The trade war between Japan and South Korea is going on, and the author needs to clarify why Tokyo lost its temper at last.

The South Korean mass media, naturally, see the reasons for the trade war not as Seoul’s desire to ignore international law, but rather having to do with the internal political problems in Japan: Shinzo Abe needs internal unity of the country as the Japanese government has faced such problems as instability in connection with the trade dispute between the US and China, concern of the population in connection with the increase in consumer tax and the changes to the pension system. In this situation, South Korea is perfectly suitable as an “external enemy” who will distract and will rally the people. Alas, precisely the same expressions can be applied to Moon Jae-in as well, even in terms of concern about what the democratic president is doing with pensions, minimum wages, nuclear power, etc.

As the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said already on July 22, the main problem in the relations of South Korea and Japan is that of compliance or non-compliance with their bilateral agreements. He mentioned the violation of the 1965 Agreement with Japan by the South Korean party, noting that South Korea was not implementing the international agreements which are the base for improvement in the relations.
In the author’s opinion, it would be useful to remind the readers about the nature of this agreement, thankfully, among the range of documents signed at the time, there were several devoted to “resolving the issues connected with property and claims for the compensation of damage.” Japan paid South Korea $200 million as a grant, another $300 million in loans with a favorable interest rate and $300 million in private loans on commercial terms. All this money was to go to the economic development of South Korea. In exchange, the parties confirmed that “the issues connected with property, rights and interests of the two High Contracting Parties and their peoples (including legal entities) and claims for the compensation of damage between the High Contracting Parties and between their peoples are hereby settled completely and finally.”

Thus, $800 million, from which $200 million was “money for nothing.” At the same time, the South Korean currency reserves in 1965 amounted to $1,800 million, and the South Korean state budget was $350 million, a third of which went to military expenses. Then, $800 million at that time would make about $6.5 billion dollars today. It is significantly more than the sum spent by the IMF and other banks in 1987 to pull South Korea out from the economic collapse of that time.

Some authors believe that this money was what formed the basis of the economic miracle. On these loans, the first South Korean modern iron and steel works of the POSCO company was constructed; the then largest Asian and the world’s fourth largest dam on the Cuoyanggang River was built; the main highway of the country, the highway Seoul-Busan, was built.

In 2005, previously confidential materials of the South Korean-Japanese negotiations were published. According to them, Japan offered to pay compensations to the Korean victims in person, but the South Korean authorities stated that they would take care of the matter. The main thing was to get money for economic projects. Besides, the problem of compensations was never brought up either by the authorities, or by the opposition, at the time. Even though the negotiations with the Japanese and the 1965 Agreement concluded later did cause mass protests, and the Park regime was accused of “selling the Homeland,” as, within the anti-Japanese discourse, the very idea of negotiations and diplomatic solution of the issue was perceived as treason.

In the 1970s, the Korean government paid certain sums to several thousand Koreans who had been mobilized by force, however only 8,000 got compensation.

Time passed, and the new generation took their current wealth for granted. At the expense of what it was achieved and with what political sacrifice, was not as important as the issues of the colonial rule victims who are perceived as irredeemable and unpaid for. Constant ideological propaganda is added to it.

A number of experts call anti-Japanism the cornerstone of national identity, noting that the founders of South Korea (Syngman Rhee and his environment) hated the Japanese as much as communists. At the same time, if the attitude to the North could change towards higher tolerance (as it is under Moon’s rule), the anti-Japanese trend remained in place even under the administration of Park Chung-hee. The person who, in many respects, was brought up in the Japanese tradition and concluded the notorious 1965 Agreement with Japan still observed the traditions, as, for example, the Japanese music remained outlawed, even in spite of the fact that Park liked it and it was performed at closed events for the élite. And the South Korean left, who grew up on opposing Park Chung-hee whom they consider a pro-Japanese element, generally compensate for the decrease in the anti-Communist tension by strengthening the anti-Japanese one.

Besides, safe fighting against Japan raised a sufficient number of the patriotic organisations who lose whatever access to the public trough with the end of this agenda. These figures are very combative and used to impunity: let us remind our readers about Kim Ki-jong who was imprisoned for 12 years for his knife attack on the US Ambassador severely cutting his face. It was not some social outcast, but the head of the popular civil Urimadan group defending the accessory of the Liancourt Rocks to South Korea and engaged in patriotic education of students and citizens. It exposed Japanese intrigues regarding territorial claims, distortion of historical facts, insufficient apologies for the crimes, etc. Kim also solemnly registered his permanent address on the Liancourt Rocks which earned him considerable popularity. In July 2010, against the backdrop of new aggravation in the South Korean-Japanese relations around the Liancourt Rocks and other things, Kim Ki-jong committed an assault on the then Japanese Ambassador to South Korea. He threw two pieces of concrete into the diplomat, considering it the best way to express his protest against the territorial claims of Tokyo. For the attempted murder of a foreign diplomat (by the way, the first in the history of the country), the South Korean court sentenced Kim to 2 years’ imprisonment postponing the execution of the sentence for 3 years.

As a result, there was a situation when, on the one hand, Japan was always the target to let off steam upon, on the
other hand, the political confrontation was separate from it and the economic relations were still a separate thing. It gave part of the South Korean leadership an impression that Tokyo would tolerate any bites resignedly.

