On the Visit made by the Australian Prime Minister to Japan

In a series of notable recent events taking place in the Indo-Pacific region, a prominent spot was occupied by the visit made by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Japan on November 17, where he held talks with his counterpart, Yoshihide Suga. Following that, a “Joint Statement” was issued, whose text can be found here. However, most of commentators’ attention was drawn to the “fundamental agreement” reached during negotiations on the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA).

But before dwelling briefly on what both of these documents contains, it is worth first noting that the meeting between the prime ministers took place in a person-to-person format, and not remotely, as has been observed for most similar intergovernmental events over the year that is drawing to an end. Apparently, not all items planned for discussion on the agenda could be entrusted to global communications networks, and the health of top officials from both countries had to be exposed to a certain amount of risk.

At the same time, as can be seen in the photo taken by The Associated Press, when making direct contact both high-ranking statesmen showed some lightheartedness regarding following WHO recommendations in the conditions of a growing “second wave” of the coronavirus pandemic. This stands in contrast to various ministerial (meaning one level below that) meetings held in recent months, whose participants complied fairly well with these recommendations, and specifically they put masks on their faces. And sometimes with national symbolism present.

That is strange: it seems that people more senior in the bureaucratic hierarchy should set an example of exercising discipline to their subordinates, and not vice versa. Moreover, the topic of combating the coronavirus pandemic runs throughout the entire text of the Joint Statement. This is customary for various kinds of intergovernmental events held in recent times.

However, the content of the document itself, of course, is not limited to this topic alone. In the context of this article, paragraphs 8-11 were the ones that primarily drew attention to themselves; these designate the place in the general system of bilateral relations of all the items that (will be) included in the RAA Agreement. It is worth noting that this document seems to be moving into the final stages of a six-year development period.

In the first two phrases of the comment made by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the future RAA Agreement, versions of the word “history” are used twice. First, it is called “historical”, and second the very fact that it was adopted, according to Morrison, will become “pivotal moment in the history of Japan-Australia ties”.

And there are certain grounds for the presence in these phrases of a certain bombast that has to do with using these words. At least in terms of (again) Japan’s postwar history. Since, as the Australian Prime Minister himself notes, for Japan the only precedent of this kind throughout its entire post-war period has, so far, been the American-Japanese “Security Agreement” signed in the distant past, in 1960.

However, it is worth making two points. First, since it dramatically expands the format and scale of interaction for the armed forces in both countries (which, generally speaking, has been going on since 2007, when Japanese-Australian relations began to be marked by the term “semi-allied”), the “RAA” is unlikely to contain any binding provisions. However, those last items is present in any document that forms the foundation of a full-fledged military and political alliance. For example, they are in that very same American-Japanese “Agreement of 1960”. It is true that they are far from equitable for all participants; that is touched upon a bit below here.
Second, the RAA is subject to ratification by the parliaments in both countries. And even in the summer this year Japan predicted serious resistance to adopting it on the part of the opposition, which has been consolidating itself in recent months. At the very least, serious amendments to the draft document are possible, which will be presented for parliamentary debate.

And no matter what Japanese society, which has an anti-war mindset in general, will not accept the prospect of entering into another full-fledged military and political alliance that entails binding provisions. Incidentally, pursuant to the “Agreement of 1960”, Japan is obliged solely to allot land and provide certain material and financial support to the armed forces contingent fielded by its de facto defender in the form of the United States.

If some kind of military troubles arise with an ally (for example, in Guam, Hawaii, or on the American continent), then Japan simply does not have the right to help them using its own armed forces. This is due to the restrictions laid down in 1947 (they say by the Americans themselves) in its current Constitution. Most Japanese are quite satisfied with this comfortable situation, and the previous Prime Minister S. Abe could not sway this sentiment. And for his political life he had set the specific goal of diminishing the significance of the abovementioned restrictions. We will see how that turns out for his successor.

Returning to the content of the latest Japanese-Australian “Joint Statement”, it is worth reiterating that the future “RAA Agreement” took center stage in that. Clauses 8-9 in the first document state that adopting the second one means that the state of the “Special Strategic Partnership” in bilateral relations (established in July 2014) “rises to a new level”. In part this is because the “RAA Agreement” will become “a reliable basis for fulfilling the obligations borne by both countries to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as further increase cooperation” between them.

Clause 10 defines the various areas where the RAA can be applied in practice. Clause 11 expresses the intention to undertake efforts to “finalize” it and then ratify it “as soon as possible”.

From the other positions outlined in the Joint Statement, clause 2 called attention to itself by confirming the intention of the parties to “develop coordination” for various activities in a triangular political and strategic configuration with US participation. Satisfaction is also expressed with the results of the second meeting that took place earlier in Tokyo between the foreign ministers in the countries that take part in the so-called Quad, which is formed by the USA, Japan, Australia, and India.

The text of the “Joint Statement” is filled with rhetoric that has become well-established in recent years, and which implicitly indicates the source (China) of various kinds of regional troubles. Which is supposedly motivating the political and military activity of those who are, to put it mildly, not very big fans of it, and one of their acts was the meeting discussed between the prime ministers of Japan and Australia.

And yet, the post-war specifics inherent in how Japan is positioned in the international arena, which still persist to a certain extent, as well as some circumstances and recent events in the Indo-Pacific region, make it possible to be skeptical about the prospect of forming a full-fledged military and political alliance here that takes on an anti-Chinese orientation. Specifically, that same Japanese-Australian one.

We should point out, first of all, the most important of these events, which was the signing of an agreement on establishing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). By the same token, this laid the foundation for forming the world’s largest free trade zone, with the participation of ten ASEAN member countries, as well as the PRC, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. This step was accomplished two days before Scott Morrison’s trip to Tokyo.

This means that both participants in the Japanese-Australian talks under discussion wound up in the same project with the country (PRC) against which they had been spinning “military intrigues” in Tokyo (without, of course, publicly mentioning that). Now it will be significantly more complicated to “keep that up”. Certain positive shifts in the political sphere of US-Chinese relations, after a new administration arrives in Washington, cannot be ruled out.

In the meantime, the activity of its ill-wishers is being watched with understandable interest in the PRC, where they point to trends running in the opposite direction in the regional situation formed by the creation of the RCEP, and the results following the Japanese-Australian talks.

Incidentally, the illustration for the abovementioned article in The Global Times in the form of a photograph during speeches given to reporters by Yoshihide Suga and Scott Morrison (taken one instant before the AP correspondent “clicked”) fairly accurately reflects the current differences in the attitude taken toward China on the part of
negotiation participants. And different attitudes toward each of them exist - something which Beijing is demonstrating today.

At the end of November, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will go to Tokyo with the intention of lending support to what was positive that was outlined in the policy toward China taken by the previous Japanese Prime Minister S. Abe. The attitude toward the increasingly ridiculous anti-Chinese course charted by the S. Morrison government is displayed in an illustration for another article in The Global Times on a closely related topic.

To sum up, it is worth noting that the anti-Chinese fuss in recent times is increasingly creating an impression that seems absurd (especially against the background of catastrophic global problems), since for its initiators (apparently and for some reason) the process is more important than the result.

Therefore, the author believes that sooner or later, during a respite from all this political noise, a catchword by one character in an old film will resound: “They played in vain, as it were”.

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