

THE CONTOURS OF THE FUTURE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: TRANSFORMATION OF REGIONAL CONFLICT INTO GLOBAL CONFLICT

Currently, when studying conflicts that unfold in Asia, more and more attention is paid not only to political or economic factors but also to social and cultural factors. There are a lot of examples where exactly they predetermine to a large extent how and in what way this or that conflict will be resolved. The latest example is events on the Korean peninsula when both sides, the South and the North, all the time appeal to common Korean cultural values, common Korean legends and heroes to explain their actions for mutual reconciliation.

The conflict in the South China Sea is of a principally different nature but here social and cultural factors – traditional Chinese-Vietnamese cultural space with unwritten but fairly real rules and traditions – have also been important factors for a long time preventing the conflict's expansion and the start of war between the two neighbouring countries. However, now the importance of the said factors somewhat decreases and the reason for that is that the state of affairs in the South China Sea is considerably different from the one we had fairly recently. The conflict in this region was strictly regional and encompassed China and its neighbours in the South China Sea. But recently there were fairly radical changes in this conflict, certifying how indefinite contours of the future can be and how dangerous they can be for global security. Two events, about which we'll tell below, changed everything cardinally – all analysts' forecasts about favourable prospects for peace and stability in this region, about a fairly probable compromise based on closeness of culture and mentality of the parties taking part in the conflict, turned out absolutely erroneous. The contours of the future were really different from what everyone supposed.

The first key event, the impact of which is felt now and as it seems will only strengthen in future, is the decisions of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague. As it's well-known, this Court that took its decisions in July, 2016, did not

recognize China's legal right to 80% of the South China Sea water area, rejected the idea of the historical right as an argument in this dispute and ruled that the only way for the legal settlement of the conflict can be the way based to the contemporary international law. Though China and some other countries, including Russia, did not recognize the decisions of this Court, thinking them not fully objective, the legal grounding and the main principles worded by it as well as the well-known Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982, currently stay the only foundation based on the international law for settlement of the conflict. In this connection it can be said that the Court of Arbitration in the Hague actually announced that the conflict in the South China Sea would be resolved not in the Eastern but Western cultural space, without any pointing at the outstanding role of China in the history and culture of that region.

It is already clear that if the peaceful settlement process starts in future in the SCS, it will not be based on coordination of local traditions and legends as the key elements of the talks, i.e. the historical law. The ASEAN countries recognizing the decisions of the Court of Arbitration actually refused from that way. They agreed that talks would be only based on the contemporary international law, and that at once, on the one hand, will noticeably simplify the process of the conflict's settlement, but on the other hand, it will make it more difficult as the giant cultural and historical layer will turn out to be outside the framework of arguments and reviewed space. China will naturally not agree to such an approach, and the legal process of the conflict's settling in the SCS in the way it is presented today, will inevitably get stuck for a long time and may be forever.

Nevertheless, the second key event can be even more important. Actual turning of the Unites States into the full-featured participant of the conflict led to qualitative changes of the whole political architecture of the conflict in the SCS. This did not happen at once, there was time, for example, at the first USA-ASEAN summit that took place in 2009, when American representatives communicated with the leaders of the member states of the bloc, speaking very strictly. They even pointed to them

that they should not complain about Beijing to Washington, that political elites of the ASEAN states should themselves look for the compromise with China. Even before that there was a serious friction between the United States and ASEAN on the issue of the prospects for Burma to chair this international organization in 2006 in accordance the approved in it rotation order. In this connection, Washington presented some serious warnings bordering on direct threats, pointing that such a decision will seriously complicate the American approach to ASEAN. Confirming the formal warnings, the then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demonstratively boycotted the annual meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on Security in May, 2005. An open threat on the part of the Americans followed – if ASEAN insists and the military government of Burma still takes the chairman’s position, Washington will refuse to provide economic assistance to ASEAN.(1)

But this tough approach of the American Administration to ASEAN changed when Obama became the President. The new US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took part in the summit of the ASEAN Regional Forum on Security on the island of Phuket (Thailand). She decidedly said at the press conference that the United States had returned to Southeast Asia (2). It was announced about the intentions of the United States to open a permanent representative office attached to ASEAN with resident ambassador at the head. The first step to new American-ASEAN relations was made as a result of the meeting – the document about the United States joining the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) was signed (3), and that had always been an unspoken and necessarily rule for those who wanted to establish closer relations with ASEAN.

