Shangri-La Dialogue on the Issues of International Security

A new (19th) Shangri-La Dialogue was held in Singapore on June 10-12 to discuss regional security issues. It was initiated and co-organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, which is rightly seen as one of the world’s most respected “think tanks” specializing in research on a wide range of issues summarized by the Institute’s name.

Its most famous product is the Military Balance, published annually and revered among analysts on the issue of the transformation of the military power balance of almost all the world’s important countries in this field. As is stated on the IISS website itself it “lives” off the sale of such products as well as donations of all kinds. In particular, the costs of providing the Shangri-La Dialogues are borne by the Singapore government and, apparently, by the owners of the fancy hotel whose name stands for the event itself.

Generally speaking, such Dialogues have been held annually for the past decades, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they were cancelled the previous two years. In view of the general process of shifting the focus of the current stage of the “Great Game” to the Indo-Pacific region and the continuously accumulating military and political problems there, it makes sense to make at least an initial and most general assessment of the main results of the latest Shangri-La Dialogue. Especially since most countries’ expert delegations are usually led by government officials at ministerial level.
However, the “star” of each event is invariably someone from the highest levels of government. And such a role this time was played by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. This was not done because some sort of a pecking order had to be observed. On the contrary, this was quite an adequate reflection of one of the iconic features of the emerging situation at the world gaming table, which boils down to the return of Japan (and Germany) to the ranks of the world’s leading players.

However, one of the organizers of the recent Shangri-La Dialogue, clearly possessing a sense of humor, tried to present an alternative candidate in the person of the current president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky, who, in fact, was given a role in this international action by the writer-director, similar to what Greta Thunberg played recently in the “ecological” problem.

Again, both the speech (or rather mission statement) by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and the series of meetings held at the same time in Singapore with Japanese Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi are of the greatest interest in the list of events of this latest Shangri-La Dialogue.

Among the several theses outlined by Fumio Kishida, a number deserve particular attention. First, he has proved to be another of the significant global politicians who have designated IPR as the center of gravity of an ever-evolving global economy. The speaker, referring to the example of the Ukrainian conflict, saw similarities with what is happening in the sea adjacent to the PRC’s coast. And above all in the area surrounding Taiwan.

Noting the increasing role of Japan (“the world’s third-largest economy”) in regional and global processes, Kishida expressed his government’s readiness to pay special attention to regional security issues. In that regard, it is noteworthy to mention Germany’s intention to gradually increase defense spending to 2% of national GDP. This was not an accidental caveat, as Kishida’s government recently passed through parliament (i.e., effectively legalized) a similar intention, which will be implemented over the next five years. Meanwhile, in absolute terms, Japan’s defense spending will reach an unprecedented level of $90-100 billion.

The theme of intentions to “increase defense spending on a dramatic scale” was continued by Japanese Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi, who was very active on the sidelines of this forum. Among the several events in which he participated, his first meeting since 2019 with his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe was particularly significant. Its outcome, however, was met with rather reserved comments in the PRC.

It should be noted that on the eve of the forthcoming Shangri-La Dialogue and the already announced meeting of the defense ministers of both countries, publications on resurgent Japanese militarism appeared in the PRC. The occasion for one of them was the 81st anniversary of the bombing of the city of Chongqing by Japanese aircraft during World War II, which killed, according to current estimates, up to two thousand people.

As for the question of the paramount importance of certain components of the set of events held during the latest Shangri-La Dialogue, it may well be that this was in fact the first direct meeting between the US and Chinese ministers of defense in several years. Indeed, its participants were responsible representatives of two of the world’s leading powers. But perhaps its main (positive) outcome is more about the very fact that the event lasted about one hour, although it was originally intended to last 30 minutes. This time was spent presenting the opponent with his own view of the situation, both in bilateral relations and in IPR as a whole. It was, however, well known to both participants in this meeting. The main focus was placed on the now most acute aspect of bilateral relations, namely the Taiwan issue. Incidentally, it should be noted that a week before the start of the Shangri-La Dialogue and the meeting of defense ministers planned on its sidelines at that time, the missing reference to the US not considering Taiwan as an independent state was restored on the Department of State’s web page.

Cautious optimism about the prospects for both the resolution of this problem and the development of bilateral relations in general could be injected by a high-level meeting in Luxembourg three days after the negotiations of the ministers of defense in Singapore. It was attended by Jake Sullivan and Yang Jiechi and this time lasted four and a half hours. However, this latest noteworthy development deserves a separate comment.

Here again it should be noted that the main objective of Washington’s current (outwardly contradictory) maneuvers on both the Chinese and Russian sides can hardly be questioned. It boils down to slowing down as much as possible (and “ideally” simply stopping) the process of rapprochement between the two now main geopolitical opponents. Such an objective is unlikely to be achievable because the process is objective in nature.

Moreover, the aforementioned “controversy” (if it is even present outside the official rhetoric) is highly unbalanced, as the predominance of a confrontational element in Washington’s policy towards Beijing (and Moscow) seems quite
evident. In the same Singapore, immediately after negotiations with his Chinese counterpart, Lloyd Austin held two meetings in the trilateral format. In both, Japan’s Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi took part. The ministers of defense of Australia and South Korea took turns playing the role of third participants.

The very next day after the meeting with China’s Minister of Defense, the special importance for the USA of this kind of configurations (both “trilateral” and other formats) built by the USA in IPR was outlined by the aforementioned Austin in his speech at the plenary session of the Shangri-La Dialogue. It is hardly necessary to say who they are targeting. Despite the American side’s declarative denial (reproduced, it seems, in Luxembourg as well) of such targets.

While welcoming recent contacts with the US side, Beijing is skeptical about their actual outcome. Especially as it relates to the Taiwan issue.

In general, what happened during the latest Shangri-La Dialogue illustrates the process of what is now commonly referred to as “reformatting the world order.” In other words, it rather serves as a diagnosis of this process, the development of which remains a cause for concern.

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