Shinzō Abe’s Trip to Iran

The fact that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe made a trip to Iran from 13 to 14 May of this year is noteworthy in and of itself, regardless of outcomes of any meetings that took place there.

We would like to highlight, first and foremost, that this was the first time a high level official from one of the leading (at present) nations visited this country in the last 30 years. Iran, in turn, is one of the lead “actors” in a years long political drama in the Greater Middle East (GME) region, which is being performed, we would like to add, with the involvement of all the key world players.

Despite numerous attempts by Japan’s “Big Brother” to involve it in games of war and politics that are being played in the GME under the guise of “fighting global terrorism”, Tokyo has confined itself to expressing its disapproval (of something?) and has tried to maintain solid relations with all the countries in the region with no exception.

We would like to remind our readers that at the beginning of 2015, during Shinzō Abe’s tour of some nations in the GME region, two Japanese journalists were publicly (on video) executed by a henchman who played his role convincingly but turned out to not be a local. It seems that Tokyo easily determined who had been responsible for this primitive twomover, and on return home, Shinzō Abe announced that Japan was not going to take part in any airstrikes in the GME.
A year later, he reaffirmed the same stance in his scheduled address at the National Diet (Japan’s parliament).

A very recent provocative incident, which once again occurred during Shinzō Abe’s visit to the region, involving two tankers (one of these had been chartered by a Japanese company) did not prompt the Japanese government to send its naval ships to the Persian Gulf region as before. It is high time that those responsible for these flagrant acts resorted to more intelligent tactics.

Japan receives around 80% of its hydrocarbons (the nation completely lacks this natural resource) from the countries of the Persian Gulf, and until recently Iran had been its third biggest supplier. Japan was essentially forced to join the U.S. de facto economic blockade of Iran although such a step was not in its national interests.

Still, Japan is not indifferent to the issue of ensuring (somewhat tenuously) nuclear non-proliferation, and Washington has accused Tehran of planning to violate its obligations with respect to that.

It is worth noting that Washington’s allies in Europe and Asia, including its key partners such as India, do not benefit from being forced to support U.S. sanctions against Iran. All of these serious issues have only caused USA’s foreign policy problems to become worse. It seems that politicians in Washington have now begun to realize that following a policy course that will lead to a full-scale confrontation with Tehran is not really worth it (in terms of costs and benefits).

But since this game has gone too far, the U.S. administration decided to resort to the help of a mediator in order to end it without “losing face”.

In a way, Japan (which, we reiterate, is currently an influential player on the global stage and practically the most reliable and important ally to Washington) has become a perfect candidate for the role of intermediary, in the eyes of the United States. After all, Japan has maintained friendly ties with Iran and is keen on resolving issues plaguing the U.S.-Iran relationship.

However, being a mediator in charged conflicts is thankless work. The role entails a provision of services, which have a price, and it is essential to repay them by offering some services in return. The most recent political negotiations between the United States and Japan on a wide range of issues pertaining to bilateral and international ties took place during U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to Japan from 25 to 28 May of this year.

From the author’s perspective, Donald Trump returned the previously mentioned favor to Shinzō Abe by allowing the Japanese government to re-establish ties with the leadership of the DPRK. The process of improving these ties began as far back as 2013, but essentially stopped the very same year after a sharp rebuke from Washington. By normalizing and strengthening relations with Pyongyang, Tokyo will have more room and opportunities to maneuver on the Korean Peninsula than before, as the tensions between Japan and South Korea have not abated and perhaps have even risen.

It is difficult to assess the outcomes of Shinzō Abe’s trip to Tehran in his mediator role, on the basis of public statements made by the participants of the negotiations, who from the Iranian side included President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei.

The latter expressed Iran’s position via two points: 1) Iran has “no intention to produce, possess or use nuclear weapons”, and 2) U.S. President Donald Trump was characterized as a person not “worth exchanging any message with”. In addition, Ali Khamenei said: “I have no answer for him, nor will I respond to him in the future” (referring to the U.S. President).

The author thinks that these and other statements made by the Iranian leadership indicate that they are not willing to maintain bilateral ties with the USA as long as Washington continues to exert such unbearable pressure on Iran. But, at the same time, they are ready for dialogue if the situation reverts to its former state (i.e. before the United States took steps to put Iran’s economy in a stranglehold).

It is probably worth agreeing with the comments in the editorial, published by the Mainichi Shimbu newspaper, that Shinzō Abe’s “peace efforts were admirable” during his mission to reduce tensions between the USA and Iran. However, issues associated with this conflict can only be resolved by the leaders of the United States and Iran.

Without a doubt, Shinzō Abe’s successful visit to Tehran will be advantageous for the Liberal Democratic Party, which he heads, in the upcoming House of Councillors election (i.e. the upper house of the National Diet).

And today Shinzō Abe, who has been governing Japan with the help of the Cabinet (whose composition has changed
several times) since the end of 2012, may use the fact that Japan's international standing has unquestionably risen (a key outcome for him and his party) to sway the electorate in his favor.

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