On Current India-China Relations

India’s refusal to extend the visas of three journalists from the Chinese state news agency, Xinhua, that expired in July this year, once again brings assessment of the status of the relations between the two Asian major players to the fore.

Since there was no official explanation of the refusal to extend the visas forthcoming, the Indian press suggested that the formal reason for this was the discovery of the Chinese journalists (under false names) in some restricted areas in Delhi and Mumbai.

In turn, the Chinese semi-official newspaper, Global Times, suggested that the real message to China in this case was far more serious and an “act of revenge” for Beijing’s refusal to support Washington’s proposal to allow India to join the so called Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). This entails one of the most important outcomes of the last visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the USA in early June this year.

The Chinese publication goes on saying that if the aforementioned suggestion turns out to be true, “there will be serious consequences”.

It should be noted that the refusal to extend visas to foreign journalists that represent official media and that submitted the appropriate request to the host country is a reliable indication of troubled relations between states. In recent years, NEO publications have repeatedly assessed India-China relations (for other reasons).

Among other recent events, the report that India deployed 100 T-72 tanks near the border with China in the mountainous Ladakh region, where an armed conflict had taken place between army factions from both countries 55 years ago, drew particular attention.

In general, the report offered nothing radically new, for the both sides have long been developing their military infrastructure alongside the India-China border in the mountains of Tibet and the Himalayas. These days, the question “who started first” is of no importance any more.

In China, it was considered remarkable that another act of mutual military containment occurred at the time when Chinese businesses are showing increasing interest in investing in the Indian economy. According to the Ministry of Commerce of China, the volume of investment increased by almost 60% in the first half of 2016 when compared to the corresponding period of the last year.

In this particular case, we are witness to just one of the manifestations of the so-called “Asian paradox”, where the focus of political and economic trends in relations between states runs directly counter to each other. This applies not only to bilateral relations with China as one of the parties, but also to Japan-South Korea relations, for example.

On the one hand, India broadly welcomes the inflow of Chinese investment but, at the same time, takes measures
(including military) to strengthen its position in its strategic confrontation with China in the regions where their interests overlap.

Naturally, Beijing and Delhi pay particular attention to the region that separates them geographically, be it directly or indirectly, i.e. via other relatively small countries.

In particular, Nepal plays this role. The struggle for influence over it has long been ongoing with varying degrees of success. The severe economic situation in Nepal exacerbated by prolonged political turbulence and natural disasters serves as the backdrop to this struggle.

The current political tension connected with the resignation of K.P. Sharma Oli’s government at the end of July (due to the loss of parliamentary support), according to India’s The Economic Times, was the reason that “India again dragged into Nepal’s power-sharing game”. Which was received with customary circumspection in China.

It is entirely possible that the India-China rivalry will spread into Afghanistan. In this respect, the India-Iran agreement on India’s loan of $500 million towards the development of the port complex near the city of Chabahar, located on the shores of the Gulf of Oman in the extreme south of Iran, is noteworthy. It was concluded during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Iran on May 23 and 24 this year with the both sides hailing it as “historic”. The future complex will be connected to Iran’s main transport infrastructure thanks to the construction of the necessary modern railways and highways.

Among the numerous consequences of implementing this project, the most important will be providing India with access to maritime trade routes of Afghanistan, whose transport infrastructure (modernized with the participation of India, too) is already connected with Iran’s transport links.

Thus, India’s long-standing strategic plan to put together something that resembles a trilateral alliance with Iran and Afghanistan may come to fruition.

In turn, Pakistan relying on support from the key ally, i.e. China, regards Afghanistan as a strategic back area in its confrontation with India. Therefore, the struggle for influence on Afghanistan between the major regional players seems predestined (and, in the author’s opinion, is absolutely inevitable, particularly, after the US withdrawal from the area).

The general picture of India-China relations, which is far from positive, is completed by next public (and unconventional) statements made by the 14th Dalai Lama. It bears remembering that 60 years ago, after the famous events in Tibet, his residence was moved to the north of India. Although the Indian government set forth that he had to refrain from political activity as a formal condition of his residence in India, the 14th Dalai Lama - the spiritual leader of world Buddhism - de facto continues to be a considerable thorn in the side for the Chinese leadership.

Like a year ago, the latest thoughts expressed by the Buddhist leader on the matter of particular political significance about his forthcoming reincarnation after his physical death caused mixed feelings in Beijing. While previously the 14th Dalai Lama didn’t rule out the possibility of reincarnating into the form of “a fly, or even a woman”, he has now focused on the time and place of this significant event.

As is understood from the comments of the Chinese semi-official newspaper, Global Times, in an interview with Taiwan-based news portal, The Reporter, the Dalai Lama said, “my reincarnation may happen on other planets and galaxies. Maybe after several hundred million years, there will be a big bang and the whole universe will disappear.” According to Chinese commentators, the 14th Dalai Lama’s statement is another “political show” that aims to raise the profile before the West.

Finally, it should be noted that how the relations between the two major Asian powers (that are exceedingly important for the world situation as a whole) will further develop is entirely in the hands of the elites within India and China. No “outsider” is able to have any significant influence over the situation.

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