Japan is Becoming More Active in Greater Middle East

We have pointed out on more than on occasion in the New Eastern Outlook that one of the most distinctive features of the current stage of the Big Game of Politics has been the gradual return of both losers of World War II to it, i.e. Japan and Germany. And it is important to highlight that they are re-entering the game as members of the elite club comprising leading players.

Notably, factors indicating that the aforementioned process is ongoing include an increase in geographic span of global events in which the involvement of Japan and Germany is becoming more noticeable. Incidentally, the state of these countries’ economies remains one of the key tools used by both to wield their power.

Still, it is fairly likely that both nations will choose to strengthen another tool at their disposal in the future, i.e. their military might. In this particular sphere, Japan (despite restrictions on the military in its Constitution that Germany does not have) appears to be ahead of the two. A characteristic feature of Japan’s increased involvement in this sector is the gradual and careful nature of it and the desire not to ruffle any feathers on the global arena, especially on account of historical memory.

Signs of Japan’s growing engagement in the military sphere are visible in Southeast Asia: ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy periodically sail in the Indian Ocean and take part in annual joint (with India and the United States) Malabar naval exercises. The nation has also been strengthening military ties with Australia.

It is also becoming increasingly likely that Japan’s military presence will expand into the Greater Middle East region (MENA). However, this will be somewhat of a forced move.

It began as far back as 2009, when Japan’s navy joined the international Combined Task Force to fight piracy in the
Gulf of Aden. It is important to highlight that the efforts of this multinational alliance are not directed against any nation in particular, and activities of notorious “Somali pirates” are not associated with the Federal Republic of Somalia. Still, attacks on merchant ships do mainly originate from the territories of this crumbling nation.

Tokyo’s involvement in anti-piracy efforts in such a manner is in line with its policies aimed at maintaining more or less equally friendly relationships with all of the MENA nations, while at the same time distancing itself from the (often very acute) problems that divide them.

Arguably, what Japan needs from this region nowadays is an uninterrupted access to its fossil fuels. There are no hydrocarbon deposits in the territory of this nation and in fact, Japan imports 80% of its energy sources from the Persian Gulf.

Japan’s neutral policy towards MENA nations engaged in political and military conflicts firstly helps it resolve the aforementioned energy issues. Secondly, this impartial stance makes the nation almost an ideal candidate for playing the role of a mediator as warring sides attempt to escape (without spilling any more blood or “losing face”) from political traps that they had forced themselves into.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe essentially took on the role of a peace broker during his trip to Iran, which took place from 13 to 14 June. An important aspect to this visit (the first of such a high level in 40 years) was, of course, the fact that right before Tokyo was forced to side with the United States and support its sanctions against Iran, the latter had been the third largest supplier of fossil fuels to Japan.

Still, the main aim of the visit was, we reiterate, to mediate between two ardent opponents, Washington and Tehran. Incidentally, it was the U.S. president who had initiated these efforts via Shinzō Abe.

However, judging by public statements made by Japanese Prime Minister’s counterparts President of Iran Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the aforementioned issues were not resolved. It is possible that further efforts in this direction will be made during the first visit to Japan by Hassan Rouhani, scheduled for 20 December. It is noteworthy that Japanese media outlets’ reports on this trip mention the fact that Tokyo’s plans had been previously approved by the United States.

Still, during the upcoming negotiations, the Japanese side will also try to deal with its own fairly delicate matter linked with an almost resolved issue to do with sending a destroyer and a maritime reconnaissance aircraft to the north-western part of the Indian Ocean. The pressure applied on Japan for a long period of time by its Big Brother to get it involved in military and political games in this region (which the United States has been playing for quite some time and particularly actively in the past half a year) is seemingly paying off and the wheels have been set in motion.

We are referring here to the U.S.-led naval coalition clearly aimed against Iran. Several terrorist attacks (with a Japanese tanker targeted in one of them) in the Strait of Hormuz, “which threatened the freedom of navigation along a crucial waterway”, became the pretext for establishing this alliance. It is still unclear who was responsible, but Iran had already been accused of staging the attacks and the aforementioned coalition is meant to act as a deterrent to it.

