The Latest Forums for the “Quad” and the Munich Security Conference

In terms of assessing the situation in the Indo-Pacific region, two recent events that happened over a one-day interval (February 18 and 19) are especially noteworthy. These were the online forum held between the foreign ministers of Australia, India, the United States, and Japan (that form the so-called “Quad”), and the Munich Security Conference.

The participants in the Munich Conference were mainly NATO member states, as well as some leaders in other prominent countries around the world that were “specially invited”. China was not among the latter, which has significance in the current world political situation. Even though in recent years the PRC has been taking part in the work performed at the Davos Forum, meaning a certain kind of “economic” counterpart to the conference in Munich.

The central issue that the political game in the IPR revolves around has to do with the outlook for how US-Chinese relations transform under the new US administration. In the absence of any specific actions taken by Washington in regard to China, the rhetoric delivered by US representatives during both of these events is of particular interest. Which, of course, does not mean in any way that what the other participants said is of secondary importance.

It is worth stating right away that in the state of general uncertainty in which US foreign policy still remains in general, and in the IPR in particular, neither of these events particularly produced any noticeable elements of
As far as the foreign ministers in the Quad member states are concerned, they already sat down at the negotiating table in Tokyo fairly recently (on October 6 last year), where the US was represented by Mike Pompeo. Initially, it seemed back then that once again nothing specific would follow beyond the ritualistic, collective performance of keeping the “symbol of faith” for the Quad participants by adhering to the principle of “freedom of access” to maritime traffic routes in the IPR (and it is clear who is “threatening” those).

But one month later all four Quad members were involved in the naval Exercise Malabar for the first time in the Bay of Bengal. In general terms, exercises under this name have been held since the early 1990s. However, with a one-time exception in 2007, they have taken a bilateral American-Indian format. Starting in 2014, Japan became a permanent participant. And starting in 2020 Exercise Malabar acquired a quadrilateral structure.

In terms of assessing the prospects for transforming the Quad from its current forum into a full-fledged military and political arrangement, the fact that the exercises Malabar-2020 were held can be defined as “this is already at least something”. But it is nothing more, since the very factor of uncertainty remains in the relations each of the Quad members has with the PRC, meaning with the object initially used to “hone” this arrangement.

It is worth reiterating that the main contribution to what is generating this uncertainty is being made by the new US administration, where it would seem the same situation (as with its predecessors) is replicated in which a noticeable inconsistency exists in what was said about China by the president and the secretary of state.

A statement from Ned Price, the press secretary at the State Department, about the latest forum between the foreign ministers in the Quad’s member countries held on February 18, gives the entire list of grievances (in particular, on the situation in Myanmar) that was presented two weeks before by the same Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi. These innovations included an “affirmation” by the Quad’s participants that they intend to hold ministerial-level meetings “at least once per year”, and “regularly” at the level of deputy ministers.

That message (just like the one conveyed in the telephone conversation between Antony J. Blinken and Yang Jiechi on February 5) does not in any way outline any of the possible areas for at least some interaction between the United States and the PRC. However, those opportunities were pointed out by President Joe Biden, both in the course of previous public statements, during a telephone conversation with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and in his speech at the Munich conference.

The content of this rather voluminous speech was superimposed by the dense shadow of the generalized slogan “America is back” - something which was at the heart of Joe Biden’s election rhetoric. In addition, the abovementioned state of uncertainty also applies to the question of the specific content inherent in this slogan.

An article in the Chinese newspaper Global Times on this topic was accompanied by an informative (as always) illustration. The latter demonstrates the state of uncertainty about what will happen after “Biden” sits down at the political game table in a chair he himself has brought to it.

Pay attention to the expression on the faces of A. Merkel and E. Macron. It is as if they are sending a signal: “Basically, nobody has been waiting for you. But if you have come (“returned”), then behave yourself considering what has happened at the game table in the last four years, when you ‘were making America great again’. And among everything that “happened” and was an unpleasant surprise for Washington, it is worth highlighting the agreement that was signed at the very end of last year (after many years of difficult talks): the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

It is unlikely that the United States was very happy about the intention of the United Kingdom, its closest European ally, that has already been expressed this year to submit an official application for membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The CPTPP, which started operations on January 1, 2019, so far includes 11 countries in Asia and the Americas. This association was created with the aim of forming a collective free trade zone for participating countries. It is worth remembering that former US President Donald Trump, with his first executive order after his inauguration in January 2017, withdrew the United States from the TPP (the predecessor of the current CPTPP).

The Quad forum and Munich conference took place in this kind of completely new context. During his speech at the second of these two events, Joe Biden specifically recalled how, having attended a similar conference “on his own as a professor” two years ago, he first promised its participants that “the US would return”. And the very fact that he
appeared in Munich as an official, the president of the Europeans’ main ally, should bear witness to the fulfillment of his own promises.

What is described above is, however, one of the potential variations for the “genuine mood” for how the Europeans feel about this.

Besides “strong support” for NATO (pronounced twice), which was voiced against the backdrop of a “variety of challenges” for Western allies, and “global shifts” in the world order, he declared the need for “defense around the world” and “modernizing our defense capabilities”. Nevertheless, as in the speech on January 10 at the Pentagon, he emphasized “the priority of diplomacy”, and that the administration’s activity is geared toward “ensuring peace for all peoples”.

The US President called on allies for “joint long-term competition with China,” which is expected to be “tough”. Just like during the interview he gave CBS television on February 7, he again accused the PRC of violating various kinds of “rules”. Especially in the area of international commercial activity. And now, “Chinese companies” are expected to adhere to these “rules”.

The propaganda attacks over recent years directed towards the Chinese leadership owing to the situations in the country’s outlying regions and Hong Kong were continued in this speech given by the US president (in an implicit form) with the message about intending “to resist those who want to monopolize and normalize repression”.

However, this diatribe was also undoubtedly targeted toward Russia because of recent events in Russia’s domestic political field. This is confirmed by the subsequent assertion about “Kremlin attacks on our democracy and the transformation of corruption into a weapon”.

On the whole, it is worth repeating that the results of both the Quad minister-level forum and the latest Munich security conference did not greatly clarify the issues in the specifics of American foreign policy for the near future, or how the situation in the key Indo-Pacific region would develop.

In this regard, the problem of the prospect of the Quad transforming into an “Asian NATO” takes on momentous form. Both events discussed here do not yet provide grounds to confidently forecast whether a full-fledged military and political organization in the IPR will originate in the years ahead.

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