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## EROSION OF THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

The Indo-Pacific waters and their densely populated coastal areas constitute a certain political and geographical whole, being linked by dotted lines of numerous maritime trade routes carrying a great variety of cargoes. A rapidly developing economy, a diversity of political systems, cultures and religions, territorial contradictions, together with a complex history of mutual relations between countries and peoples, make the IPR unique in terms of its scale and peculiarities. It comprises thirty-six countries spread across sixteen time zones; these countries account for more than half the world's population, contain twenty-four of the world's thirty-six megacities, and cover more than half the planet's surface area.

The region is home to three of the world's largest economies, seven of the largest armies, and five of the seven partners in mutual defense agreements with the United States.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, despite significant economic growth and the commitment of most countries to the existing status quo, the IPR is challenged by growing tensions and uncertainty, along with the threat of local wars that could easily spread across the world. This is because the entire region has become a geopolitical battlefield for global leadership between China and the U. S. It would take a dedicated study to cover in detail the entire frontline of this confrontation; we are currently focusing on the military, political, and economic dimensions of the conflict. The author was mostly interested in the history of emergence of the contemporary U. S.-China confrontation in Asia and especially in Southeast Asia, its development, contributing processes, and predictions that can be made about the IPR's future. The main purpose of the research was to give Russia a more realistic outlook of this confrontation and the processes taking place in the IPR, in order to formulate policies that would take into account the actual situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Браун Р. Индо-Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион и концепция сражения во многих областях. URL: <https://sgs-mil.org/war-theory/multidomains/265-indo-aziatsko-tihookeanskiy-region-i-konceptsiya-srazheniya-vo-mnogih-oblastyah-domenah.html> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

The focus of our research is to analyze the APR-IPR issues through the prism of the U. S.-China conflict as well as through the politics and interests of the APR countries and especially SEA countries. Clearly, the control of the vast expanse of the APR-IPR, its mineral wealth, trade routes, and political preferences of the populous and rapidly developing states, is key to the success of the U. S. global dominance, which has been challenged by China. Therefore, the conflict for world leadership is expressed in its fullest extent here rather than elsewhere in Africa or even the Middle East. In this struggle, adversaries combine different elements of aggregate power, whereas "hybrid warfare" is the main form of confrontation. Even a cursory analysis shows that this is the war that the U. S. is waging, seeking to outbalance China in the trade and economic relations in order to prevent the political dominance of the latter in any state or the region as a whole. The parties to the conflict are also engaged in an information war and compete for sympathies of the local elites. The issue of Taiwan and the direct military collision in the South China Sea play a signature role in this confrontation as mutual military demonstrations and the U. S. ship cruises could instantly turn the conflict into a "hot war".

In the developing standoff, both Beijing and Washington make no secret of their objectives: China wants the Americans to recognize its interests in the South China Sea and its dominant influence in Southeast Asia, not to hinder Taiwan's integration with the PRC, and to abandon its strategy of containment and distortion of China's image by picturing Beijing as the main threat to the independence of regional states. Beijing is also strongly against letting the U. S. build an alternative to the current security model in Asia, to be based on a network of bilateral military-political alliances of regional states with the U. S. and excluding China.<sup>4</sup>

The Americans naturally do not agree to these demands, and most probably never will, since fulfilling them would mean the end of American hegemony in Asia, and indeed in the world, with the de facto surrender of a vast region to China. Under the disguise of "China containment policy", Washington is itself seeking sole control of the vast region, squeezing out China, and subordinating the policies of the other major Indo-Pacific countries – Japan, Australia, and India. The purpose of such a strategy is to protect national interests of the U. S. in the region to the fullest possible extent, which is crucial for the stability of the U. S. economy and America's current global positioning.

<sup>4</sup> Мамонов М. «Возвращение» США в Азию. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytiks-and-comments/analytiks/vozvraschenie-ssha-v-aziyu> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

The Americans are working to weaken their main adversary as much as possible, to form a hostile bloc of neighbor states around it, and to energize the internal opposition. They hope to provoke the Chinese leadership into taking risky steps as part of a military confrontation and, ultimately, to achieve its defeat and the abandonment of its global claims and the transfer of power in China to political forces aligned with American global dominance.

