US President Visits Vietnam

Last Monday, May 23, US President Barack Obama set off on his five-day trip to Asia, the tenth trip to this region in his eight-year presidency.

He spent the first three days in Vietnam. The agenda of the second part of the trip consisted of a regular G-7 summit scheduled for May 26 to be held in the Japanese resort town of Ise-Shima and a visit to the memorial complex in Hiroshima on the following day.

President Obama's visit to Vietnam was no less important for the Pacific Rim and the US policy in this region than his participation in the G-7 summit, whose significance in the global politics is not to be exaggerated.

Mr. Obama's visit as well as the results of his negotiations with the Vietnamese leadership will have a special implication for the development of the situation in the Southeast Asia, where tension has been as they say "smoothly and continuously" building up in the recent years.

The US and China, a great northern neighbor of Vietnam whose relations with Beijing have been declining almost as "smoothly and continuously as in the region on the whole, will be the key actors in this negative trend (which is considered one of the most dangerous in the contemporary political setup).

A miraculous metamorphosis in the relations between the former bitter enemies (US-Vietnamese relations were hostile in the 1950-80s), which has been unravelling in the last twenty five years, can be explained by the general deterioration of the situation in the region. Even at the end of the 1990s, such radical change in the relations defied imagination, although it was obvious that the two recent enemies had been searching for ways to resume dialogue.

Establishment of diplomatic relations in July of 2000 was the starting point in the improvement and development of bilateral relations. A grand celebration with participation of the former US President Bill Clinton, who initiated the thaw in relations, hosted by the US embassy in Hanoi last July, marked the 20th anniversary of this event.

Actually, Bill Clinton (and not his wife Hillary, who published a notorious article in The National Interest in October 2011) was the person who orchestrated a shift toward Asia in the American international policy. Along with Mr. Clinton's initiative on the development of ties with India, establishment of diplomatic relations with Vietnam was a point of departure in the US international policy shift that has been developing for over 15 years.

Although the parties began cooperation in the field of defense almost instantaneously, in the past decade they have been mainly focusing on trade. And the success in this area is compelling.

In the recent years, the US has been ranking second after China among Vietnam's key trading partners. By today, an annual volume of the bilateral trade has reached $45 billion, which is only one and a half time less than the total volume of the Sino-Vietnamese trade. On the other hand, the US-Vietnamese trade is truly beneficial for Hanoi, as
anywhere from two thirds to three quarters of the total volume of goods and services traded between the countries is exported from Vietnam.

As for the trade with China, the situation is exactly the opposite: Vietnam imports about three quarters of the total volume of goods and services from China. Thus, a trade deficit along with political issues create an additional source of Hanoi's discontent with the state of relations with Beijing.

As for the current US-Vietnamese summit, global mass media were particularly interested in the lifting of the lethal weapon embargo previously imposed on Vietnam by the US (the embargo on the non-lethal weapons was lifted two years earlier).

Commenting on this decision at a press conference in Hanoi, Mr. Obama stated that it had finalized a lengthy process of normalization of the bilateral relations, and that it was not intended against China.

Vietnamese experts, however, link the significance of the decision with the underlying message. In their opinion, the decision was supposed to stress the fact that the US-Vietnamese relations had ascended to a new strategic level, and that "China should think twice over anything they do towards Vietnam or the in the South China Sea." Such assessments are not ungrounded, especially if one considers a new series of American "concerns" over the situation in the South China Sea the US President expressed in the course of his visit to Vietnam (the "concerns" have been repeatedly voiced in Japan at the G-7 summit).

As for the Vietnamese arms market, it may be of interest to American defense companies simply because it offers new trading opportunities, since Vietnam is the eighth largest importer of foreign arms in the world.

So far, there have been no reasons to be concerned about the implementation of the ongoing Russian-Vietnamese arms supply contracts. However, in the future Russia might face the same situation in Vietnam it has earlier encountered in India ("the Indian syndrome"), when the US started gradually penetrating the arms market of one of the key importers of Russian weapons. According to some estimates, the US has already surpassed Russia in the volume of armaments sold to India.

An official reaction of the People's Republic of China to the visit of the American President to Vietnam and lifting of arms ban was very concise. It was expressed in just two phrases a representative of the Chinese Foreign Ministry uttered at a regular press conference, "As a neighbor to Vietnam, China is happy to see Vietnam develop normal relations with all countries including the US. And we hope this would be conducive to regional peace, stability and development."

Chinese experts, however, were more direct expressing Beijing's concerns over the visit of the American President to Vietnam. The titles of expert articles demonstrate their take on the situation. For example: Closer Ties with US do not Mean that Vietnam is Planning to Turn its Back on China, Washington Uses Past Foe Vietnam to Counter China.

Lastly, a sort of parting advice the US president received from three (now well-known) American veterans of the Vietnam War on the eve of his trip to Vietnam was particularly curious. They were John Kerry and John McCain, who do not need an introduction, and Joseph Robert (Bob) Kerrey, who served in the Vietnam War as a United States Navy SEAL officer and who today is known as one of the prominent members of the US Democratic Party.

The authors of the advisory article published in The New York Times defined four rather obvious "lessons" of this war. The last of them is particularly interesting, "...with sufficient effort and will, seemingly unbridgeable differences can be reconciled...old enemies can become new partners."

This provision is universal in nature and has been confirmed by the entire history of humankind, and there is hardly any reason, why, for instance, it should not be applied to the Russian-American relations.

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