

Russian Assessments of the U.S. “Return” to the Asia-Pacific Region^{*}

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AT FIRST, in the middle of 2009, Obama administration’s proclaimed “return” of the United States to Asia (precisely to the Asia-Pacific region, APR) did not raise much interest in Russia. Other aspects of Washington’s foreign policy, those directly connected with the U.S.-Russian relations, held far more importance for Moscow. In the first place, hopes for a “reset” in the U.S.-Russian relations, i.e. their comprehensive improvement, were directly connected with the progress reached in negotiations over the strategic offensive weapons, rejection of U.S. plans to deploy elements of the Anti-Missile Defense (AMD) in the Czech Republic and Poland, which had been put forward by the previous administration of George W. Bush, as well as with Washington’s abandonment of the impudent policy of getting into NATO post-Soviet states, namely Georgia and Ukraine. It is not very hard to note that for Russia these priority directions of the bilateral U.S.-Russian relations, in geographic terms, belong to the European or the wider Euro-Atlantic segment of world geopolitics.

Aggravation of situation around the Korean Peninsula in 2010, related to the sinking of the South Korean vessel *Cheonan* and the North Korean shelling of the island Yeonpyeong controlled by the South, apparently became the main driving motive for Moscow

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to dedicate increased attention to the East and Southeast Asia regions. Besides, preparations for the summit of the Organization for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Vladivostok in September 2012 also became conducive to the actualization of plans for rapid economic development of the Far Eastern regions of Russia and more active inclusion of Russia into the economic life and even into the integration processes inside the APR.

During 2011—beginning of 2012, Russia increased its attention with regards to the events and processes in the APR. “Return” of the United States to the region has begun to take shape as an open counteraction to China’s rise, since China’s economy already came second in the world based on its GDP. Up to a certain measure, Washington’s policy of revitalization of old alliances and creating new ones in the APR, all done as means to “contain” China, also affects Russia’s interests. In addition, some of Russia’s citizens have been alerted by China’s vigorous policy conducted towards its neighbors during past three years. Under the conditions of pre-election atmosphere inside the Russian Federation, high-level Russian politicians considered it necessary to make sufficiently comprehensive and clear statements on the issue of country’s position in the world, including the assessment of the contemporary geopolitical situation in the APR.

Related to this, most interesting are the policy program articles written by Vladimir Putin who was elected for six years term as the President of the Russian Federation on March 4, 2012. In the article “Being Strong: Guarantees to National Security of Russia” Vladimir Putin underlined the necessity to undertake “decisive steps towards the strengthening of the unified system of air-space defense of the country,”¹ elaborating that “on the issue of the AMD deployment the U.S. and NATO force us to undertake such measures.” As it is well known, Russia’s proposal to set up a joint AMD system with European countries was turned down, while the United States refuses to confirm in writing that the European segment of the AMD is not directed against Russia. Under these conditions, Russia considers the deployment of the U.S. AMD in Europe (this time in Poland and Romania) as the outright breach of the principle of equal security. Russian Deputy-Minister of Defense Anatoly Antonov

made a remark in his interview to the "Kommersant" newspaper that "components of the global U.S. AMD system in other regions also bear an anti-Russian potential. Earlier they spoke less about it, since the general attention was concentrated on Europe...integration of the European segment of the AMD together with the anti-missile system deployed in Alaska and in the APR increases the comprehensive abilities of the U.S. AMD."²

In whole, noted Vladimir Putin, our country is facing the task of "developing the military potential inside the framework of the policy of deterrence and on the level of defense sufficiency." One of the most important directions here is the full resurrection of the "blue-sea" fleet, above all the Northern and Pacific fleets, as it was concluded by then Prime Minister Putin.³ Explaining the ongoing currency of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, Anatoly Antonov said: "Let it be understood, life without nuclear weapons is wonderful. But we should gradually move towards the non-nuclear world, creating conditions for it."⁴

In his article "Russia and the Changing World,"⁵ dedicated to the ongoing phase and prospects of the Russian foreign policy, Vladimir Putin particularly emphasized the increasing role of the APR in international affairs and presented his viewpoint on the topic of Sino-Russian relations. According to him, "with its stand in the international arena China does not provide any reasons to talk about its desire to dominate. Indeed, China's voice does resonate more confidently in the world and we greet this, since China shares our views on the evolving multi-polar world order." Vladimir Putin described the established model of Sino-Russian relations as promising, ascertaining the existence of

