Kishida and Morrison Sign the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement

On January 5, Reuters, citing Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, reported the signing of the so-called Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with his Japanese counterpart Kishida. This event is certainly one of the most significant ones in the process of development of the political and strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific region.

The November 2020 visit to Japan by the same Morrison was a milestone in the successful conclusion of years of bilateral negotiations to conclude the RAA. Then, during a meeting with Yoshihide Suga, the predecessor of Japan’s current Prime Minister Suga, the two sides came to an “agreement in principle” that it was time to finally agree on all the contentious points in the document that would establish the RAA.

The latter should be an important addition to the format of bilateral relations in the field of defense and security, which since 2007 have been referred to as “semi-allied.” Note, however, that even after the RAA enters into force (discussed below), these relations will not necessarily become a full-fledged military-political alliance where its participants are bound by obligations (spelled out in a corresponding document) in the event of threats to any of them in the area of defense and security. Such commitments are present, for example, in the documents establishing NATO and the US-Japanese political and military alliance.

At the same time, the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s brief announcement about the signing of this document draws attention to the passage, indicating that with its entry into force the sides intend to “further promote bilateral security and defense cooperation,” increasing their contribution to “the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific
In other words, the RAA may actually be an important, albeit still intermediate, step on the road to establishing a full-fledged alliance between Japan and Australia. In this connection, recall the words Morrison said a year ago, stating that the very fact of the forthcoming signing of this document would be “a pivotal moment in the history of Japan-Australia ties.” He also drew a certain parallel with the US-Japanese “Security Treaty of 1960.”

This, however, so far sounds rather like an exaggeration, because, as follows from the extensive (29 pages) document of the RAA, it solves the rather intermediate task of “creating a legal framework” for the presence of units (as well as accompanying civilians) of the armed forces of one of the parties “visiting” the territory of the other. And, as follows from Article 6 of this document, the format of the mentioned “framework” is rather strict for the “visiting forces,” designed to exclude the possibility of them stepping outside said framework during their stay in the territory of a partner. Provisions are made in particular for the host partner to fully identify each of the members of the visiting group.

Note the absence of the word “China” both in the text of the document under discussion and in the comments of the two prime ministers made immediately after the act of signing it. However, “independent experts” hardly hesitate to link the motivation for the emergence of the RAA with the fact of China’s transformation into a regional and global power.

To comment on this event, it is appropriate once again to express bewilderment as to why this fact is viewed with apprehension by the current Australian government, whose anti-Chinese motives result in quite tangible economic losses.

At the same time, for Japan’s leadership, the signing of the RAA fits into the overall process of the country’s return to the table of the Great Game as one of its leading participants. In particular, it corresponds to the trend towards the expansion of its comprehensive (including military) presence in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. It seems quite obvious that it is Japan who will get the most use out of this document. The fact of its signing also fits in with the creeping process of diluting the significance of the anti-war Article 9 of the Japanese constitution as it stands.

It is remarkable that commentators link the RAA Agreement with the beginning of the so-called Quad, which, in addition to Japan and Australia, also includes the United States and India. Note, however, that the Quad is not a formalized military-political alliance and its practical activities have so far focused mainly on the “humanitarian” sphere, conditioned primarily by the task of combating COVID-19.

But the motive of opposing the spread of the China’s political influence in the IPR can also be seen in the Quad. Whether it will become the core of the “Asian NATO” that Washington has been pursuing for nearly two decades seems to depend critically on India’s positioning in the game unfolding in the region.

So far, despite the obvious shift towards Washington in New Delhi’s foreign policy in recent years, the country’s leadership has refrained from participating in the formation of a binding military-political alliance with an anti-Chinese orientation. Whether this positioning of Delhi will continue will depend entirely on the development of Sino-Indian relations in their “full format,” as well as in such important “details” as the continuing mutual territorial claims.

Comments on the signing of the RAA mention the recent acronym AUKUS, made up of the initial letters of three countries (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) that formed this configuration for the purpose of coordinating military activities in the IPR. So far, the motives of its emergence are not very clear, considering that this “trinity” is already connected by paired military-political alliances. Even without AUKUS, the US has long felt at home in Australia (Darwin, Perth).

Perhaps this configuration is also seen as a potential core of the same “Asian NATO.” But this prospect also depends entirely on India and Japan joining AUKUS. Again, with respect to India, this development looks unlikely.

But it is equally unclear for Japan, whose leadership, on the way to increasing the importance of the military component in its foreign policy, is confronted with a generally anti-war attitude among its own population. Its people (much like the people of Germany) learned from experience that it is possible to achieve tangible political goals in the international arena without breaking the ribs of its neighbors, and without risking their own.

Just wait and see how the ratification process of the RAA, rather limited in its scope and military and political
significance, will go through Parliament. The said process is provided for by its Article 29, according to which the document enters into force five days after the exchange, through diplomatic channels, of communications on the completion of the relevant “internal procedures bringing this Agreement into force.” A year ago it was predicted that at least some kind of amendment might appear in it during the debate in the Japanese parliament. This would mean a subsequent (likely just as lengthy) discussion by the parties on a new version of the text of this document.

If this process succeeds, the RAA will, once again, confirm the trend toward an increasing military component in the overall expansion (or, rather, “return”) of Japan’s all-round presence in the IPR.

It is also worth noting that the signing of the Japan-Australia RAA coincided with another US-Japan 2+2 meeting, that is, with the participation of foreign and defense ministers of both countries.

This, however, is another story for another time.

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