

Obama Doctrine: Control Over Strategic Sea Lanes To China

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The program manifesto US President Barack Obama voiced in the Australian parliament on November 17 and his statements on January 5 make it clear to everyone that Washington has outlined a new strategy of its foreign policy.

“After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, the US is turning its attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific”, the president said. The decision of commander of US military forces Obama to deploy 2,500 marines in the Northern Territories (an administrative district in Australia, which borders Southern Asia) became the first concrete manifestation of the new course.

The change of priorities portends serious international shifts. It presages the completion of military operations against Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which produced no results, a partial retreat from Iraq and reorientation on new external enemies both real and imaginary.

The US is drawing a bead on the Celestial Empire, which is now implementing functions as a global workshop for foreign companies, including US companies. Instead of active participation in European affairs and re-division of the Middle East (it seems that the US gave this task to Saudi Arabia, which came up with an unexpected initiative to achieve it) Washington chose the creation of tools to hold back the world’s second largest economy. (Provided that the GDP factor is not taken into account.)

In his article for European Energy Review journal, Michael Klare, a professor at Hampshire College and the author of the book with the telling name of “Blood and Oil”, gives the following interpretation of Obama’s Canberra Manifesto: “While administration officials insist that this new policy is not aimed specifically at China, the implication is clear enough: from now on, the primary focus of American military strategy will not be counterterrorism, but the containment of that economically booming land – at whatever risk or cost”.

It seems that Washington decided to take steps in advance to ensure competitive advantages for itself for the time when a strategic military component inevitably emerges in its relations with China. Politicians and the military in the US are getting more and more obsessed with the idea of gaining a footing in the Asia-Pacific region in order to get control over “sea lanes” through which oil and liquefied gas are shipped to China.

Can it be that Washington is concerned about the threat of pirates – those mysterious Somali pirates who emerged from God knows where? Does Washington want to protect

Chinese sea-borne oil supplies in order for the Chinese people to use energy resources for manufacturing of motherboards, sport shoes and toys for children?

Or maybe America hopes to ensure the security of trade operations in the name of the rapidly growing Chinese GDP by patrolling the sea lanes through which China receives raw materials and energy carriers? Not at all! "My guidance is clear," Obama declared in Canberra. "As we plan and budget for the future, we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in this region." In her turn, US State Secretary Hillary Clinton, in an interview with the Foreign Policy magazine, spoke almost in the style of confessional prose that now economically weakened America is not capable of being a dominating power in several regions of the world at the same time.

While America was fighting two wars - in Iraq and Afghanistan - China "had the leeway to expand its influence in the (Asian Pacific) region", Klare notes. "For the first time since the end of World War II, Washington is no longer the dominant economic actor there", which is why in order to maintain its position the US has to "restore its primacy in the region and roll back Chinese influence".

In his turn, William Pfaff, an American political writer in his typical tart-tongued manner wrote that in his manifesto Obama "proclaimed Pax Americana for Asia". For Pfaff this is "absurd", because it will be gradually reduced to "suppressing China's attempt to reclaim the Asian preeminence it held for thousands of years".

What can become an apple of discord, a cause for war between the two giants divided by the Pacific Ocean? Pfaff ponders this question: "A war for industrial domination in the world - but what does it actually mean and what is it worth? Bragging rights who is the top nation? That is what Washington seems to care about". But in the end Pfaff concludes that the only thing the two powers may drift into confrontation over is raw materials.

Over the last few decades the US, which accounts for 5% of the global population, has been consuming about 40% of all natural resources of the planet. At the same time it is becoming more difficult for the West to get access to raw materials, in particular to energy carriers, which are the economy's "circulatory system".

On the one hand, after many years of use traditional oil and gas fields become exhausted, while new "Eldorados" of raw materials are located deep in the permafrost area or on the Arctic shelf, which makes their production much more expensive. There won't be cheap oil and gas anymore.

