Another US-Japan 2+2 Meeting

The regular US-Japan meeting (2+2) (officially called the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee) in January this year, involving the foreign and defense ministers of both countries, is noteworthy for a number of reasons.

First of all, it should once again be emphasized that the very existence of the 2+2 format in a pair of states is almost a necessary sign (with a few exceptions, such as in the RF-Japan pair) of a high level of trust in the relations between them. Necessary, but certainly not sufficient.

In the case of the US-Japan nexus, this necessary attribute is complemented by others, among which the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security remains the most important. The confirmation of the “cornerstone” importance of the bilateral military and political alliance in the whole system of US-Japanese relations is the central thesis of the outcome document of each successive 2+2 meeting.

The motivation for holding another 2+2 meeting does not, of course, end with the fixation of allegiance to this “creed” in this relationship. Each such event audits the full range of defense and security issues, both bilaterally and in the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

The latter is subject to high dynamics, but still not to the extent that the Joint Statement, which is adopted by the parties at the end of the next 2+2 meeting, is completely different from the previous one. A major aspect of the US and Japanese concerns about the regional situation was identified long ago. It is driven by the factor of the PRC’s
emergence as one of the world’s leading powers. Everything to do with it has been in the spotlight lately in Washington and Tokyo, encouraging them to meet more frequently in the 2+2 format.

Since 2020, they have been held annually, with a gap of just nine months between the last and penultimate one (held on March 16, 2021). The reasons for this seem to be the sudden change of the Japanese cabinet in November 2021 and the further straining of relations between Washington and Tokyo on the one hand, and Beijing on the other.

With regard to the PRC, the Joint Statement 2022 mainly uses already established negative connotations, such as: “Ongoing efforts by China to undermine the rules-based order present political, economic, military, and technological challenges to the region and the world.” The concern is expressed, first, about the situation in the entire maritime belt adjacent to the PRC (at least 4,000 km long) and, second, about the intention to jointly confront the challenges that both members of the US-Japanese alliance see here. In particular, the US confirms the extension of Article V of the alliance to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu in China).

Both sides once again advocated a “peaceful settlement” of the situation in the Taiwan Strait and rejected China’s claims to the waters and island archipelagos in the South China Sea. The second case refers to a ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in the summer of 2016.

An opportunity has not been missed to meddle once again in the internal affairs of the PRC with regard to the situations in XUAR and Hong Kong.

At the same time, the text of the Joint Statement 2022 reflects the military and political innovations that have emerged in the region since the penultimate 2+2 meeting. In particular, the ministers endorsed the signing (discussed in the NEO) of the so-called Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), a detailed set of rules under which military units of both countries can be stationed on each other’s territories.

The formation of the trilateral AUKUS configuration (comprising Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States), as well as the increasing military and political activity in the region by leading European countries, have been equally welcomed.

Participants in the last US-Japan 2+2 meeting expressed their intention to promote cooperation in the development of advanced military-applied technologies, as well as to strengthen controls on the possibility of any information about the results being leaked and falling into the hands of the PRC.

In this regard, the Joint Statement first mentions “hypersonic systems“ in the part that deals with this kind of development by regional opponents. Apparently, this does not only refer to PCR’s announced test of its hypersonic missile. The DPRK is suspected of something similar.

It was therefore noteworthy that a report that appeared the day before the 2+2 meeting was held that the Japanese Defense Ministry was funding the development of a railgun with an electromagnetic projectile acceleration system. It is supposed to be used in air defense systems to intercept hypersonic missiles. Apparently, these studies will be taken as a basis for joint work on such systems, which, among others, were mentioned by Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his speech at the event.

The NEO has repeatedly noted a long-standing trend towards a levelling of the roles of the participants in the US-Japan alliance. Japan is gradually shifting from being a “consumer” of defense and security services provided by its overseas “big brother” to being a significant “supplier” of them. This has been fully understood by all recent US administrations, especially the penultimate president. In this regard, it is notable that the Joint Statement says that “Japan reiterated its resolve to fundamentally reinforce its defense capabilities... The United States welcomed Japan’s resolve...”

At the same time, the US restated its “unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan” (in particular, as noted above regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands) in accordance with the provisions of the bilateral military and political alliance.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic factor could not but affect the agenda of the event under discussion, which, however, continues to be present in all global processes while the political and medical nature of this factor remains unclear.

It is understandable the interest with which the passing of another US-Japanese 2+2 meeting was watched in the main “object” of its targeting, the PRC. Here, on the one hand, they called everything that the sides have been
saying lately about the situation in the sea lanes adjacent to the Chinese coast as well as in China itself well-established “anti-China clichés”. But at the same time they took the event quite seriously. This is especially true of the Taiwan issue.

Overall, however, the very fact, as well as the outcome of another US-Japanese 2+2 meeting shows a thickening of the shadows in the overall picture of the Indo-Pacific region.

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