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On Some Developments in India-PRC Relations

A number of noteworthy recent developments in the relations between India and China allow us to once again address the topic of transformation of one of the most important elements of the current stage of the “Great Game”, which is these relations.



The General “border problem” in the focus of India and the PRC

It should be noted that the very fact that the two Asian giants are territorially separated by a “Line of Actual Control”, which is about 4,000 km long, rather than by an internationally recognized border, is evidence of serious difficulties in relations between these two nations. Throughout the entire period of independence of both Asian giants, periodically (which is important to emphasize), i.e. with intervals of different duration, one or another aspect of the generalized “border problem” has been discussed by the involved parties at various levels of representation.

A full-fledged Sino-Indian dialogue shows the positive role of Russia

The appearance of each new “break” in this process has always been a sure sign of the beginning of cooling (if not aggravation) of bilateral relations in general. The latest such period, stretching over three or four years, began with the famous incident of summer 2020 in the highlands of Ladakh, during which several dozen border guards from both sides were killed without firing small arms (which is also important to note). This incident had a very negative impact on the entire tapestry of Sino-Indian relations and undoubtedly served as an impetus to accelerate the (long-established) pendulum swing of New Delhi’s foreign policy toward the United States and “Western countries” in general.

However, the Indian government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started to slow this process to a certain extent over the last few months. The fact of resumption of a full-fledged Sino-Indian dialogue shows the positive role of Russia, which used the site of the October BRICS Summit in Kazan, where Mr. Modi and Chinese leader Xi Jinping finally met.

It should be noted here that bilateral contacts did resume several months after the incident in Ladakh, but they were conducted mainly on the lines of the military departments and within the narrowly specialized framework of preventing possible aggravation of the situation in this and other border areas to which there are overlapping claims.

The trend set by the Xi-Modi meeting was continued by the December 18 meeting in Beijing between Wang Yi and India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, who both are actually second-in-command in the leaderships of their respective nations in the field of building a foreign policy strategy. During this meeting, the already generalized “border problem” was discussed. It seems though that the interlocutors went beyond this topic, touching upon a wide range of issues and problems of bilateral relations. In particular, some comments refer to the possible resumption of visits of Indian Buddhists (not excluding direct descendants of Tibetan refugees of the ‘60s) to sacred places in Xizang (as the Tibetan Autonomous Region is mostly called in China today).

We should not expect “miracles” in Sino-Indian relations for the time being

Nevertheless, the fundamental nature of the difficulties in relations between China and India, which have been repeatedly highlighted in the NEO, is more or less regular and irrespective of the emergence of positive aspects of these relations over a certain period of time. Moreover, it would be strange if in our imperfect world the interests of the two new world players did not overlap both in the global political space and in individual countries, first of

all, in those countries that are located in the zones where the above-mentioned “interests” manifest themselves particularly clearly.

These undoubtedly include Nepal and Sri Lanka, which have both recently undergone changes of leadership. In such cases, the question of which of the two leading Asian powers the new leader of the country of “importance”—Nepal or Sri Lanka—will make his first foreign trip to is always significant. It turned out that Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, who took over as Nepal’s Prime Minister once again in June 2024, made such a trip to the People’s Republic of China in early December. Two weeks later, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, elected in September 2024, traveled to India. The former was received by Chinese leader Xi Jinping and the latter by Indian Prime Minister Modi.

In the course of each of these meetings, the guests naturally uttered the words that their hosts, who are now very prominent on the world stage, wanted to hear from them. In particular, Sri Lankan President Dissanayake said at the meeting with Narendra Modi that his country would not allow anyone to use it “as a threat to India”. And these are not accidental words, because the issue of control over the island of Sri Lanka (formerly called “Ceylon”) has always acquired extremely important strategic significance when the struggle between the leading players in the Indian Ocean region at a given historical moment becomes particularly acute. This was the case, for example, during the Second World War.

In general, the very fact of the first foreign visit of the new president of Sri Lanka to India is considered in the latter as an undoubted foreign policy success. At the same time, an article by an Indian expert on the trip of the Nepalese Prime Minister to China, published by the leading Taiwanese (which is noteworthy) newspaper Taipei Times, assesses with obvious misgivings the increasingly noticeable strengthening of Beijing’s position in Nepal. This is essentially at the expense of the weakening positions of India and the United States in this (also extremely important) country.

But China is also suspiciously watching, for example, the process of transformation of the Quad configuration, which includes India in addition to the United States, Japan and Australia. Since this process indicates further strengthening of ties between the participants, as well as the expansion of areas of cooperation. In particular, it is reported about plans to organize joint naval patrols in the Indo-Pacific region in 2025.

Developments in Bangladesh

Among other countries geographically close to India and China, let us once again briefly mention Bangladesh, where a de facto coup d’état took place in early August 2024, as a result of which the country’s permanent (since 2009) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to

flee to neighboring India. It is worth noticing once again the fact of undoubted successes in the development of Bangladesh's economy during her premiership, which, however, could not but be negatively affected by the global economic problems of recent years. In fact, this was the real reason for the growing discontent of the Bangladesh people, which resulted in anti-government student actions.

The new leadership of Bangladesh has repeatedly demanded that the Indian government extradite Sheikh Hasina for trial. She herself remained silent until early December, when for the first time she publicly addressed her supporters from the People's Party (which was at the origin of the Bangladesh independence movement) accusing the current transitional government headed by Muhammad Yunus (Nobel Laureate in the field of Economics) of a "genocide of minorities".

It should be noted in this regard that anti-Hindu actions by some radical Islamist groups took place while Sheikh Hasina herself was in power. This was fought vigorously by her government. Apparently, the government of Mr. Yunus is also trying to act in a similar way, but today it is in conditions of apparently poorly controlled social and social elements.

Naturally, the further development of the situation in this country is being closely watched both in India and China. But it is also watched by Pakistan, which until 1971 included present-day Bangladesh.

Finally, let us once again express our hope that the process of a certain "détente" between the two Asian giants, launched with Russia's assistance, will continue. At the same time, we should not turn a blind eye to the quite discernible and potentially dangerous pitfalls that do not disappear from the route of movement of the two giants in this direction.

While continuing to contribute in every possible way to the development of the emerging positive trends in Sino-Indian relations, special care should be taken in contacts with one or another of the group of "particularly sensitive" countries for China and India, some of which have been outlined above.

Vladimir Terehov, December 30, 2024

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