QUAD-2 is Created: Has India Left the Geopolitical Crossroads Behind?

The announcement of the October 18 video meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Israel, India, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States has not garnered much attention. Meanwhile, it may well be a landmark in the transformation of the world’s political map taking place before our very eyes. First of all, some clarification of what is going on and what can be expected in the near future is required.

Briefly about the event. In the second half of October, a video meeting took place with a four-day visit to Israel by India’s Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and his negotiations with his counterpart Yair Lapid. Yair Lapid was appointed in June of this year as Israeli Foreign Minister by its new Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett. Two of the participants, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Yair Lapid, were in Jerusalem, while the other two, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Anthony Blinken, remained in their capitals.

It is alleged that the very idea of such a meeting was discussed a week earlier in Washington during the visit of the same Yair Lapid to the USA. At that time, in particular, there were trilateral talks between the Foreign Ministers of the US, Israel, and the UAE. In other words, the video-meeting of the New QUAD, already designated in the press by the familiar abbreviation QUAD, but with the addition of the number “2” probably had been discussed in advance and was not spontaneous.
It was hardly surprising for the Indian minister, who arrived in Israel to discuss bilateral relations, which have long been developing quite successfully, especially regarding military-technical cooperation.

A US State Department summary of the event states that participants “discussed expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation, and increasing maritime security.” Reference is also made to the problem of combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally speaking, QUAD-1, whose two members (India and the United States) are now also part of the “second edition” of the QUAD, has previously identified approximately the same topics for joint work. The notable difference from the “first quad” is due to the other two parties, the UAE and Israel, which signed a landmark document called the Abraham Accords in September 2020. Therefore Israel has established normal relations with a third Arab country, expanding space for its involvement in the entire region of the Middle East, which until recently was entirely hostile to the Jewish state. The fact that Israel is now also participating in Quad-2 will undoubtedly contribute to a dramatic expansion of this space.

And yet, the main thing that draws attention in the formation of both quadrilateral configurations is the presence of two participants in a narrow pool of leading world players, i.e., the United States and India. Especially the second of these, referring to the transition into action of a long-standing trend to reduce both Washington’s presence abroad and its commitments to allies and partners, which is one of the main characteristics of the process of radical transformation of the world order, being talked about everywhere today. New centers of power and attraction are emerging in the “liberated” political spaces. The role of one of them is, quite reasonably, claimed by India. It is to it that the outgoing current hegemon would like to “hand over the position” in South Asia. And in particular, with this trend in mind, it is worth noting that the second QUAD with Indian participation has already been formed.

One could reasonably expect a similar “transfer of position” to Japan, mainly in East Asia. And here, it seems crucial to mention once again another no less significant trend in contemporary global politics associated with the process of comprehensive Japan-India rapprochement. This, in particular, was reflected in the fact that QUAD-1 was formed.

One of the main motives behind this process is that China is emerging as the second global power and is perceived by New Delhi and Tokyo as a source of threat to their national interests. Again, the anti-Chinese orientation of the Japan-India tandem could, if desired, be interpreted as a successful transfer of position for the US in the Indo-Pacific region, the key one at the current stage of the Great World Game.

But each of the participants in this tandem has diverse and deep-rooted problems in its relations with China. That is, the mentioned motive has a much more serious background than someone’s (American) intrigues. For India, for example, this motive was instrumental in finding new external partners after losing its mainstay of the Cold War period, which was then the USSR.

The gradual rapprochement first with the United States and then with Japan was expected. In the Indian expert community, intense discussions have been taking place on this topic in recent years. They focus on positioning the country in the international arena amidst problems with China and its regional ally Pakistan. An offshoot of the above-mentioned discussion is the prospect of a “war on two fronts,” periodically brought up to date by military analysts and the country’s top generals.

Earlier NEO has noted that the divergence of opinions among leading Indian experts on the topic of the country’s foreign policy positioning boils down to the issue of the extent and depth of India’s rapprochement with the US and Japan. It also discusses its participation in various interstate configurations (both existing and potentially possible) of obviously anti-Chinese orientation.

In connection with the latter, it’s appropriate once again to outline the author’s position regarding the just formed, as it seems, military-political configuration of AUKUS. It is unlikely to go beyond a business project with the target of two leading Anglo-Saxon countries taking out a very financially large-scale project from France, which for some reason got it from a third not so leading Anglo-Saxon country. Regarding the prospects of expanding the US military presence in Australia, it is also quite possible within the framework of the long-existing bilateral alliance relationship.

As for the prospect of relations between India and China, such a reputable expert as Brahma Chellaney once again came out with the most radical positions, having published an article titled “Save Taiwan” on October 11. Discussing the Taiwan problem, which is the most painful for Beijing, the author, in contrast to the official position of Washington, denies that the island belongs to historical China and calls on the US and Japan to take measures to
prevent the island from being annexed to the mainland.

Raja Mohan, a leading Columnist associated with The Indian Express, takes a more restrained stance towards China, seeing it as one of the sources of problems emanating from India’s neighboring countries. He assesses the fact of QUAD-2 talks as “an important turning point in New Delhi’s relations with the Middle East.”

Career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service, M.K. Bhadrakumar, who served in the Indian Embassy in Moscow for a long time, while mentioning “confronting China and the rise of political Islam” as the main challenges for the country, leaves the question “Is the Indian foreign-policy ship changing course?” without a clear answer.

Incidentally, despite all the mutual political filibustering of recent years, there has been a sharp rise in trade between India and China this year, as assessed in cheerful tones by China’s Global Times. It fits well with the general, outwardly strange picture of the state of affairs in the Indo-Pacific. Politicians of the opposing parties nearly curse each other while businessmen develop mutually beneficial cooperation without excessive excitement.

Among other things, this circumstance allows the author to believe that India, one of the major players in modern global processes, in the course of changing its positioning in the international arena, has not yet crossed the invisible line beyond which no positive change in its relations with its great neighbor, China, could be expected.

And this is no minor issue in our world, which seems to have gone seriously insane in the aforementioned “transformation” process.

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