

"Challenges and opportunities for cooperation between Russia and the US in the Asia-Pacific region"

The Asia-Pacific region has its own logic of development and further evolution, thereafter the relations between the United States and Russia have their own unique character in this part of the world. This is why, it is important to note that Ukrainian crisis, despite on its destabilizing effect, does not fundamentally affect US-Russia relations in the Asia-Pacific.

Thus, it is worth to emphasize factors which have an impact on US-Russia relations, such as their own interests in the region, the North Korean nuclear program, the factor of China and a changing situation in the Asia-Pacific in terms of leadership.

Russia's policy in the Asia-Pacific

Russia's "turn to the East" was a logical decision of the Russian government because Moscow aimed to diversify its foreign policy ties and develop the territory of Siberia and the Far East region. After the APEC Summit in Vladivostok which had been organized in 2012, Russia began to pay more attention not only to relations with its main Asian partners (China, South Korea and Japan), but also to institutions located in Asia. For example in 2016 the Russian Federation and ASEAN adopted Sochi Declaration in order "to establish a strategic partnership and achieve regional peace, stability and prosperity".¹

In addition, Russia began to increase its presence in the Asia-Pacific by increasing the number of military exercises and deployment military facilities in the Kuril Islands that are not directed against a particular enemy, but are intended to show that Russia is now in the region.

Russia has its own main goals in Asia. Firstly, Moscow wants to strengthen cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. Secondly, Russia tries to achieve a strategic partnership with ASEAN as a group of countries. Thirdly, Moscow seeks to be more engaged in Asian multilateral dialogue platforms and institutions. And finally, Russia prefers to have bilateral ties not only with China, but with other countries of the region.

US Asian policy under the Trump Administration

If we look back to the Obama Administration, we can note that the U.S. policy in Asia at that time was based on six main aspects which are the followings:²

1. Strengthening traditional bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines.
2. Deepening of the US-China relationship.

¹ Sochi Declaration of the ASEAN-Russian Federation Commemorative Summit to Mark the 20th Anniversary of ASEAN-Russian Federation Dialogue Partnership "Moving Towards a Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit" (URL: <http://www.asean.org/storage/2016/05/SD-of-the-ASEAN-Russia-CommSummit-Final.pdf>)

² The US and Russia in the Asia-Pacific // Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations; IISS (URL: <https://www.iiss.org/en/shangri-la%20voices/blogsections/2016-588c/the-us-and-russia-in-the-asia-pacific-e68a>)

3. Participation in multilateral dialogue platforms and regional institutions.
4. Using economic diplomacy tools, namely the US was focused to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP).
5. The U.S. tried to balance its policy in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.
6. Obama's military strategy in the Asia-Pacific was based on geographic diversification and recognition the important role of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.

After President Trump had come to power, the situation in the region changed. Now it is hard to predict his further actions in the Asia-Pacific.

There are high expectations for improving US-Russia relations in Russian official and expert circles after Trump's victory. However, this does not guarantee the automatic improvement of relations between Moscow and Washington. There is no doubt that the new administration will take an active position on regional affairs, including in the Asia-Pacific, in view of the entrenched opinion that "it is the US that has the primary responsibility for the security and development of this region as a responsible leader".³

Russia and the United States are not enemies in Asia, but they have different approaches on a security system in this region. The US position is to create the security system based on American alliances while Russia, in its turn, prefers to build an inclusive security system in the Asia-Pacific.

U.S.-Russian relations are mainly concentrated in the context of Russian-Chinese relationship and in the resolution of the nuclear missile problem of the Korean peninsula.

North Korean nuclear issue

Nuclear-missile problem of the Korean peninsula is one of the main contexts of Russian-American relations. In this case, both Russia and the US have a similar position. Due to both countries are responsible nuclear powers, they do not accept the presence of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula. 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. But nowadays, situation in the Korean peninsula has changed dramatically. The North changed its Constitution in 2012 and declared itself "a nuclear power". Nuclear and missile programs are no more a "commodity" for trading. They play a role of deterrence and frightening of the neighboring countries.

However, one of the main challenge to US-Russia relations, and to the Korean peninsula issue as well, is the decision to deploy THAAD missile defense system in South Korea to respond on the threat from Pyongyang. The problem of THAAD is not that it makes real military

³ Transpacific Security: the Hierarchy of Power and Responsibility / Mikheev V., Shvydko V., eds. – Moscow, IMEMO, 2016. P 11.

threats to China – but it is that the US and South Korea made decisions, which can change military balance in strategically important area for China without consultations with Beijing. This decision of the Obama Administration was a strategic mistake because deployment of THAAD, which cannot defend the entire South's territory in case of the North's attack (North Korea has a big arsenal of long-range artillery), narrows channels for cooperation with China and Russia.