The prerequisites for the current large-scale confrontation between the two strongest states in the world have been emerging gradually, with the growth of China's economic, military, and political power. The Americans have tried to ignore these developments for quite a while, as their military and political interest in the East and South-East Asia has weakened after the end of the global confrontation with the USSR. The prevailing view in American ruling circles was that their position in the region was stable and the situation was under control. This belief was sustained since Beijing's ruling circles have remained in international relations generally under Washington's close supervision as part of the so-called 'engage policy' of partnership between the U. S. and China, and China's leadership has never objected to Taiwan's presence in the new international economic organization called Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) established at the initiative of the U. S. in 1989, or to the U. S. taking the lead in it. When some ASEAN leaders complained in Washington about increasing Chinese pressure and conflicts in the South China Sea, they were told to solve their problems with China on their own, without asking assistance from the U. S. With regard to the events on the Mischief Reef near the Philippine island of Palawan, where Chinese 'military fishermen' unexpectedly landed in 1995, the Americans did not interfere and provided no real help either to the Philippines or to the ASEAN as a whole, who opposed the Chinese expansionist efforts.<sup>1</sup> Even the events of 2001, when a US reconnaissance aircraft collided in midair with a Chinese fighter jet 160 kilometres away from the Chinese naval base in the Paracel Islands and had to land on Hainan Island, had no serious impact on the bilateral relations. The U. S. government satisfied the requirement of the Chinese to issue a statement concerning the incident, and "the language of this document was deliberately ambiguous and allowed both countries to 'save face' while defusing a potentially volatile situation between the militarily strong states."<sup>2</sup>

However, as China's power grew and the country projected itself across the region, the U. S.-China relations began to change significantly. Somewhat of a Rubicon is 2010, when certain events opened a new page in the relationship between the two countries: Beijing has officially announced that it has ended military relations with Washington, the U. S. leading company Google has reported that it was subjected to a cyber-attack organized by China, and a prominent Chinese dissident and ruling regime opponent Liu Xiaobo received the Nobel Peace Prize while in prison.

In addition, the U. S. President Barack Obama has organized several demonstrably anti-Chinese actions that year: a meeting with the Dalai Lama, despite strong protests from the Chinese side, and a statement that political

reforms in the PRC were lagging behind the economic reforms.<sup>3</sup> With this statement, Obama was emphasizing that a free and prosperous economy can only develop within the framework of an American kind of a democracy, not within the framework of an authoritarian communist regime.

Thus, the U. S. proclaimed itself a defender of civil liberties in China and supported the 2010 awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the convicted dissident Liu Xiaobo, who liked to repeat, "China needs at least 300 years of colonialism to become like Hong Kong."<sup>4</sup> Washington hoped to be able to use this staunch Westerner and opponent of the Communist Party power, who was internationally known and recognized as an unjustly convicted human rights activist and a selfless fighter against the regime, to actively influence the policies of the Chinese authorities and even the stability and sustainability of China's political system. The American technology aimed at supporting a group of individuals in China who would fight for civil rights and democracy, and who would be untouchable to the local authorities, even while drawing up an indictment against their own country on one occasion or another on a continuous basis.

In Beijing, the Liu Xiaobo case caused great irritation, and most importantly, growing distrust of the Americans as Chinese leadership started to reasonably suspect that their opponent was preparing a so-called 'democratic transformation' of China's political system, that is, the elimination of the Communist Party, which has repeatedly been talked about in Washington.

Military pressure became another leverage against China. In early 2011, the Obama administration announced that the US Navy's presence in the seas adjacent to China would be significantly increased. Washington said that America was returning to East and Southeast Asia and strengthening its naval grouping in the Pacific. This new approach found its most ample reflection in U. S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's October 2011 article, "U. S. Policy in the Pacific", in *Foreign Affairs* journal. She later outlined it in an address to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit.<sup>5</sup>

The text caused a huge resonance in Asia and beyond, because it suggested that relations with China are taking a new shape for the U. S. and that the previously poorly concealed confrontation is moving into an open phase. So, the U. S. Secretary of State proclaimed the advent of a "Pacific American Century" and said the U. S. was responsible for protecting the rights and freedoms in Asia. Having attended the East Asia Summit (EAS) for the first time, in November 2011, Barack Obama declared that the United States is now "the guarantor of security in the Asia-Pacific region" (APR).<sup>6</sup> This was an open challenge to China, meaning that the U. S. was finally parting with the "engage policy" of cooperation with the PRC as a junior partner, and moving to a "hedge policy" of containing China as no longer a "difficult" partner but an enemy. The stiffening attitude toward the PRC became even more pronounced when the

<sup>3</sup> История американо-китайских отношений. URL: <https://tass.ru/info/4159288> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Косырев Д. Попытка изменить родину. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3359751> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Clinton H. R. America's Pacific Century. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Calmes J. Obama and Asian Leaders Confront China's Premier. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/world/asia/wen-jiabao-chinese-leader-shows-flexibility-after-meeting-obama.html> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>1</sup> Королев А. С., Анасова А. М. АСЕАН как зона столкновения интересов США и Китая. URL: <https://asaf-today.ru/s032150750010445-1-1> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Инцидент на острове Хайнань. URL: [https://ru.wikibrief.org/wiki/Hainan\\_Island\\_incident](https://ru.wikibrief.org/wiki/Hainan_Island_incident) (accessed: 14.05.2023).