"some roughness" in bilateral relations. Putin made a key remark that "Russia needs flourishing and stable China," while China needs strong and successful Russia. Making special reference to the "instability" of the Russia-U.S. partnership and essentially putting all the blame on the American side, furthermore, Putin also made a remark about the

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readiness to “create a qualitative breakthrough” in the relationship with Washington, but “under the condition that in effect Americans will abide by the principles of equal and mutually respectful partnership.”⁶

Commenting upon Putin’s pre-election articles on Russian foreign policy, Fyodor Lukyanov, one of Russia’s leading political scientists and editor-in-chief of the journal “Russia in Global Affairs” (Россия в глобальной политике), singled out these basic points: a) Russia looks like a country disenchanted by the West, while Putin maintains powerful arsenal of mistrust towards the U.S.; b) Russia began scrutinizing China and Asia as a whole, also doing that through the lenses of development of Siberia and the Far East.⁷

Point about the increased attention dedicated by Russia to Asia was previously confirmed and substantiated by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in his interview to the “Izvestiya” newspaper. According to the minister, increased attention was not the result of the current political state of affairs, but a consecutive implementation of “the strategic line taken to forward positions of our country inside the APR,” including the effective link-up of Russia, above all of the regions of Siberia and the Far East, with the Asia-Pacific process of integration. Clarifying Moscow’s position towards the ongoing “struggle between China and the United States for control over the Pacific” inside the APR, Sergey Lavrov made an appeal not to allow the natural process of increased attention of the international community towards this region to “go down the negative road of sharp competition or, even worse, confrontation.”⁸

Thereby it was emphasized that the joint Sino-Russian initiative for the creation of an “open, transparent, and equal architecture of security and cooperation,” formulated in the Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the All-Round Deepening of the Sino-Russian Relations of Partnership and Strategic Interaction (September 27, 2010), represents a conceptual contribution to the maintaining of stability and security in the APR. Inside this document Russia and China issued a call to all countries in the APR to construct their bilateral and multilateral cooperation by adhering to the generally accepted principles of international

law, such as "respect sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, non-interference into the internal affairs of others; confirm commitment to the principle of equal and indivisible security; confirm the defensive character of their military policies; non-use of military force and avoiding the threat of its use."⁹

Even though this joint Sino-Russian statement, above all, reflected the inherent logic of the developing bilateral strategic partnership and intentions of Moscow and Beijing to deepen their joint actions in the international arena, furthermore, this also emphasized the concern, shared by both countries regarding the security issues in the APR in September 2010. This could be viewed as the indirect response to the U.S. proclamation of "return" into that same region. In essence, Russia and China invited the U.S. not to destabilize the situation in the region, refraining from any exhibition of force. Fact that the official Moscow positions itself in the APR closer to Beijing than to Washington was also confirmed by Sergey Lavrov. On February 4, 2012, while giving a speech at the Munich Conference on Security Issues, he reiterated: "We will never take part in any structures directed at containing China, which is our good neighbor and strategic partner."¹⁰

Compared to the consistent official position of Russia, deliberations among Russian experts have had a much diverse character. Current large number of publications in leading journals dealing with political science and oriental studies in Russia (Russia in Global Affairs, *Международная жизнь* [International Affairs], *Проблемы Дальнего Востока* [Far Eastern Affairs], *Азия и Африка сегодня* [Asia and Africa Today]), as well as specialized web pages (Modern Politics Russia, *Новое Восточное обозрение* [New Eastern Survey]), allow us to single out main directions of analysis and initially classify main approaches of Russian political scientists and oriental studies experts to the issue of the U.S. "return" to the APR.