The main reason that made Americans change their attitude to ASEAN and transfer the members of this organization into their potential allies, was evident rise of China, when Beijing’s policy became more and more independent from the United States and in a sense it became expansionist on the islands and the water area of the South China Sea. China announced approximately 80% of the water area of this sea its own

territory and thus suddenly aggravated the state of affairs in this region as the position and interests and rights of other states turned out to be seriously violated. Most ASEAN member states turned to the United States for support to return the status quo and actually convinced the Americans to return to this region as their protectors from the growing threat to security on the part of China.

By now, the Americans most actively intervened in the conflict in the South China Sea within the framework of the policy of the United States returning to Asia, their ships sail in the areas of disputed islands announced by China closed to other vessels, thus putting the world under a threat of a direct clash with Chinese forces. The unfolding American-Chinese confrontation in the SCS turned the low-intensity conflict of neighbouring states that interested nearly no one in the world for a long time, into the confrontation of modern superpowers. And the interesting thing is that this conflict was aggravated in such a way as if the events were taken from a textbook on political science, when the conflict originates based on small antagonisms understood by very few and then, if it is not cut short, it starts growing, acquires its own logic and finally draws in new countries and nations. The conflict in the SCS passed the level of bilateral disputes and clashes between China and Vietnam because of the known to very few waterless tiny islets and reefs, then it reached the stage of the regional conflict, in which China and ASEAN states were drawn, first of all Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei and later Indonesia. The conflict reached this level after the People's Republic of China, as we already said, announced 80% of the South China Sea its territory in 2009, completely ignoring the interests of its neighbours.

It should be noted that before the Americans appeared, even notwithstanding the general negative development of the conflict, many analysts in the region and outside it thought that mutual claims of the SEA countries and China would be gradually resolved. At the same time, the cultural factors played an important role in their arguments – closeness of basic views and vital stereotypes, tradition of mutual

concessions connected with the opposing forces doing everything for no one to lose seriously and for everyone to “keep face” when coming to a compromise. Many people pointed at important cultural and political influence of local Chinese diasporas, deeply integrated into the political elite of the SEA countries that could also help to resolve the conflict. Thus, the contours of the future in the context of regional cultural space looked fairly positive.

The coming of the Americans with their energy, aggression, powerful cultural mythology actually shattered and changed all that. The alternative of Chinese political and cultural domineering activated various modernist forces in the SEA countries that started actively promoting the American cultural stereotype and thus preparing national communities to closer relations with the USA.

Today, when the Americans are dragged into regional confrontations, the conflict in the SCS stopped being regional. It turned into a global one, threatening stability and security in the SCS, in Asia and in the world. The matter is that any armed clash of Chinese and American forces may bring about a big war between the leading world powers. The threat of such development of events is appearing regularly as again and again either an American aircraft flies with Chinese anti-aircraft defense systems aimed at it in the zone announced forbidden by the People’s Republic of China, or a United States destroyer sails with Chinese canons aimed at it in the area of artificial islands also announced forbidden by China. Any non-sanctioned or accidental shot can cardinaly change the situation. And the state of affairs in security is only worsening after it was announced that the group of American men-of-war with the aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* at the head started patrolling the SCS from February 18, 2017. The task of the American Navy’s permanent presence in the SCS set then became just a prelude for another more dangerous for the world and stability in the region decision that American vessels would regularly enter the areas, which China announced forbidden for them. That means that the SEA region is actually doomed for constant nervousness and instability, expectation of conflict as it already happened not once, and the last time

was on July 2, 2017, when the USS *Stethem* intentionally and demonstratively entered the disputed water area of the SCS, provoking the Chinese coastal artillery for a destructive answer.

And what is more, we can currently speak not only about the global nature of the conflict but also about a new spiral of cultural and political rivalry, when the great powers appeal to the countries of the region looking for support. And in this case we should say that American “soft power” based on the well-developed cultural creation of myths about the Messianic role of America in the world definitely wins over the Chinese mythologema as to historical and cultural community, ability to understand each other better than the others and deal with the existing contradictions peacefully. But the problem in this connection is also in the contours of the future seen as full of new conflicts, the atmosphere of mutual misunderstanding and tension in the environment of serious success of American myth creation. The reason for that is that American cultural stereotypes and dominants, taking root in political elites of the SEA countries, destroy the traditional cultural space of Big Eastern Asia, generating mutual distrust and misunderstanding. And the threat is that even if we imagine that the Americans will leave after some time, how can the SEA countries and China restore their common cultural and political space when there is a gap of cultural misunderstanding and deep mutual distrust between them?