U. S. charged several Chinese military officers with economic espionage in May 2014 and, in August, accused China of having its fighter jets dangerously close to a US reconnaissance aircraft over the South China Sea.

All these events marked the beginning of the U. S.-Chinese “hybrid war”, which, quite in line with the classical theory, is developing very unevenly, in ups and downs, under the influence of various kinds of negotiations and discussions constantly ongoing between the two sides in order to limit it and somehow try to stop it on the basis of the existing status quo. But this has not been achieved; a “hybrid war” is something that is intrinsically non-stop, although it sometimes takes a subdued form, giving the impression of a positive change.

The reason for such negative developments for Asia and the world in general, when the contradictions between the two countries as well as their military confrontation are not being resolved but only deepen, can be explained by the fact that the desire of the strongest states to establish their leadership in the world and in the IPR, to strengthen their own security and prosperity, is an objective reality and it will not disappear either today or in the foreseeable future, and will determine the course of history. This is how the world works: the state that has the greatest aggregate power, with predominant political influence, a strong army, economic strength, and a stable financial, scientific, educational, informational, and cultural component, is always a contender for the role of world leader and hegemon. Becoming a superpower, such a state seeks to dictate its rules of the game to the entire world at all times, and in this way to secure its advantage. Therefore, the situation around the growing U. S.-Chinese conflict cannot fundamentally change, even despite the best intentions of the unchanging presidents of China and the changing U. S. presidents.

Another important constituent of today’s global agenda is the superpowers’ struggle for superiority in the Asian and world politics. Other countries are also drawn into the conflict between superpowers, as they depend on them in one way or another, but also affect the general course of their confrontation, having global interests and building a system of relationships over vast territories.

This is what we can observe when the ruling elites of most APR-IPR countries are trying their best to predict the future and be on the winning side. Growing political tensions are associated with an atmosphere of increasing mistrust and suspicion, and a constant search for the most reliable partners for the “big game” of survival and domination. This changes the configuration of customary regional ties and alliances, threatening the unity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose cohesion is being severely challenged by opposing superpowers. This raises the important question of whether the community of small and medium-sized countries is capable of influencing and adjusting the course of the game, being forced to engage in a process of transformation of their foreign and often domestic policies under the influence of the struggle between superpowers. Can they remain free to choose their allies and not to side with one of the rivals? What is their role and influence in the global confrontation?

Clearly, most of these countries do not want to play the role of a dummy; their ruling elites understand that if they let go of the control, an absolute chaos with an extremely negative outcome may ensue. Therefore, the specifics of

today’s transformation in the APR-IPR is that all countries participating in this process seek to influence it in one way or another, thus forming a complex and very unstable network of international ties and dependencies, dialogues and conflicts that are sometimes very difficult to discern.

At the same time, this precarious situation of political tension, disguised and open struggle of geopolitical rivals bears certain opportunities for small and medium-sized states, which are placed at front line of this struggle. On the one hand, the threat of external interference, and on the other hand, global attention to the country and the region are associated with significant financial resources and boost the rate of economic growth and modernization of local communities. Besides, the competing superpowers are forced to make substantial investments in the economies of Asian states, to transfer technology, train students, and form elites that would be loyal to them. Therefore, it would be wrong to view the growing tensions and security threats to the APR-IPR states as an outright negative phenomenon that forces them to spend significant resources on defense and taints their future with growing uncertainty. There is also a flip side to this phenomenon, when up to certain limits the conflict of the superpowers fills the region not only with struggle, but also with energy; the rivalry brings about new opportunities, the competition clearly spurs local elites and makes them look for solutions and not fear the inevitable changes.

There are many politicians in Southeast Asia who see the upside of the U. S.-China confrontation and are trying to play both cards at the same time. There are such telling examples as the Philippines, which alternately turn their back on the U. S. or China; of Vietnam, which successfully balances between China and the U. S.; of Malaysia, which either rejects or takes Chinese money.

The paradox is that in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions there are trends at work that are destructive and dangerous, and other trends that create opportunity and aim at modernizing and integrating Asian economies into global world markets. Russia’s political practice should take into account that aggravation of the U. S.-Chinese struggle is not perceived unequivocally negatively by many in the ASEAN.

The process of transformation of the political space in the APR-IPR is complicated by the fact that it takes place in conditions when the trust of most countries in international law as the only source of impartial attitude to the participants of conflicts for making decisions based on international law is clearly undermined. The fact is that the so-called ‘rules-based order’ – that is, a mechanism for resolving specific conflicts in which key provisions are always changing based on the U. S. interests – is rightly viewed by many policymakers in Asia as an illegitimate pseudo-legal system that serves the U. S. agenda and only adds to the uncertainty of the global and regional security architecture.

