, that had arrived in the SCS from of the Indian Ocean caused yet more uproar. The latter, incidentally, is remarkable in itself, for it shows who and where, in fact, Washington's main source of foreign policy strife is.

The Head of the Pentagon used a specific platform on the aircraft carrier to deliver the latest in a series of accusations against China of "growing tensions over territorial disputes in the SCS". The fact of the presence of "Theddy Roosevelt" here and of our visit to the ship is a symbol of our policy of rebalancing (towards Asia) and it signifies the important presence that the United States has in the Asia-Pacific region".

During his visit to Vietnam and Singapore, the Chinese leader showed restraint, composure and an unwillingness to respond to the open provocation in the SCS by the US Navy even at the level of rhetoric.

The current state of the China-Vietnam relations most clearly manifest the so-called "Asian paradox." This is when there is a rather successful development of economic relations between a particular pair of Asian countries (primarily between China and its neighbours), however the political sphere appears to be negative in varying degrees.

The case of China and Vietnam stands out in particular. Both countries have been controlled by communist parties for a long time and it would seem that they have ideologically close state systems, thus it would be easier to find common ground in the resolution of problems in bilateral relations.

However, serious disagreements, that go centuries back, emerged in the final stage of the Wars of National Liberation in Vietnam against the United States in 1957-1975. In 1979 these disagreements resulted in a large-scale border war.

Since then, the motives of the China-Vietnam tensions, which are not very clear to the outside observer, gradually crystallized into one, clear and traditional motif: territorial disputes in which there are no such "Asian specifics."

Upon completion of the demarcation of the 1,300-kilometre land boundary in 2009 both sides expressed a desire to do something similar in the SCS. However, there has not only not been any progress there, but the situation...
deteriorates year after year. In the summer of 2014 the work of a Chinese state-owned company in charge of searching for hydrocarbons in one of the sections of the SCS triggered anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam of an unprecedented scale.

Noticeable since the latter half of the last decade the notorious "aggressiveness" of Chinese foreign policy has caused quite the expected reaction from Vietnam in the form of looking for support from China's main opponents i.e. the USA, Japan, and India.

China finally realised that crossing the line in "aggressiveness" is more trouble than it's worth and the rhetoric of readiness "to defend national interests" delivered towards its neighbours since the autumn of 2013 (practically laying claim to the disputed territory in the SCS) has diminished somewhat.

The words of the joint communiqué of the intention of both countries “to properly manage and control maritime disputes” can be considered as the main outcome of Xi's visit to Vietnam. This phrase belies the main aggravating factor in their bilateral relations, mentioned above, and it remains only to wish both countries well in eliminating it.

The importance of the Chinese leader's visit to Singapore is due primarily to the fact that since 2005 this country has been linked to China's main opponent in the Southeast Asia (i.e. the United States) with a formally established framework of bilateral commitments in the defence sector.

However, Singapore is the largest trading partner of China among all the countries of Southeast Asia. In 2008 the two countries signed an agreement on establishing a bilateral free trade zone with the aim of gradually removing import duties on goods and services procured.

The Chinese leader's visit to Singapore fell on the 25th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations, and the joint statement signed by the presidents of both countries contains an impressive list of achievements thus far, as well as plans for their further development.

Still, the world's media paid special attention to the meeting between the leaders of the PRC and Taiwan (the first in their bilateral relations), which was held on "neutral" territory of Singapore. Its participants named it a "historic" event.

Although more symbolic in nature, it has really become a very important event not only in regional but also in global policy, taking into account the growing importance of the Taiwan issue in today's global game. Directly or indirectly, this problem affects the strategic interests of all the three major regional and global players, that is, China, the US and Japan.

A necessary condition for saving at least relative peace and quiet in the Taiwan Strait (especially notable in light of the alarming developments in the neighbouring SCS) is the periodic confirmation of the so-called "1992 consensus" between Beijing and Taipei, the main content and significance of which has repeatedly been discussed in NEO. Their commitment to uphold the consensus was demonstrated again at the meeting in Singapore.

But the fact is that the current president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou, who publicly exchanged a firm handshake with the leader of the mainland for the first time, is set to be replaced by his successor in the beginning of the next year.

The successor will almost certainly be Tsai Ing-wen, who currently heads the opposition Democratic Progressive Party, which calls for (currently, although not as loudly as for the past decade) the full-fledged sovereignty of Taiwan. In any case, she avoids bringing up the theme of the "1992 consensus" in public, which is extremely important for Beijing.

This is only fair considering the meeting between Xi and Ma in the context of the general election in Taiwan upcoming in January next year, Ms. Tsai also expressed her readiness to hold talks with the leader of China.

At first it seemed that Beijing's response to this initiative would be polite silence and an overall (externally impartial) position in relation to the upcoming elections.

However, the accumulated emotions regarding the inevitable event on 16 January 2016, are apparently beginning to break through. On 9 November the semi-official Global Times published article entitled "Provocative words expose Tsai’s true intent".

The article, in particular, refers to the "shrieking cries from two ladies" regarding the meeting between Xi and Ma. One of these "ladies" was Ms. Tsai, the second - a popular TV host in Taiwan. Among other things, they were both
accused of persistently urging Ma Ying-jeou to use the “official” name of Taiwan, that is the “Republic of China” during the meeting with the leader of China.

It is noteworthy, however, that a public opinion poll, conducted immediately after the harsh words, uttered by Tsai Ing-wen to the current Taiwanese president, showed an increase in her popularity by 3.4%, and also confirmed the hopeless position way back in the ratings of the candidates of the Kuomintang in the upcoming elections.

Finally, it pays to remember the military-political background of the Chinese leader's visit to the two countries of the Southeast Asia, which Washington sees as potential and de facto allies. China's policy of establishing normal political relations with Vietnam and Singapore, as well as the prevention of a potential change in the situation in Taiwan, can hardly please Washington. Despite the public assurances to the contrary.

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