Meanwhile the patience of Tokyo was coming to an end. The Japanese authorities repeatedly apologized for the past, and from the author’s point of view, the number of apologies from the incumbent state leadership shows clearly enough the desire to turn the page. For example, in August 2015, Shinzo Abe apologized to world community and, first of all, the Asian neighboring states, for the actions of the Japanese authorities during that period. But South Korea said every time that the apologies either were private in nature, or were insufficiently sincere.

If the subject of the crimes of Japan and the fact that it must repent and pay, cry and repent are constantly brought up in Korea under the aforementioned “state myth,” in Japan, this page is turned because, from their point of view, it is high time great-grandsons stopped repenting what had been done by their great-grandfathers. As Abe said in the same speech, Japan had brought immeasurable damage and suffering to innocent people, but the generations of the Japanese who had no part in the conflict ought not to be burdened with constant apologies.

Besides, it already looks as the second instance for the Japanese, showing indignation just when it is pointed out to Moon Jae-in that South Korea also had certain obligations under the Agreement.

Let us mention the 2015 Agreement, in which the following was written:

*The Government of the ROK acknowledges the fact that the Government of Japan is concerned about the statue built in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul from the viewpoint of preventing any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity, and will strive to solve this issue in an appropriate manner through taking measures such as consulting with related organizations about possible ways of addressing this issue*

*The Government of the ROK, together with the Government of Japan, will refrain from accusing or criticizing each other regarding this issue in the international community, including at the United Nations, on the premise that the Government of Japan will steadily implement the measures it announced...*

Meanwhile, although Japan honestly fulfilled its obligations under the agreement, from apologies to compensations, South Korea said that the Agreement did not correspond to the interests of the people and did not intend to carry out its duties, and the statues, which became a wianbu symbol, continue to appear: suffice it to remember the scandal when this artwork was erected directly across the street from the Japanese consulate in Busan. South Korea even sent such a statue to the international Aichi Triennale art exhibition in Nagoya and, after the Japanese took it away, stated that the actions of the Japanese government were violating the freedom of opinion. In his turn, the Japanese cabinet Secretary General Yoshihide Suga explained that the statue was heartbreaking for the Japanese people.

At the same time, Seoul does not intend to terminate the Agreement either: otherwise one billion yen will need to be reimbursed.

The same is true for the 1965 Agreement. After the resolution of the Supreme Court pointed out that this treaty could not be an obstacle for the right of individuals to demand compensation, “the indignant people” began to submit similar claims in large quantities. Thousands of applicants, given the position of the court, mean hundreds of millions of dollars of compensations, though international agreements formally have superiority over national legislation.

However, there is an unpleasant nuance: why should one demand compensation from the Japanese instead of the South Korean government since the latter promised to pay? The first trial regarding the victims of mobilization has lasted since 2005, over the 13 years’ time, 3 of the 4 claimants died, could not the authorities at least allocate money for a funeral? It proves that the priorities for Moon and his clique are not justice for the elderly, but an opportunity to rally voters around themselves to face the enemy, to maintain the conflict fire and also once again to wound the opposition by accusing it of pro-Japanese moods.

And, in the author’s opinion, the present situation allows Moon to put the internal political problems aside and to proclaim “all rise and fight against Japan,” in passing attributing all possible difficulties to the consequences of the trade war. At the same time, it is necessary to somehow shade the failures in the inter-Korean relations, since Pyongyang again expressed its stance that Seoul is not a wise intermediary contributing to the détente cause, rather a weak-willed ally of the US. The more failures in other areas, especially the inter-Korean one, the higher rating the president will get from the trade war, despite the possible risks. The latest statement of the president on the “peace
economy,” which, thanks to the cooperation with North Korea, will defeat Japan even caused in the conservative media headings like “Has Moon Left the Planet” and whether or not he lost touch with reality.

Another thing is more deplorable. The South Korean patriotic rise is causing a similar reaction of Japanese right who let their rage out on the Korean diaspora. According to Yo Go Ni, head of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, “hate statements” are spread on social networks on the Internet and in the street protests of the Japanese far right activists. “We have a painful history. The victims remember it all. But the criminals forget.” The representative of the Korean diaspora in Osaka O Yong Ho noted that the relations of South Korea and Japan have an impact on the life of the Japanese Koreans. According to him, it is impossible to call the relations of the two countries good today, which creates problems for the Korean diaspora in Japan.

Ultranationalist groups stage provocative demonstrations at Korean schools, accusing Koreans of creating an ethnic mafia and cryptographic support of North Korea, even openly calling for violence at the connivance of the police. And although, in 2016, the country adopted the law on fight against hate speech, it is de facto not enforced.

The position of this camp is well shown by the documentary film Shusenjo: the Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue which was released in South Korea on July 25. It is devoted to the disputes around the comfort women issue, but its director, an American Japanese, Miki Dezaki interviewed not only the defenders of wianbu, but also more than 30 far-right individuals who deny the existence of the matter saying that those women were just prostitutes and were rather well paid for their work.

Miki believes that such sensitivity to the problems of historical memory is connected with the fact that, from the point of view of the right (including Abe), the state “can be never mistaken and never has to apologize.” Generally, this attitude is characteristic not only of Japan: we may also remember G. Bush Sr.’s remark: “I will never apologize for the United States of America, I do not care what the facts are”. But the Japanese left consider that it is based on the secret desire to return to the pre-war Constitution of Meiji, while the comfort women issue has to be considered as fight against racial discrimination, sexual discrimination and fascism.

In general, it is sad to see the populists and the nationalists of both parties rock the boat, as what previously served to direct steam into a whistle now can become the cause of a big explosion.

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