Another principle that the Americans are keen to instill in modern international relations is the principle of ‘canceled history,’ when their representatives say that international conflicts should be resolved only through modern law which they themselves establish while ignoring any grounds for using historical facts and information to find a just solution.

The impasse of this approach is illustrated, for example, by the decision of the Court of Arbitration in The Hague re-

garding the islands of the South China Sea, which ignored all the historical information provided by China that Chinese dynasties controlled these islands in ancient and medieval times. Naturally, China has expressed complete disagreement with the legitimacy of this decision. Incidentally, the weighty evidence provided by Vietnam that the islands were also used by the Vietnamese authorities was ignored as well.

As a result, the court's decision was so disputable and biased that even the Philippine authorities, despite the seemingly positive outcome in their favor, refrained from any attempts to implement the decision in practice. Apparently, Rodrigo Duterte, then President of the Philippines, was well aware that the purpose of the Americans, who pressured the court in The Hague in every way possible, was to divorce his country from China, to reignite the territorial conflict and to profit from this confrontation.

Yet another principle increasingly introduced in the international relations is 'peace by force,' when instead of seeking a compromise, a military victory of one of the sides of the conflict (which acts in the interests of the United States) is presented as its valid solution. Now this principle is being tested in Ukraine, but soon it may well be used in the Asia-Pacific region as well. Its preferential use is quite understandable – in a situation where other factors of national power – economy, information and 'soft power' – are no longer sufficient to maintain American dominance in the APR, the military factor as the 'last argument of kings' comes to the fore.

To complete the picture, one must say that the aforementioned new "principles" of world politics are closely related to the phenomenon of 'post-truth,' which plays a key role in today's information flows. The main feature of 'post-truth' politics is the repetition of distorted information, even though it has been refuted or was knowingly false. 'Post-truth' is "circumstances in which objective facts are less significant in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs."<sup>1</sup> The architects of 'post-truth,' for the most part, are the Western media, which create a different reality for Asian societies by constantly manipulating public sentiment in the interests of the United States and the collective West.

Another feature of modern global politics is that nuclear deterrence, which worked so well during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and later in the 1970s and 1980s, is now almost non-existent. A generation of politicians that has come to power in the West have not known the horrors of war and, for some reason, exclude the possibility of nuclear war from their calculations; they are ef-

fectively waging a virtually undeclared war against Russia, risking to cross all "red lines". On their part, they are ready to use nuclear weapons; for instance, the now former British Prime Minister Liz Truss, who said in one of her speeches that she was prepared to press the button to launch a nuclear weapon. "I consider this an important duty of the Prime Minister. I'm ready to do that," she said.<sup>2</sup> Another peculiarity of the situation with nuclear deterrence is that propagandists and politicians of Western states are trying quite skillfully, through information and 'soft power', to shape the situation in which the leadership of Russia or China would abandon any thought of using the nuclear power. It is a very cunning political technique to convince one's opponent that, even if to save itself, it should not resort to nuclear weapons. So far, there is a sense that in the West, many politicians, journalists, and even scientists seriously believe that everything will work out for them. Therefore, they do not notice the Russian warnings about the West crossing all "red lines" in the conflict in Ukraine, and in Asia – in the danger of aggravation of the situation around Taiwan and the South China Sea.

It is clear that the purpose of introducing all these 'innovations' into international relations is, firstly, to destroy the world order based on international law to build in its place another order that reflects and protects Western and, above all, American interests. Another goal is to impose American views of particular international conflicts on the ruling elites and political activists of most countries, to make them universal, and to prove that only American approaches are the only correct ones and that international policy can function only on their basis.

Based on all these 'innovations', which form a completely new political reality, the Americans and their allies are trying to draw to their side the Asian states that refused to join Western sanctions after the start of the Special Military Operation. The U. S. seeks to use the 'post-truth' mechanism in India, Vietnam, Indonesia, and in the APR-IPR region in general, distorting Russia's policies and actions in every way. Not only Russia's, however; also North Korea's, Myanmar's, and in the Middle East, Syria's – all those countries that oppose American dictate and are considered enemies in Washington.

The problem is that the application of all these innovations by the U. S. and the collective West completely rules out dialogue and increases trends toward conflict and war. They now form the basis of a global political landscape that is uncertain, conflicted, unjust, and extremely dangerous for most states.

<sup>1</sup> Карась Л. Феномен постправды: почему мы верим в то, во что хотим верить. URL: <https://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/19283-fenomen-postpravdy-pochemu-my-verim-v-to-vo-chto-khotim-verit> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Миронова А. Кто из западных политиков заявил о готовности применить ядерное оружие против России. URL: <https://fedpress.ru/news/77/policy/3101268> (accessed: 14.05.2023).