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Malaysia: US Loses Another Key Ally in Asia Pacific Region

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Malaysia is another old time America's ally to shift away from the US orbit following the Philippines. Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visited China on October 31-November 6 to sign 14 agreements totaling 143.64 billion ringgit (\$34.25 billion), including a defence deal. Malaysia agreed to buy four Chinese littoral combat ships. Two will be built in China and two in Malaysia.

The rapprochement has taken place despite the differences over the South China Sea territorial disputes. During the visit, both countries pledged closer cooperation to handle the problem bilaterally to counter US influence in the region.

Najib Razak said Malaysia welcomed the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank which marks a turning point «of peaceful dialogue, not foreign intervention, in sovereign states». Global institutions needed to be inclusive of «countries that were given no say in the legal and security infrastructure that was set up by the victors of the Second World War», he noted.

China has increasingly invested in Malaysia and is implementing major infrastructure and other projects in the country. Chinese companies are widely expected to win a planned \$15bn high-speed rail project linking Kuala Lumpur and Singapore - a new rail line on Malaysia's east coast.

With the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in jeopardy, the US seems to have little leverage over Malaysian foreign policy.

The trip marks another potential setback for US Asia «pivot» policy. The event took place against the background of worsening relations between the US and the Philippines. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has made statements about his intent to break the military alliance with the United States and shift to the partnership with China and Russia. He had visited Beijing to defy America just two weeks before Mr. Razak's trip.

Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia politics analyst, said, «This is the new regional norm. Now China is implementing the power and the US is in retreat», adding Washington's Asia «pivot» was «dead in the water».

Russia-Malaysia relations are also on the rise. In 2017 the two countries will mark the 50th anniversary since the diplomatic ties were established in 1967.

In May, the Malaysian PM visited Sochi, Russia, leading a delegation to the ASEAN-Russia Commemorative Summit. Back then, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, «We will be pleased to develop relations in the humanitarian sphere, in the economy, investments and of course in the military sphere, or in the sphere of military-technical cooperation».

The Russia-produced Sukhoi Su-30MKM is the most advanced fighter in the inventory of the Royal Malaysian Air Force. The contract to deliver 18 jets was signed in 2003 during the Russian president's official visit to Malaysia. The purchase of Su-34 and Su-35 Russian jets is on the agenda.

Malaysian Defense Minister Hishamuddin Hussein believes his country should «look to the future, to a new era of military-technical cooperation with Russia». Russia took part in the 15th Defense Services Asia Exhibition and Conference on April 18-21, 2016, in Kuala Lumpur to demonstrate the Mi-171Sh helicopter, the T-90MS tank, the BTR-82A armored vehicle, and the Pantsir-S1 air defense system.

Malaysia will explore the possibility of signing a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

There are other facts to prove the fact that the US loses its clout in the Asia Pacific region. Japanese banks and development institutions may offer loans to Russian regional banks. Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hiroshige Seko told TASS in an interview.

It was also reported that the government-backed Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) will provide about 4 billion yen (\$38.5 million) in financing to Sberbank of Russia, in open defiance of Western sanctions. The US and the European Union have effectively banned lending to certain Russian companies and financial institutions, including Sberbank, as part of

sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014. The announcement comes before the President Putin's visit to Japan in December.

The JBIC also plans to make investments into the Yamal LNG gas project. The JBIC is likely to set up a special fund to invest in Russian projects together with the Russian Direct Investment Fund.

The economic cooperation with Russia definitely threatens the Group of Seven's united front on sanctions. The move will most certainly provoke Washington's anger but Tokyo finds the development of ties with Russia important enough to risk it. The US influence in the region is not strong enough to prevent Japan from pursuing its national interests.

With the Philippines and Malaysia shifting away from US orbit, Washington is finding itself with increasingly fewer allies in the region. The Asia Pacific «pivot» appears to be another foreign policy failure in addition to the Middle Eastern debacle. In addition, the US faces a major setback as Europe rejects the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

America is a global power in retreat. A new US president will have to face this reality. The events in the Asia Pacific region provide a good example to support this obvious fact. In a very short period of time the US has lost two major allies in the region. Japan defies the anti-Russia sanctions regime. The American century seems to be fading away as other poles of power emerge on the world map.