Naturally, such a development of events does not give reasons for optimism as to a possibility to resolve the conflict. But if we just put aside all these well-known and very dangerous phenomena and events a little, and try to understand what actually changes in the new situation, when the conflict in the SCS acquired all features of a global conflict. The first thing you pay attention to at once is a completely new presentation of the events in the region in world mass media, and a completely new role and place in discussions at the biggest international forums and especially in the United Nations besides that. For example, I especially analyzed two important events that took place fairly recently. One of them is aggravation of Chinese-Indonesian relations in connection with the Natuna Islands, and the second

is sailing of American destroyers, at first the USS *Stethem* and in this March the USS *Mustin* in the forbidden area by the artificial islands built by China. It was mostly reported about aggravation of the Chinese-Indonesian relations and Indonesian measures for strengthening of its presence on the Natuna Islands in the regional mass media of the ASEAN countries. There were just a few short pieces of information on the international scene. But the USS *Stethem's* sailing became a hit in the world press. Naturally, all American newspapers wrote about that, CNN analysts discussed that to say nothing of regional mass media of the ASEAN countries. That is, the first news stayed regional to a large extent, that second became world-scale, underlining the global importance of the event.

But the meaning of the global character in case of the conflict in the SCS consists not only in the scales of covering, the more important is that the conflict's transfer to the global level cardinally changes all the political architecture in the situation formed in the SCS. Really, the conflict of China and Vietnam and the conflict of the ASEAN countries and China in the new environment as if go to the background. Naturally, they don't disappear but they make way for the global confrontation, they become inferior to it. Naturally, the main motives and the so-called "reference" points determining the character of the conflict change in connection with that. If Beijing's actions were undoubtedly expansionist to a certain extent in the environment of confrontation with Vietnam and the Philippines, these actions in the new environment get a somewhat different dimension – they can be viewed as formation of the defense line for Chinese security against the threat from the USA. The new quality of the conflict inevitable generates new foundations for old phenomena, and building artificial islands can be viewed not as a clearly unfriendly gesture in relation to the neighbours, but as an attempt to create an alternative for American aircraft carriers, turning the artificial islands into impregnable fortresses capable to control considerable water areas. As we see, the old conflict loses values and orientation points that seemed unshakeable before, in the new reality.

Besides, the ASEAN countries conflict with China in the new environment stops being the key for settlement of the conflict, and the precedence is taken by the relations of the USA and China. And what is more, ASEAN finds itself in a difficult geopolitical situation, when a lot of skills and will are required to preserve the freedom of actions and internal unity in the situation when the USA and the People's Republic of China stay the key and the most important partners in economy and politics. Currently the Americans, notwithstanding the change of the Administration in the White House, still on the whole go on with the so-called "hedge policy" – the strategy directed at turning neighbours of China in its enemies and respectively in friends and allies of the United States. They expect to control the whole situation in the region in such a way and have levers of influence to have an impact on the ASEAN countries and via them China. Unfortunately, there is still no one single line still seen in American efforts. It's enough to compare the policy of equidistance with evident turn to China, carried out by the Philippines under the President Duterte's control, and more and more pro-American line of Vietnam that sees its security in bigger cooperation with the USA. It can be said rather definitely that Beijing and Washington rivalry creates a threat for the ASEAN unity, tears its bloc not only politically (when Cambodia, for example, turns into the mouthpiece of China in ASEAN, and Singapore into the main American ally in the region) but also undermines the foundations of the common cultural identity of the Southeast Asian countries. The matter is that a different political focus either on the People's Republic of China or the USA to a large extent determined different trajectories of cultural development and consequently, in connection with all that, absolutely undeterminable contours of the future for all that region.

