Is War Between the US and China Inevitable?

In recent decades, the United States has actively promoted in the world the notion that it is the most powerful country on the planet, and that the rest of the world must, by rights, slowly but surely become like the United States. However, in recent years, China's growth has cast a direct challenge to the United States. Differences between American and Chinese values, traditions and philosophies have aggravated the fundamental tension between these nations against the background of China's clear ability to push the US out of its top roles.

As far back as the end of the Second World War, Washington has sought to prevent the emergence of an "equal competitor," capable of challenging the US politically, economically, and especially militarily. For several decades, Washington pursued a foreign policy of installing democracy "American style," more than once imposing it by force on those who were resolutely resisting it. Washington exhorts other powers to accept the world order that it has established, and which it oversees. But in the eyes of the entire world, including China’s, this is further evidence of Washington’s imperial aspirations, its quest to impose rules by force, and financial and economic levers, compelling other countries to carry out its orders and instructions.

However, it’s no secret that the United States is not alone in possessing a superiority complex. China also displays one in an extreme form. Yes, each of these two countries considers itself exceptional, without equal, and that only it alone can be number one in the world.
The above factors, and competition that has intensified between the US and China in recent years, have given outlines to the current, noticeably deteriorating adversarial relationship between these countries in various fields.

After Donald Trump’s rise to power, relations between the US and China took a sharp turn for the worse. Many American politicians speak of a genuine trade war between the two countries. China's request for recognition of its market economy in accordance with international trade rules was officially rejected in mid-November by President Donald Trump's administration. At the same time, it is significant that all this is taking place against the background of "rapprochement between the two countries," widely and actively proclaimed by Washington and Beijing as the result of the November visit to China by President Trump, during which agreements were signed for $253 billion.

However, besides disagreements arising from trade investigations initiated against Beijing by Washington, serious differences remain between the countries over the disputed islands in the South China Sea. Therefore, more often now, one can encounter forecasts of certain experts, who speak of the possibility of a "shooting" war, one of the main causes for which may become Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, an area of Washington’s economic, military and political interests. The US and its allies call China’s actions in the South China Sea "aggressive," because of its deployment of military facilities on the artificial islands. Officials in Washington decided that the South China Sea is part of the area of US national security interests. The White House announced a "pivot to Asia," where about 60% of the US armed forces were to be stationed. This decision alarmed Beijing, and for this reason construction of the artificial islands was driven harder. In response, the United States announced the launch of “freedom of navigation operations." Up to this point, this issue was never raised. No one had impeded the freedom of navigation. One can even say that the PRC supports freedom of navigation like no other country in the world, because the greater part of Chinese production is exported by sea.

In 2007, Japan proposed the creation of a four-way security agreement ("Quadrilateral"), which was to be signed by the United States, Australia, and India. This agreement was promoted as a "diamond of democracy," necessary for opposition to the PRC. In 2017, this agreement once again reasserted itself, when the US, instead of the Asia-Pacific region used the term Indo-Pacific region, and India without even a hypothetical outlet to the Pacific Ocean, was counted among the Pacific powers for clearly specific reasons that had nothing to do with geography.

To strengthen opposition China, the United States uses a varied arsenal of tools. One of them recently has been fanning the North Korean nuclear threat, which, according to the opinion of the well-known British political analyst, Michael Keith Billington, is used primarily by Washington as a pretext for maintaining its considerable military presence around China.

Using the "divide and conquer" principle, the US uses various methods and means in its adversity toward China, one of which is spuriously pitting some states against each other, thereby spoiling relations between them. One such manifestation by Washington is pushing China and India toward the trap of a major war with each other.

One of the latest outbreaks of military activity along the line of standoff between India and China was the incident at the end of June 2017, when military and political tension rose on the border between India and China in Tibet in the Doka-La Pass area. It made American experts begin dreaming about an impending great war between these two Asian superpowers. After all, the prospect of war in South Asia, with the participation of the two leading nuclear powers, with a combined population of 2.6 billion people, clearly excites them. A war between India and China, as forecast by American experts, could become brutal and short-lived, yet with far-reaching consequences for the world’s economy and politics. Afterward, one of the two candidates for the role of the world’s main production workshop would have to retreat into the background. Of course, from all the hints and wishes, uttered by American experts, China must become the loser.

However, Sino-Indian military competition, or a naval arms race, is something new in Asian history, which makes this development difficult to predict. At this date, neither modern India, nor modern China has the experience to engage in land and sea wars, with huge military formations. Therefore, no sober-minded analyst or politician could say confidently today, which of these Asian superpowers would "win out" in such a conflict. One thing is clear, though, unmistakable losers would not be just the millions of these countries’ residents.

Nevertheless, Washington continues to play the "India card" in its standoff with Beijing. Now, India's military activity in the Indian Ocean region is met with open "understanding and sympathy" from the leadership of the United States, which regards India as a natural counterweight to China's growing influence in Africa and South Asia. Experts in the US suppose that Sino-Indian conflict is more likely than Sino-American conflict. The main reason is the geopolitical struggle for leadership and resources in the region.
One can say that the relationship between the US and Beijing increasingly resembles a variation of last century’s “Cold War.” The United States is trying, above all, to hinder China’s trade, which provides Beijing huge inflows of money. Along with anti-China trade alliances, Washington is also trying to work through the WTO. Additionally, the US is encircling its enemy with a ring of military bases and barriers, which is intended to make Beijing spend its finances and resources on defense of its perimeter, in order to worsen the state of the Chinese economy.

Although Newsweek magazine predicts that “war between the US and China is inevitable”, without a doubt, a direct military clash between China and the US is unlikely to happen. Moreover, the mutual economic dependence of these geopolitical opponents far exceeds the classical framework of the “Cold War”.

Valery Kulikov, expert politologist, exclusively for the online magazine ‘New Eastern Outlook’.