The security dimension of US-China relationships in the Indo-Pacific region

Sergei Ignatev

Theoretical understanding of the Indo-Pacific region concept

The Indo-Pacific region is going to become as the main geopolitical landscape in the international arena. So, in terms of theoretical understanding, it is important to analyze its political architecture. According to the National Security Strategy of the U.S. "the region stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States and represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world". Taking into consideration a top priority and the importance of the Indo-Pacific region for the U.S., Washington will be concentrated on conducting its active economic and military-political diplomacy in this part of the world "to establish fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law".

As per China, which has been referred to as the main competitor for the U.S. not only in the Indo-Pacific region but in the world as well, Washington talks about Beijing's "aggressive investment and economic policies", "military pressure on its neighbors and assertiveness in the South China Sea".

Chinese official documents don't have the term "Indo-Pacific". But, in this case, China's economic and military activities in South East Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and Africa are linked with the construction of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. According to this initiative, China plans to build three, so called, blue economic corridors which are the followings – China-India-Africa, China-Oceania-South Pacific and, in terms of perspectives, via the Arctic Ocean.

Due to the implementation of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, the potential of the military component of the global leadership of the People's

---

1 Sergei Ignatev is a Junior Research Fellow at IMEMO
3 Ibid.
6 "一带一路"建设海上合作设想 (Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative) // 新华社 . 2017. URL: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-06/20/c_1121176798.htm
Republic of China increases and its global positions are strengthened. While creating military standpoints, China aims to ensure the safety of sea trade routes. Thus, we may see that military component associated with the development of China's naval forces and the strengthening of their positions in the Indo-Pacific region is increasingly strengthening.

Another important element for theoretical understanding of the Indo-Pacific region development logic is U.S.-India relations. India has an unclear position on China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative. On the one hand, India can't stay away from global economic project, which are now being implemented in South Asia, but, on another hand, it considers the strengthening of China's economic and military positions in the Indo-Pacific region as a threat. That's why, many experts say about changes in the quality of Indo-American relations by strengthening strategic and military-technical cooperation between the two countries.

In connection with mentioned above, relations between China and Pakistan is considered by some analysts as a contrast to U.S.-India relationships. Islamabad plays a crucial role as a place where land and maritime parts of the Belt and Road Initiative are connected through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Moreover, Beijing now plans to build its second naval base in Gwadar. Taking into account its strategic importance, Gwadar seems to become as a base for China's naval force to conduct military logistic support.

**Security challenges and threats in the Indo-Pacific region**

We may highlight the following challenges and threats which are now taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.

---


First of all, it should be noted about geopolitical competition between the U.S. and its allies and China. Both Washington and Beijing have different approach on a future of the security system in the region.

Secondly, there are territorial contradictions in the South China Sea. From official point of view, Beijing resolutely opposes attempts to internationalize territorial problems there.  

The third one is unconventional challenges and threats, such as piracy, transnational organised crime activities, maritime terrorism and drug trafficking. According to The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Southeast Asia is the world's largest methamphetamine market and the second largest market for opium and heroin sales. In addition to that, South-East Asia is the region that accounts for the largest number of acts of maritime terrorism in the world. In accordance with the statistical data, from 1993 to 2015, the, there were 46% of the world number of pirate robberies occurred, 136 seafarers were killed in this region. In 2015 there were 246 robberies by pirates in the world, 174 of them - in Southeast Asia. In 2016 there were totally 68 piracy acts in the South China Sea, 21- in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, and 7- in the Yellow Sea.

And the last major problem in the security sphere is North Korea nuclear program. With Pyongyang strongly opposes to consider its program as a subject for negotiations, the "six-party talks" don't have any potential to address the problem. Moreover, it is very important to stress that North Korea nuclear program is not tactical actions or any kind of reaction, but a strategy which is reflected in main official documents of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the Kim Jong-il era, the nuclear weapons program played a role of “a constant commodity”, which the North used to trade for economic aid. Nowadays, the situation is

---

11 中国的亚太安全合作政策 (China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation)  


different. The North changed its Constitution and declared itself “a nuclear power”. Nuclear and missile programs are no more a “commodity” for trading. So, it seems that Pyongyang will continue to take a non-negotiable position.

**U.S.-China relationships in the Indo-Pacific**

As it has been mentioned above, the U.S. considers China's economic and political-military activities in the Indo-Pacific region as completion for American interests. Beijing, in its turn, does not accept the American approach for the security system in Asia and continues promote its Maritime Silk Road initiative.

But nevertheless, there is a clear understanding in the Chinese official circles that comprehensive competition with the U.S. will undermine China's capabilities in economic and military fields. It appears that conducting global leadership of China is possible only with cooperation, rather than contradiction, with Washington. Last event, signing of the five-party joint development agreement (JDA) for building infrastructure to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Alaska to China\(^{14}\), can be seen as China's attempts to engage the U.S. under the frameworks of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

What about North Korea nuclear program, both China and the U.S. are considered themselves as responsible nuclear powers and don't accept North Korea nuclear power status.

The U.S. doesn't have a clear plan to address North Korea nuclear program because Washington doesn't know about real military capabilities of Pyongyang and cannot choose between economic and military instruments for resolving the problem.

The dilemma for China is what is better - nuclear North Korea or regime collapse in the North with unpredictable consequences. In this case, Beijing traditionally has been oriented on Russia's position. But now some different analyst opinions are emerging in Chinese expert circles that Russia is not a partner

---

anymore. So, we may see a transition from passive to more active policy in China, but that one hasn't emerged yet.

As per South China Sea issues, China will continue to carry out its "carrot and stick" policy providing investment to Southeast Asia countries and simultaneously taking strong position on territorial contradictions in the South China Sea, while the US Navy and its allies will organize efforts to ensure freedom of navigation.15

A joint patrols on the Mekong River mechanism (China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand), which has been conducted since 2011, will continue as a main instrument for combatting with activities of cross-border organized criminal groups in the Mekong Basin, and drug and arms trafficking as well.

**Conclusions**

1. In order to create a new atmosphere of "mutual strategic trust", it is necessary to conduct policy on cooperative basis among all Indo-Pacific nations in general and between China and the U.S. in particular, including by using the potential of academic and expert circles.

2. But nevertheless, geopolitical competition will take place, first of all, in China-US-India triangle.

3. North Korea nuclear problem is going to continue as a main security problem. It is necessary to think about conducting "five-party talks" which will be include China, the U.S., Russia, South Korea and Japan.

4. Unconventional challenges and threats, such as piracy, transnational organised crime activities, maritime terrorism and drug trafficking can be seen as a sphere for cooperation between Indo-Pacific countries through joint patrols activities and coordination between coast guards of the nations.

---