At the same time, analyzing the current situation in Southeast Asia, there is a reason for a certain optimism as to possible compromises between China and its neighbours, together with worries and pessimism as to possibilities of coming to an agreement, understand each other and stop the rivalry of the People's Republic of China and the USA. Practically all analysts are used to stating that China's motives

for expansion are expectations of big oil and gas deposits, control over the main sea trade routes through the SCS and the Strait of Malacca as well as fishing zones in one of the richest in fish seas. Now these expectations with global confrontation and absolutely new motives and threats as the background, can become the field for a compromise. The explanation of this phenomenon is that today not these issues but the issues of national security come to the forefront in China's expansion in the SCS. This region turns into an important place for development and promotion of Chinese forces and early nuclear attack warning means. According to American intelligence data, China placed the equipment for interferences in communications and radio location systems of American men-of-war and aircrafts on the new artificial islands. And it was placed fairly recently, within the last 90 days on Mischief (Meiji) Reef and Fiery Cross Reef.(4) China develops the marine component of its strategic nuclear forces on submarines, with the biggest naval base in the Yulin harbour on Hainan Island. The special features of the lay of the sea bottom make exactly the water area of the South China Sea the most logic place where Chine nuclear missile carriers can go out into the broad expanses of the ocean nearly unnoticeable for American satellites. If you follow the logic of Chinese commanders, control over the Spratly Islands and a considerable part of the SCS is necessary for the People's Republic of China not only to be protected against American missiles but also for it to be impossible for the USA and their allies to close vital sea economic arteries and stifle the country by economic blockade, about which it is all the time said in American mass media.

At the same time, no matter the whole negative development of the situation in the SCS, it's possible to say that transfer of the conflict from the regional level to the global level pushed China and its regional rivals to a serious review of ideas that seemed established long ago, and in some sense opens new opportunities to look for a compromise between them. First, all participants of the old conflict have already completely different stakes that require maximally responsible approach to their actions. Second, if not only fish resources of this sea and not oil and gas prospects

are the main drivers of the Chinese policy, it's evident that opportunities open for China to look for a compromise with the ASEAN states. It is even more important when Americans are trying to pull them to their side step-by-step. At the same time, their current aspirations and claims against China are rather concrete: they are striving for free fishing and an opportunity to exploit the SCS riches in their interests. Chinese authorities can fairly well meet them halfway in case of a global confrontation as they did recently with the Philippines, signing an agreement on joint exploration and use of mineral resources in the disputed water areas and announcing the South China Sea the sea of "amity and cooperation"(5). It's extremely important for China in the environment of the confrontation with the USA for the ASEAN countries not to find themselves in the American camp and for them not to turn into Washington puppets. By the way, China in this case can find support among the influential part of the ASEAN political elites, well-known representative of which already not once said about their wish to be outside the global confrontation of Beijing and Washington and preserve their freedom in selecting their foreign political partners.

The ASEAN members do not hide that they'd like to have constructive relations with the People's Republic of China, they are against becoming the American front line against China, with which they develop trade and economic relations fairly successfully within the common free trade zone. At the same time, they do not want to be a drive belt of American politics in the region. The matter is to what extent they will manage to attain this goal in the environment when traditional common Asian cultural space is being destroyed, and that is happening just in front of our eyes, when formation of the new, so to say "hybrid" Eastern-Western cultures only brings about new antagonisms and aggravates old ones.

The complexity and special feature of the current situation in the South China Sea is that even serious shifts in Beijing's relations with its neighbours absolutely do not guarantee relief of tension and can little help to evade a possible new war. We can only count on some relief of tension, but the conflict will not be resolved as

global contradictions of modern superpowers China and the USA are deeper and encompass not only the disputed water areas of the South China Sea. There is bitterness in this statement that we did not manage to resolve the conflict in due time, when it was still at the regional stage, and there are concerns as to what extent we can find a solution after running against one of the most dangerous features of globalism, related to rivalry of great powers for domineering both in a separate region and the whole world. Because of that the contours of the future, no matter all possible concessions of regional states to one another, stay dangerously insurmountable for the states in Southeast Asia, like a black cloud just waiting for its hour to come to turn the surrounding world into an unmanageable and dangerous chaos.

1. CyberLeninka: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/novoe-prishestvie-ssha-v-yugo-vostochnuyu-aziyu>.

2. Availability at the ASEAN Summit. *Hillary R. Clinton*. The United States is back in Southeast Asia. Phuket, Thailand, 22 July 2009// <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126320.htm>

3. Remarks by Hillary R. Clinton from the Signing Ceremony of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation Accession, Phuket, Thailand, 22 July 2009// <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126334.htm>

4. RIA News <https://ria.ru/world/20180410/1518270568.html>

5. RIA News, April 10, 2018