Russian experts, almost unanimously, recognize the fact of such "return" and they primarily explain it as Washington's desire to stabilize its shaken international position and prestige. Stakes are put on the recreation of a system of traditional alliances in the region, with a possibility of encompassing some new members

too. The integrating factor of this concept is the opposition to a rapidly growing China. Washington also takes into consideration the increasing role of Asian nations in world economy, aspiring to transform the Asia-Pacific vector of its policy into an effective strategic instrument of revival of the U.S. economy. However, there are certain nuances in the considerations of different experts. Sergey Mihnevich is more prone to consider the activity of the U.S. in Asia as a preventive measure. According to him, with time Asian countries might rally around China which “promotes the alternative model of development and has a goal to reform the present international system.” This political scientist thinks that such considerable strengthening of any country that is ready to squeeze the U.S. out from its leading world position is quite unacceptable for the United States. “On this assumption, the U.S. will put maximum effort to foil such turn of events.”¹¹

Fyodor Lukyanov emphasizes the real aspirations of some countries in the region to ensure themselves, with the help of the United States, from certain risks connected with the rise of China, which was in return also utilized by Washington in its own interest. In his interview to the radio station “Voice of Russia” he noted that the main direction of the U.S. diplomatic quest in the APR is concentrating on “strengthening or elevating to a new alliance level relations with those countries which, according to certain historical or geographical reasons, would like to balance China.” These are traditional allies, such as Australia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Japan. There are new countries too, like Vietnam. They also try to include into this hesitant India. According to Lukyanov, “there is sense a ring is being closed around China.”¹²

Editor-in-Chief of the Russian Foreign Ministry Journal “International Life” Armen Oganessian supports the standpoint that “soon we will see the strengthening of previous military-political blocs and, possibly, formation of new ones.” According to him, the basis of the mini-NATO in the APR could be formed by the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, while this organization might “grow into a full-fledged Asian NATO that could also include South Korea, Philippines, and Thailand.” At the same time, Oganessian considers that before the publication

of the article "America's Pacific Century" by Hillary Clinton¹³, Washington "did not have an action plan to reach strategic goals in the APR."

Russian political scientists are reconsidering a range of issues or potential consequences of "the U.S. return to Asia." Perhaps, greatest attention is being dedicated to the current situation and the potential evolution of the Sino-U.S. relations, but also to the situation in the South China Sea, Sino-Japanese dispute over the possession of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands, and the state of affairs at the Korean Peninsula. Specialists on certain concrete issues have been far more active in discussions dealing with these problems than it has been the case with political scientists in general.

As it was noted by Ambassador Viktor Trifonov, Research Fellow at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, "the U.S. return to Asia" was supplemented by further strengthening of the American military presence in the region. On January 6, 2012 at the Pentagon, President Obama expounded the new U.S. military strategy that will be focused on the APR and will be accompanied by a decrease of U.S. military activities in other regions of the world. In general, this strategy implies the overall strengthening of the navy and air-force components of the U.S. policy in the Pacific; further deployment of the regional AMD aimed at East Asia; consolidation of the military bases at Guam and Okinawa; increase in military assistance to the American allies in the APR. As it seems, a new powerful military complex is being established in the Southwest Pacific—stationing of 2,500 U.S. marines in Darwin, Australia, together with attached navy and air-force units. All this activity is directly aimed at China and the South China Sea region where the U.S. have undertaken a course of direct confrontation with PRC.¹⁴ Russian press has actively responded to the news on the expansion of U.S. military presence in Australia. Articles with regards to this subject were published by one of the leading newspapers "Izvestiya," as well as on many internet web-pages. It was also noted that the Russian Foreign Ministry is "focusing on the attempts to flare-up the situation in the APR."¹⁵

We should also shed light on the existing substantial differences in the estimates of Russian experts on the current role of the "Taiwan

factor.” Viktor Trifonov thinks that “Washington is not ready to abandon its line on the Taiwan issue which is still considered to be a very sensitive [issue] for the PRC” and this is corroborated by large sales of the latest American arms to Taiwan by the Obama administration. At the same time, Yana Leksyutina, lecturer at the Faculty of International Relations, University of Saint-Petersburg, emphasizes the process of deep erosion in the U.S.-Taiwan relations as a result of island’s rapprochement with the mainland, thus making “the military cooperation between Washington and Taipei limited to arms sales.” According to her, at present “limits which the White House Taiwan policy is now facing are conditioned by the reluctance demonstrated by island’s authorities.”¹⁶

In general, as it is considered by Andrey Davydov, fellow at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, military-strategic factors, and not the economic ones, are gaining the upper hand in the Sino-U.S. relationship. Both sides have entered into a protracted period of setting-up a model of partnership which also contains elements of rivalry.¹⁷ Probably, these circumstances make Sino-U.S. relations deeply contradictory. Open ambiguity can also be observed in China: positive attitude towards the United States among the Chinese population is falling (according to Pew Research Center, from 58% in 2010 to 44% in mid-2011)¹⁸, while negative assessments of the U.S. policy in Asia exist among Chinese experts. However, official Beijing tries, in every way, to shade the discrepancies in its relationship with Washington, whilst promoting the topic of “generally good bilateral relations.”

