Senkaku /Diaoyu Islands Issue Discussed at US-Japan 2+2 Meeting

During the visit to Japan (as well as South Korea) by US Secretaries of State and Defense, the scheduled US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) meeting took place in Tokyo on March 16 of this year. It is worth noting once again that engaging with one another in such a format is indicative (with rare exceptions) of a great deal of trust between the countries involved.

The aforementioned statement applies to the relations between the United States and Japan, whose “2+2” partnership has existed for more than a decade. For the United States, the collaboration in such a format is one of the main means of fostering ties with its key ally in Asia-Pacific, which is turning into the epicenter of world-wide political power shifts. This region is also home to USA’s primary geopolitical rival, China.

The fact that Japan was the first country to be visited by two high-ranking members of the new US administration underscores the crucial role played by Japan in the current climate. Lending further support to the aforementioned viewpoint is the fact sheet entitled “Reaffirming the Unbreakable US-Japan Alliance” issued by the US Department of State before the visit to Japan.

The mere fact of its publication as well as contents, sub-divided into five themed topics each with its bulleted points, also indicates that nowadays the United States has assigned a special role to Japan on the foreign policy stage. The aforementioned document reiterates that Japan hosts the largest contingent of US forces outside the United States.

In addition, the following words from the text “The United States’ commitment to the defense of Japan is absolute” are worthy of note. Some reporters expressed particular interest in the affirmation in the fact sheet that “the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security”, whose
first version was signed as far back as 1951 in San Francisco after the signing of the Treaty of Peace (which ended the state of war between Japan and each of the Allied Powers). The latest version of the former was amended in 1960.

It is worth reminding our readers that the recently escalating tensions over the islands due to existing disagreements between Japan and the PRC (where these territories are referred to as Diaoyu Islands) are nowadays one of the main causes for concern in the region. They are particularly noticeable on account of the de-escalation in yet another volatile region in the Indo-Pacific, located in the mountainous parts of the Sino-Indian border.

The joint statement issued by the United States and Japan at the end of the aforementioned 2+2 meeting focused on the Senkaku /Diaoyu Islands issue. In fact, the document includes essentially similar statements on this topic to those made in the fact sheet from the US Department of State, cited earlier in the article.

Reports on overall outcomes of the latest US-Japan 2+2 meeting and (particularly) on the contents of the joint statement issued at the end of it convey the seemingly immutable nature of the statements expressing USA’s unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan including the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands.

Still, a crucial point, i.e. the United States’ official position on territorial disputes involving Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea as well as Taiwan and its archipelago in the South China Sea, appears not to have been taken into account. In fact, the USA’s stance on the issue is paradoxical, as the country has actually not taken one.

A daily press briefing in 2012 with Victoria Nuland, the Spokesperson for the US Department of State at the time, which took place after the Japanese government bought the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands from their private owner, lends support to the aforementioned viewpoint. The purchase marked the start to rapid deterioration of Sino-Japanese ties in general and, particularly, in relation to these islands. In 2012, a pushy journalist was unable to get any concrete answers from Victoria Nuland about the US stance on the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands issue.

Washington’s official position (i.e. of not actually having one) with regards to disputes over territories located in the vicinity of the PRC (the treaty signed in San Francisco did not address their status) is accompanied by a warning against any attempts to resolve these conflicts in a unilateral manner and, especially, by force, which could challenge the existing status quo. In fact, this caveat is included in the aforementioned fact sheet from the US Department of State and the joint statement.

The absence of an official stance on unresolved territorial disputes together with the warning to those who may attempt to change the status quo are at the heart of Washington’s “circumstances-based policy” in relation to its regional allies as well as its key geopolitical rival. In other words, it offers the United States a wide range of options on how to exert influence on any of these nations.

For instance, the US took advantage of this ability in 2015-2016 when Japan, which was intent on improving its relations with the Russian Federation, took too long (in the opinion of US leadership) to support the sanctions imposed against Russia over Crimea. In the meantime, the White House chose not to affirm that the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands fall within the scope of Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Only at the end of April 2016, i.e. after the Japanese government decided to impose the aforementioned sanctions, did President Barack Obama state that the territories were covered by the agreement.

Nowadays, the changing climate in the Indo-Pacific region and the entire world has prompted the US leadership to make their position on the territorial dispute over the islands in question more concrete. The key transformations taking place involve China (as mentioned previously), and according to reports from leading media outlets, discussions during the Tokyo meeting centered on the PRC and the rising tensions in the East and South China Seas. In addition, the aforementioned joint statement includes serious concerns expressed by US and Japanese counterparts about “recent disruptive developments in the region, such as the China Coast Guard law”.

Still, it is worth noting that the new US administration’s foreign policy course is still evolving. And the tough anti-China stance taken by the former administration, especially towards the end of Donald Trump’s presidential term, can not but impact it.

In addition, for now, the author can only discuss policies pursued by the US Department of State and not the country as a whole (and this caveat also applied to the former US administration). In fact, US Congress can easily limit US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s room for maneuver on the international arena.

Hence, we could be in for some surprises in the future when it comes to the world power’s foreign policy course. in
relation to the entire Indo-Pacific region as well as China. It is possible that as the foreign policy course continues to evolve, at some stage, the United States may choose to “forget” its previous statements on the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands issue.

The challenges that the USA faces in the region include its unsuccessful attempts to establish a trilateral alliance (the United States-Japan-South Korea) over a number of years. The main reason for the failure stems from the far from amicable ties between the ROK and Japan. And the leadership of both nations will probably have a hard time eloquently explaining what they dislike about their neighboring country. Issues involving the Liancourt Rocks islands and comfort women are often mentioned in such a context.

However, in the author’s opinion, all of these problems are relatively insignificant while the actual reasons for the animosity are rooted in history and come up at an “opportune time” during internal political struggles, particularly in South Korea. Either way, the visits to Tokyo and Seoul by two high-ranking members of the US administration did not (and could not have) add (added) anything new to USA’s relations with its two key allies. In its article, China’s Global Times described fairly accurately (and most likely, with great satisfaction) the negative aspects of USA’s role in the United States-Japan-South Korea “triangle”.

At the end of the trip to Japan and the ROK, the two high-ranking US officials each continued with their own journeys. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin went on to New Delhi to meet with his Indian counterpart, while Antony Blinken flew to the capital of Alaska, Anchorage, in order to take part in negotiations with a delegation from China’s leadership.

And each of these trips deserves a separate report.

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