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Is the Situation in the Taiwan Strait Deteriorating?

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10/12/2016

Information that appeared in the Taiwanese media on September 20 on the termination of the program to develop medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles designed to strike Shanghai and Beijing was not the only reason to discuss the situation in the Taiwan Strait after the presidential elections that took place on the isle in January 2016, but the most serious and newsworthy one.

It is worth mentioning that Taiwan's program aimed at creating its own missile capability for containing the Mainland was launched immediately after the so-called "third crisis" in the Taiwan Strait, which developed with varying intensity in 1994-1995.

Over the course of this crisis, the PRC demonstrated its willingness to solve the Taiwan problem using military means. For particularly sensitive experts of that time, this was a sign that the historical cycle (that had almost come to an end) had been restarted and had started to acquire a new format with new major participants.

The aforementioned program continued under all the subsequent presidents of Taiwan including Ma Ying-jeou, representing the Kuomintang Party in 2008-2016, who enjoyed the special favour of Beijing. The reason for the (relatively rare) disagreements between the Chinese leadership and President Ma was not so much the varied output of Taiwan's own (quite active) military-industrial complex, but its continuing military and technical cooperation with the United States.

It is important to mention the rise in national identity in all strata of Chinese society. That is why, the Kuomintang Party, an adherent to the principle of the “united China” (in all interpretations of this notion) since the time of Sūn Zhōngshān, is considered much more preferable than the opponent to the Kuomintang – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – by the leadership of the Communist Party of China.

Over the course of the last decade, the DPP has refused to openly discuss the problem of “united China” with Beijing adhering to the opinion that “Taiwan is an independent state, and the Taiwanese are a separate people.”

Thus, when the current leader of DPP Tsai Ing-wen became the President of Taiwan in May 2016, Beijing started to take the “antics” of Ma Ying-jeou and the missile program more seriously. In this respect, the title of the editorial published by the Global Times “Taiwan should give up missile illusion” looks like an explicit warning for Taipei.

Although Tsai Ing-wen has not taken liberties with the “united China” topic (so far) in the style of her predecessor – the former leader of DPP (and the President of Taiwan in 2000-2008) Chen Shui-bian, her real attitude on the key political problem of PRC concerning the status of Taiwan is of no doubt in Beijing.

Therefore, the political relations between PRC and Taiwan have deteriorated to the lowest level over the last months, demonstrated by the termination of contacts between the official government bodies created at that time to develop comprehensive relations “between the two sides” of the Taiwan Strait.

The long-standing problem concerning the symbols, which Taiwanese athletes are permitted (by Beijing) to participate under in international competitions, is taking on a serious nature, as is the issue of Taiwan’s participation in the work of various international organizations.

For example, China’s representative in the International Paralympic Committee (of the games that just came to a close in Rio de Janeiro) demanded that members of the Taiwan team be forced to replace the badges on their outfit and the flag that they performed under.

Beijing has blocked Taiwan’s participation in the next session of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) from September 27 to October 7 in Montreal, where the ICAO headquarters is located.

However, both parties are trying to maintain the (impressive) level of economic ties, which, however, tend to decrease though usually due to objective reasons unrelated to current policy.

Of the major reasons, the main one is driven by China gradually losing its major competitive advantage that was bolstered by the low level of salary inside the country (until recently), which contributed to the inflow of external investments (which includes from Taiwan), and the transfer of production facilities there. Chinese workers are not willing to promote the greatness of their country for free any longer.

As for the information spread in the media of Taiwan regarding its (alleged) termination of its program for missile development aimed at a strike on Chinese territory, it was refuted by the official representatives of the President's administration and the Ministry of Defense of Taiwan on September 20.

Nonetheless, the very appearance of such information may be indicative of the Taiwanese leadership's reflections on the viability of continuing the program.

Amid growing financial problems everywhere, the following question seems to be quite reasonable: What would the Taiwanese leadership set to gain from the possession of a certain (obviously limited) amount of missiles of this kind (except for additional "pain in the neck")?

Without nuclear warheads (occasional discussions take place regarding the possibility of Taiwan developing its own nuclear weapons is only ill-founded speculation), the future arsenal of such missiles would count for nothing in a hypothetical full-scale armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Therefore, we can not exclude that the aforementioned leak to the press is an attempt by Taipei to disguise the (possible) termination of an expensive and pointless military program as a "goodwill gesture" towards Beijing.

However, the new Taiwan leadership is unlikely to "sell" China the specified information (at least, at any significant price). In any case, this is proven by the content of the mentioned article in the Global Times.

Finally, it should be noted that Taiwan is the key link in the chain of zones (stretching from the Korean Peninsula to the Strait of Malacca), which seem to evoke the Balkans of the modern world order. Until recently, it has been a (relative) "backwater" in an increasingly stormy sea of political problems constantly arising in the region.

It would be ideal if Taiwan continued being an exception despite all the aforementioned and other negative trends. At least relatively so.