Tokyo’s clear unwillingness to undermine its capacity to play the role of a peace broker in the Greater Middle East region was the reason why the Japanese leadership delayed issuing a response (for quite some time) to insistent U.S. requests to join the allies in such an important undertaking.

After all, past developments in connection to this have not been forgotten in Tokyo. Only 5 years ago (at the beginning of 2015), Shinzō Abe’s tour to a number of Greater Middle Eastern nations strangely coincided with an execution (purely for show) of two Japanese journalists by a far from camera-shy henchman in an unknown location, in a country of this region.

Since then, various staged incidents (for instance, in connection with a purported chemical attack by Damascus) have been used on more than one occasion. Political aims of such shams have always been quite clear.

As for the Japanese reporters, they were publicly executed in order to push Tokyo to join the Western coalition, which at that very time was engaged in airstrikes in the name of “democracy” against certain “totalitarian regimes”.

However, the operation failed. On return from his trip, Shinzō Abe stated that Japan was not going to take part in air strikes during his speech at the National Diet.

However, it is becoming more and more difficult for Tokyo to essentially “sabotage” international military operations
conducted by its allies. Japan's constant use of restrictions in the Constitution as an excuse to avoid involvement in U.S.-led military operations has been evoking a typical response: "change the Constitution".

However, on this particular issue Shinzō Abe does not require any convincing. After all, one of the main aims of his entire political career is to make amendments to the anti-war Article 9 in the current Constitution. But, in this case, his personal wishes are not shared by the Japanese populace, who think just as any other member of society in the world: “Leave well enough this issue alone. Why change the "U.S." Constitution if everything is working out for us in this world”.

This is why the issue on revising the Constitution was not discussed during the scheduled extraordinary session of the National Diet this autumn, although it had been convened for this very reason. According to the latest reports, “a vote on the Act on Procedures for Amendment of the Constitution of Japan has been postponed beyond next year’s regular Diet session”. The reason for the delay was yet another unabated scandal involving the leadership, which this time around even touched the Prime Minister himself.

In addition, the Japanese strategy (which up until recently had worked like a charm) of avoiding any involvement in military operations led by its key ally, the United States, (for, we reiterate, a seemingly good reason) is turning into an important part of the entire U.S.-Japanese relationship, which is becoming increasingly complex. After all, Japan needs to somehow repay the United States for the degree of restraint it has shown in enacting punitive measures in response to the “imbalance” in bilateral trade complained about by Donald Trump.

As a result, after a long delay, the issue of sending a Japanese destroyer and a maritime reconnaissance aircraft to the Strait of Hormuz is close to a positive resolution. However, we would like to point out that, as far back as September, Japanese media outlets reported the Japanese troops dispatched to the Middle East would not join the U.S.-coalition to protect merchant vessels and instead operate independently. Their main aim will be to gather information and observe developments in the region. Some of the data collected may be passed on to the commanders of the American and allied ships. But only if this information points to potential future threats. The Japanese troops will also not be responsible for accompanying Japanese merchant ships.

Incidentally, approximately 60% of Japanese survey participants opposed the deployment of ships to the Greater Middle East even if the troops were responsible for such a limited number of tasks.

In addition, it will only be possible to increase the number and scope of the troops’ operations if the government of Iran agrees to such a move. It seems that this particular issue will become key during the upcoming negotiations between the Japanese Prime Minister and President Hassan Rouhani. The final decision on whether to dispatch Japanese naval ships to the Strait of Hormuz or not and on the scope of their operations there will most likely be made at the meeting.

It is also worth highlighting that this naval unit bears no connection to the troops that have been a part of the aforementioned international Combined Task Force to protect merchant vessels from attacks by “Somali” pirates for over a decade now.

Hence, the recent events are indicative of a gradually growing Japanese military presence in the Greater Middle East, which, in large part, stems from the way the Big Game of Politics is evolving.

At a certain point in time, the military may become a useful additional tool to the economic one, which will, for some time to come, remain a key instrument that Japan uses in the MENA region (and the global arena as a whole) in its national interests.

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