On the other hand, all over the world Western and transnational energy corporations are losing ground, because the developing countries, where the main energy resources are located, are conducting nationalization of these resources in order to get a guaranteed source of income from exports. Russia is not an exception to the rule; it has learned a lesson from the poor experience of the 1990s when many production share agreements were signed with Western transnational corporations.

Russian authorities did not use any tough measures (there were no corporate raids, no assault landings), everything was done in the form of juridically binding agreements. It is remarkable that our contract partners who produced oil and gas on Sakhalin put their pride in their pockets. They silently agreed to change the one-sided terms of the Sakhalin production sharing agreement, understanding that it was inevitable, and remained in the

project.

The doctrine proclaimed by Obama may lead not only to lawsuits but also to “gunboat diplomacy” of the 19th century variety and “aircraft carrier diplomacy” of the 20th century one. On November 18, before the US president’s speech in Canberra, the “Manila declaration” was signed, which envisaged closer military and technical cooperation with the Philippines. At the same time the White House unveiled plans to supply 24 F-16 jet fighters to Indonesia and Hillary Clinton visited Burma (the first time in 56 years), a country which is in the sphere of China’s vital interests. Moreover, Washington is considering how to intensify military contacts and cooperation in the defense industry with such countries as Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – all of which countries are situated along the sea lanes for shipping oil to China.

The statement that the ongoing rivalry for raw materials is the real motive of US military expansion in Asia can be proved (although not directly) by the following statistics. In 2011, the US consumed 19.6 million barrels of oil daily, which included 9 million barrels of American oil and 10 million of imported oil. Dependency on imported oil was an everlasting headache for Washington. To ensure safe oil shipments the US has maintained relations on preferential terms with the monarchies and authoritarian regimes on the Middle East, equipped the armies and security forces of those countries, trained and brainwashed (when it was possible) local officials, and recruited agents of influence.

Every time when the situation was out of control the US sent limited military contingents to those countries (Lebanon, Somalia), and when there was a threat of an oil blockade (the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991), it switched to full-scale military actions. Such tactics were efficient because the enemies were weak and the US could always rely on the support of its allies. Trans-Atlantic unity always won every time there was a danger to lose access to the Middle Eastern oil, but now the situation has changed.

According to recent statistics, in 2001 China consumed 5 million barrels of oil a day (four times less than the US) and of this amount imported oil accounted for only 1.7 million barrels a day. In 2008, the world’s second largest economy, where the middle class was growing rapidly and more people started to buy cars, consumed 7.8 million barrels a day. It is expected that in 2020 this figure will increase to 13.6 million and in 2035 to 16.9 million, and with domestic production oil demand at 5.3 million barrels, the demand for imported oil will reach 11.6 million barrels. That means that the competition for oil between mega-consumers on the global oil market will become significantly higher.

Part of this oil China can buy from its closest neighbors – Kazakhstan and Russia – but the biggest part of oil exports will come from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. There long sea shipments imply certain risks. According to Michael Klare, “by securing naval dominance of the South China Sea and adjacent waters, the Obama administration evidently aims to acquire the twenty-first century energy equivalent of twentieth-century nuclear blackmail. Push us too far, the policy implies, and we’ll bring your economy to its knees by blocking your flow of vital energy supplies”.

There have been many signs of China’s concern about such development of the situation. Beijing’s attempts to establish close diplomatic and trade relations with Indonesia and Vietnam and also with important oil exporters such as Angola, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and other oil producers look quite symbolic. Pursuing its economic interests, China is also using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): under the auspices of this organization China

is expanding its influence in Central Asia and investing funds into modernization of its technically backward naval fleet. It is not surprising: the strengthening of a military component in international relations is always provocative and usually leads to symmetrical measures, namely to an arms race.

One of the conclusions made by William Pfaff, who recalls the lessons of history, is the following: "Don't start wars with powers being driven by revolutionary enthusiasm and nationalism to claim or reclaim a place in the sun". This is the very recommendation which should be given to the authors of the "Obama doctrine", who are running risks to give birth to all necessary prerequisites for a full-scale Cold War in Asia.

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