Russian experts are also paying a lot of attention to the role exercised by Japan and South Korea in the revival of the U.S.-sponsored military alliances in the APR. Anatoly Syomin, expert on Japan at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, points to the first military agreement in the history of Japan-South Korea relations concluded in January 2011 (General Security of Military Information Agreement и An Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement) which testifies to the U.S. efforts to create a triple alliance directed against China.¹⁹ As for Japan, Syomin portrays it as “Great Britain of the East” willing to become a nexus inside the system of military cooperation in the region that is being set up by Washington.²⁰

On the other hand, Aleksandr Zhyobin, Head of the Center for Korean Studies at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, totally puts the blame on the U.S. for the dramatic increasing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2010. According to him, this was in the interest of those circles in Washington and Seoul that hoped to “accelerate the dissolution of the North Korean regime and establish control over the whole Korean Peninsula, directly aimed at reaching the land borders of China and Russia with its military machine.”²¹ However, by mid-2011 the Obama administration became aware that the tactics of applying direct military pressure against North Korea was unproductive. Therefore, new representative of the Secretary of State on North Korea was named, as well as the new head of the U.S. delegation at the six-party talks on North Korea’s nuclear program, while direct contacts between the U.S. and North Korea were also resumed.²²

A number of Russian experts have analyzed in detail territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and some ASEAN members. According to Yana Leksyutina, these disputes create a favorable environment for Washington to implement its policy of “the U.S. return to Asia.” On one hand, this increases American interactions with ASEAN, while, on the other, this policy attempts to contain China’s growing influence in the region.²³ In the opinion of Vladimir Portyakov, deputy-director of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, lack of concrete support inside the international community for China’s position on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea has poised Beijing to seek compromise solutions. As for one of these compromises—in order to concentrate its efforts on the preservation of China’s sovereignty over the Xisha (Paracel) and Nansha (Spratly) islands, Beijing made concessions on the issue of control of the sea itself.²⁴ On February 29, 2012, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman confirmed this position and said that neither China, nor any other country insisted on the establishment of its sovereignty over the whole South China Sea.²⁵

“U.S. return to Asia,” American military build-up in the region, further complications in Sino-U.S. relations in the East and Southeast Asia regions mainly generated by Washington, all this, without any doubt, infringes upon the interests of Russia. Country’s leadership

has stated its principled position. Moscow sets off from a necessity to preserve and improve its strategic partnership and interactions with China, but at the same time without any intentions to renounce its policy of maintaining constructive relations with the U.S. and West as a whole. One group among Russia's expert community, while observing the developing situation in the Western APR, sees in this "a risk to be drawn into a superpower conflict," as well as a possibility to, following Chinese wisdom, "sit on the top of the mountain and watch the tigers fight."²⁶

Dimitri Trenin, Director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, considers that Moscow should avoid its unilateral orientation on Beijing and needs to deepen its ties with China's neighbors, particularly with India "Asia's second superpower as means of counterbalancing China." He thinks Moscow will preserve its neutral stance towards a number of territorial disputes over China's Eastern and Southern periphery—dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and the South China Sea territorial issues.²⁷

Moscow will preserve its neutral stance towards a number of territorial disputes over China's Eastern and Southern periphery

However, another viewpoint is much more present—necessity of preserving and deepening the course on all-round development of closer ties between Russia and China. Aleksandr Lukin, Vice-Chancellor of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Academy, is of an opinion that "thanks to ties with China and other Asian partners Russia could be at the centre of world influence." China also needs Russia as a geopolitical and economic partner. "Beijing would like to see Russia as a counterbalance to its difficult relationships of partnership-rivalry with the United States and Europe and as a guarantee of its independent foreign policy."²⁸ Head of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, academician Mikhail Titarenko, invariably defends his standpoint that Russia and China "need each other as partners, while their interaction and good-neighborly relations exist as a mutual guarantee of territorial integrity and sovereignty of both countries."²⁹