As already noted above, in terms of military point of view, deployment of THAAD doesn't have a direct threat to Russia, however, there are political and psychological concerns to US-Russia relations, such as:

1) Many officials and experts in Russia believe that deployment of THAAD is the step of Washington to develop its Asian segment of American global anti-missile defense system.⁴

2) Russia has concerns that after the deployment of THAAD, the United States will build military infrastructure on the Korean peninsula that will bring new security risks to Russia.

In this case, Pyongyang will have big advantages and new opportunities to play on contradictions among the US, China, Japan, Russia (so called "P-4 countries") and South Korea.

Nowadays, the main agenda for the P-4 is not the North Korean problem per se – but creation of a new atmosphere of mutual trust, policy coordination and cooperation in order to set up around North Korea a new constructive “Security Area” that could help to solve the North Korean problem.

It is important to add that nowadays the approach of the P-4 to the North is different from the Cold War times. At that time, the scheme looked like this:

North Korea + (Russia and China) vs South Korea + (US plus Japan)

According to military Alliances obligations, Russia and China were responsible for North Korean military security providing military and economic support to the North.

Nowadays, the scheme is different:

North Korea vs the P-4 and South Korea

Trump's victory brought new expectations of a possible normalization of Russia-US relationship. Russia understands that they are just expectations – not guarantees. But if US-Russia –relations under Trump really improve – this could open new opportunities for the P-4 cooperation on North Korea.

⁴ Davydov O. US deploys anti-missile defense system in South Korea (URL: http://www.imemo.ru/index.php?page_id=502&id=2981)

US-Russia-China Triangle

There will be a redistribution of forces and roles in the Asia-Pacific during the next 20 years. China will become the main competitor of the United States in the region in the military, economic and technological spheres⁵.

Some experts believe that situation in the U.S.-Russia-China Triangle under the Trump Administration will be changed. Washington will try:

1) To prevent the development of the Russian-Chinese alliance and to achieve Russia's neutrality, or

2) to have Russia as an American junior partner to contain China's growing power.

Moreover, we need to keep in mind the factor of China.

The main global uncertainties for China are the US's exit from the TPP and Trump's negative position on the Paris Climate Agreement. This situation can increase the world demand for Chinese leadership. Taking into account the Silk Road strategy, in which China already realizes the potential as a leader, the global burden on China - in terms of ideas and finances that are expected from the leader - will increase. In this context, the question is whether China is ready for this or not? Is China ready to implement further reforms of democracy and openness? What is the global leadership with Chinese characteristics? And which will Russia's position be in this global order?

The 19th CPC congress, planned for the end of 2017, influences upon China foreign policy. Xi Jinping, who got many enemies in China military and political high circles due to anti-corruption campaign, has to demonstrate to people and Chinese elites that his anti-corruption campaign does not weaken neither China economy nor security. On the eve of the Congress, he has to look strong in order to consolidate his power.

To improve its negotiation positions in relations with the US, Xi actively plays Russia card. China supports Russia on the Syria issue and, on the other hand, involves Russia in confrontation with the US on the THAAD issue. Another area where China tries to engage Russia against American military presence is the South China Sea, where Russia does not have its own direct security interests.

Russia, in its turn, tries to play China card against the US in the situation of worsening relations with Washington. So, Russia supports China "protest diplomacy" in order to get China support in Russia's own confrontation with the US. However, expectations of that the Russia-US relations can be improved under the Trump administration brings new logic to relations between Russia, China and the US. In the new situation, playing on China side and on China

⁵ Глобальная система на переломе: пути к новой нормальности = Global System on the Brink: Pathways toward a New Normal: пер. с англ. / под ред. А. Дынкина, М. Барроуза; авт. кол. ИМЭМО РАН и Атлантического совета (США). М.: Магистр. С. 140.

rules against the US in the areas, where Russian security interests are not threatened directly, can bring damage to the process of US-Russia normalization process.

In this situation, Russia should not be involved in this triangle, but pursue a policy aimed on achieving its own interests.

Recommendations for US-Russia cooperation in the Asia-Pacific

1. To develop an understanding between Russia and the US that their relations in the Asia-Pacific must be based on transparency and mutual trust.

2. To avoid the situation in which the parties could be drawn into a direct military clash.

3. Avoid the emergence of the arms race in the Asia-Pacific in general and in the Korean peninsula in particular.

4. To develop a unified approach to create such a security system in Asia at which the interests of all parties will be taken into account.

5. To launch, minimum on track-2 level, a new format of Five party talks (the P-4 and South Korea) aimed at (1) providing mutual trust among the P-4 countries plus South Korea and (2) strategically, creating a new “Joint policy coordination and cooperation area” around the North Korea.

6. To try to start, minimum on track-two level, talks on joint theater missile defense issues with participation of Russia and China, as well as US, Japan and South Korea.

7. To use the potential of academic and expert circles to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation.

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