Situation in the South China Sea and G7

The momentum-gaining topic of escalation of the situation in the South China Sea will undoubtedly be one of the main items on the agenda of the regular G7 summit scheduled for the end of May 2016.

Ultimately, two circumstances can motivate the “Group of Seven” to consider this issue. First, this time the meeting will be held in Asia — the newly shaping center of gravity of the global politics.

Secondly, not only will it be held in Asia, but specifically in Japan — the country that sees the development of the situation in the South China Sea as strategically important. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the evolution of the situation in the South China Sea is turning to be a matter of life and death for Japan for the reasons discussed by NEO previously on a number of occasions.

That is why in the recent decades Tokyo has been focusing its political and economic activities on the countries of Southeast Asia situated along the coastline of the South China Sea. The prospects of Japan engaging its military machine to defend its interests in the South China Sea are as realistic as ever before.

All this explains why Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China Wang Yi appealed to Tokyo (represented by his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida) urging it to leave the issue concerning territorial disputes in the South China Sea out of the agenda of the forthcoming G7 summit.

And that is understandable. G7 is a high-profile international forum and China fears that discussion of an extremely sensitive for Beijing problem there, especially considering that there will be no official representatives of China present at the summit, might challenge China’s international reputation.

Meanwhile, the situation in the South China Sea has already been discussed in the course of pre-summit preparations, specifically at the meeting of G7 deputy foreign ministers held in Tokyo in February this year. In April, pre-summit consultations will be held at the ministerial level and if China wants to dispute the future agenda of G7, it should not procrastinate.

Beijing’s reasoning against the discussion of its territorial disputes with southern neighbors at the G7 forum is rather standard. It boils down to the argument that since none of the countries-participants of G7 represents the South China Sea region, they should not concern themselves with the problems of this subregion. Beijing has been talking about its intention to resolve the problem in a bilateral format, i.e. individually with each country of the South China Sea region.

Besides, China uses Tokyo’s predisposition to alleviate tensions in China-Japan relations as yet another argument in its attempt to influence Tokyo. A meeting of foreign ministers of the two countries scheduled for the coming April could be a perfect occasion for the Chinese party to achieve its goals.
But continuing incidents in the Senkaku islands region and ever greater involvement of Japan in the military aspects of the situation there render it unlikely for Wang Yi and Fumio Kishida to improve the bilateral relations, not even at the very least.

The fact that the Japanese navy will now participate in the annual US-Indian naval exercise Malabar on a regular basis cannot but make Beijing frown. The participation of the Japanese navy was approved at the Japan-India summit held in Delhi in December 2015.

This year the exercise will be conducted northeast of the Philippines. Beijing’s reaction to the joint, this time tripartite US-Indian-Japanese naval exercise, carried out in a close proximity to the South China Sea region, is quite predictable.

The prospects of a joint (American-Japanese) patrolling of the South China Sea might prove to be realistic as well. That can be concluded from the text of a Joint Statement summarizing the results of the last spring’s visit of Japanese PM Shinzo Abe to the US and his negotiations with President Barak Obama.

A new raft of defense laws that was approved in September 2015 and came into force on March 29 of this year supports the expansion of Japan’s military and political activities beyond the country’s borders.

Japanese government still has some minor internal issues to resolve before it can engage in military activities abroad, including in some countries of the South China Sea, like the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, which demonstrate (with a different degree of openness) a mutual interest in the development of bonds with Japan in the sphere of defense.

The Philippines strongly oppose territorial claims of the People’s Republic of China in the South China Sea and, being a military and political ally of the US, openly express their desire to establish similar relations with Japan.

Negotiations between Japanese PM Abe and President of the Philippines Benigno Aquino III held in Manila in November 2015 during a regular session of APEC were an important stage in the development of an alliance. It was the second bilateral summit in 2015 (Tokyo hosted the first one earlier that year).

A summary of the meeting was published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. It contained only general statements indicating Japan’s intention to contribute to the “enhancement of capabilities” of the Philippine marine border patrol and to the “peaceful settlement of disputes in conformity with international laws”.

However, when commenting on this meeting, experts talk about very specific results. For example, they mention that the Philippines plan to buy ten patrol boats and three maritime patrol and antisubmarine aircrafts P-3C Orion from Japan.

The Japan-Vietnam and Japan-Indonesia (the latter being the largest country in the South China Sea region) relations demonstrate, maybe in a more discrete form, the same trends.

According to the Defense Minister of Japan Gen Nakatani, “a wide range of issues covering a further development of the bilateral cooperation in defense” was discussed during his November 2015 visit to Hanoi and negotiations with his Vietnamese counterpart Phung Quang Thanh. For example, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships will be allowed port calls in Cam Ranh Bay, a base in the South China Sea.

As for the Japan-Indonesia relations, the first meeting in the “2+2” format, with participation of foreign and defense ministers, held in December 2015, testifies to the high degree of trust between the two countries. A Joint Statement adopted following the negotiations is noteworthy, as it demonstrates the intention of the parties to give the cooperation in defense “one of the highest priorities”. In the future, the countries are planning to hold meetings in the “2+2” format on a regular basis.

Summing up the foregoing, it looks like Japan is making a military and political comeback (75 years after its first attempt) in the strategically important region of the South China Sea. Apparently, this time the form and scale will be different, but the situation in the subregion and in the Pacific Rim is also different as compared to the times of the “first attempt.”

It is almost definite that Japan, as the host country of the forthcoming G7 summit, will make sure that the topic concerning the situation in the South China Sea is put on the summit’s agenda.

Taking into account that the leading countries of the EU are looking to develop more profound and comprehensive
relations with China, it would be interesting to see what strategy Europeans will adopt in the discussion of this problem.

The reaction of China to the latest steps of its geopolitical opponents in the South China Sea and broader—in the Southeast Asia—is a topic of a separate article.

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