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- ¹ Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Moscow, February 20, 2012.
- ² Vokrug nashei strany neporstaya obstanovka—zamestitel' ministra oborony ob ugrozakh bezopasnosti RF—Kommersant, Moskva, February 6, 2012.
- ³ Rossiyskaya gazeta, February 20, 2012.
- ⁴ Kommersant, February 6, 2012.
- ⁵ Moskovskie novosti, February 27, 2012.
- ⁶ Moskovskie novosti, February 27, 2012.
- ⁷ Lukyanov, Fyodor, Rossiya v mire, Moskovskie novosti, February 28, 2012.
- ⁸ Full version of the interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov "Rossiya budet stabiliziruyuschim faktorom v ATR," published in the newspaper Izvestiya, January 27 2012 http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newline/65BFD5087E327B44257992001F0CAD.
- ⁹ Sovmestnoe zayavlenie Rossiiskoi Federacii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki o vsestoronnem uglublennii rossiisko-kitaiskih otnoshenii partnerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeistviya, Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka, Moskva, 2010, No. 6, pp. 3-10, here p. 9.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.mid.ru>, February 4, 2012.
- ¹¹ Mihnevich, Sergey, SShA v Aziyatsko-Tihookeanskom regione: liderstvo lyuboi cenoi—<http://modernpolitics.ru/2012/01/ssha-v-aziatsko-tihookeanskom-regione-liderstvo-lyubojj-cenoi/>
- ¹² SShA okruzhayut Kitai vnimaniem—Beseda P. Zhuravlyova s F. Lukyanovym, Radio "Golos Rossii," February 11, 2012—http://rus.ru/radio_broadcast/55813581/65596075.html
- ¹³ Oganesyanyan, Armen, Tihookeanskii vector SShA—"ya pridu i tebya oboimu," Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn', Moskva, 2011, December, p. 43. In quotations are words from a popular Soviet song that were used as the title ("I will come and hug you"). Word "oboimu," grammatically wrong from verb "obnimu" [means I will hug you] was used as a game of words, as it sounds very similar to the surname of the U.S. President Obama. (author's remarks with translator's comment)
- ¹⁴ Trifonov, Viktor, Doklad na Uchenom sovete Instituta Dal'nego Vostoka RAN, January 30, 2012 (unpublished manuscript).
- ¹⁵ Yavlyanskii, Igor', Avstraliya poluchit zaschitu ot Kitaya. Novaya baza dlya 2.5 tysyach pehotincev vyzivaet razdrazhenie v Pekine i voprosy v Moskve, Izvestiya, February 1, 2012.
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- ¹⁷ Davydov, Andrei, Kitaisko-amerikanskii otnosheniya na novom etape: chto vperedii?, Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka, 2011, No. 4, p. 100.
- ¹⁸ Poll was done during the period March 18-May 15, 2011 by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project—<http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower>.
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- ²² Zhyobin, Aleksandr, KNDR: kakim kursom?, Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka, Moskva, 2012, No. 2 (in print).
- ²³ Leksyutina, Yana, Obostrenie napryazhennosti v Yuzhno-Kitaiskom more: vzglyad iz YuVA,

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²⁴ Portyakov, Vladimir, O nekotorykh osobennostyakh vneshnei politiki Kitaya v 2009-2011 gg., Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka, Moskva, 2012, No. 2 (in print).

²⁵ <http://russian.people.com.cn/31521/7744555.html>

²⁶ Gabuyev, Aleksandr, Belyaninov, Kirill, SShA menyayut Blizhnii Vostok na Dal'nii. Amerika podhodit k granicam Rossii so storony Azii, Kommersant, March 13, 2012.

²⁷ Trenin, Dmitri. True partners? How Russia and China see each other.—London, Centre for European Reform, 2012, pp. 46–47.

²⁸ Lukin, Alexander. Solid Basic for Partnership—Russia Beyond the Headlines. Distributed with “South China Morning Post,” Hong Kong, February 29, 2012.

²⁹ Round-table discussion at the journal Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka, “Menyayushchiisya Kitai v menyayushchemsya mire,” Moskva, 2011, No. 1, p. 121.