Russia and Japan: a Difficult Balance in a Challenging Environment

On February 7, 2022, US Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel, in a video message posted on Twitter, expressed support for Japan on the issue of ownership of the Southern Kuril Islands, stating that “the United States supports Japan on the issue of the Northern Territories and has recognized Japanese sovereignty over the four disputed Islands since the 1950s”. It certainly does nothing to help normalize relations on the Kuril Islands between Russia and Japan, but only fuels anti-Russian sentiment in Japanese society.

But it cannot be said that the Japanese society fully supports Washington’s line: one commentator under the video appeal ironically suggested the placement of American bases in Hokkaido to better protect national interests, another asked whether the Americans are to blame for the story of the return of the two islands in Khrushchev times, a third asked a reasonable question: “What did the Yalta Conference participants say? Wasn’t the US behind the Soviet invasion?”, while another commentator pointed out that Okinawa was returned to Japan 50 years ago [in 1972], but there is a basic Japanese-American security problem, there is the issue of a status agreement. There is also a perception in Japan that it was the US that created the “Northern Territories” problem with the Soviet Union. There were reminders of the US nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as US military operations in the Middle East.

Despite Washington’s long-standing call on Tokyo to impose sanctions against Russia, which Rahm Emanuel touched on in his video message, the Japanese leadership is in no hurry to draft domestic laws that would allow international economic sanctions on the basis of human rights violations. On that occasion, Russian Ambassador to Japan Mikhail Galuzin said in an interview on February 10, 2022:
“As for the possible participation of this or that country in the anti-Russian sanctions once again being conceived by Washington and the Anglo-Saxons, of course this will not help our country’s relations with the state that has joined these sanctions. I am fully compelled to explain this to my Japanese colleagues and reiterate that joining the sanctions will not help to create a favorable atmosphere for the Russian-Japanese dialogue.”

The lack of a legal framework for international economic sanctions allows Japan to maintain even relations not only with Russia, but also with another nuclear neighbor and major trading partner in the region, China, where Washington says human rights are allegedly being violated in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

As for trade ties with Russia, Japan, for example, is the main buyer of liquefied natural gas from the Sakhalin-2 project, owning a 22.5 per cent stake in its operator, Sakhalin Energy. Negotiations are also under way to create opportunities for “mutually beneficial business cooperation in the Kuril Islands, including the southern part, in the context of a major initiative by Russia’s leadership to launch a preferential customs and tax regime in the region,” Russian Ambassador to Japan Mikhail Galuzin said, adding that “Japan does not and cannot have any exclusive rights to those territories. Any economic activity in the Kuril Islands, including its southern part, must be carried out strictly on general terms and solely within the framework of Russian law.” It is the latter statement that does not suit the Japanese side, causing the issue of establishing a special economic zone in the southern Kurils to stall.

As long as Tokyo listens to Washington’s rhetoric, no positive developments are likely in the Japanese-Russian diplomatic dialogue, which is aimed, among other things, at finding a way to sign a peace agreement between the two countries. Unfortunately, the information posted in Russian on the official website of Japan’s Office of Policy Planning and Coordination on Territory and Sovereignty leave little room for optimism in quick resolution: “The ‘Northern Territories’, consisting of Iturup, Kunashir Island, Shikotan Island and the Habomai Islands, were handed down from one generation of Japanese to another, they are the ancestral territory of Japan and have never been the territory of other states.”

But there is a bright side to Japan-Russia relations: under the rule of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a new impetus has been given to bilateral humanitarian exchanges in the field of education and the recruitment of graduates, including through the implementation of theEight-Point Plan for Economic Cooperation between Russia and Japan, which Abe proposed to Russian President Vladimir Putin during a summit meeting. Putin during a summit meeting in 2016. As part of this Plan, the HaRP platform (Human Resource Development Platform for Japan-Russia Economic Cooperation and Personnel Exchange) was established in 2017, and inter-university relations were intensified: Hokkaido University and Niigata University are initiating educational projects on the Japanese side; Tokai University is actively working, concluding partnership agreements with five major Russian universities. At the same time, the project “Russian-Japanese youth exchanges”, which the Russian Ministry of Education and Science has been running since 1999, is gaining momentum. In 2018, the “Association of Russian and Japanese HEIs”, initiated in 2016, began its work with a total of 63 Japanese and Russian HEIs as of 2021.

In recent years, Japanese companies have been interested in hiring Russian graduates, especially in the field of IT: thanks to the digitization of the global economy, they can work from home without having to leave the Russian Federation. Graduates from Russian HEIs are in high demand by Japanese employers after taking Japanese language courses provided by the Japanese side through agreements with Russian higher education institutions; Kazan Federal University and Astrakhan State University have been the most involved in this process.

The remote work offered by Japanese companies to Russian specialists is mutually beneficial to both Russia and Japan from an economic point of view. If Russian specialists are employed directly in Japan, they are expected to return home at the end of their employment contract, so there is no question of a “brain drain” from Russia.

By recruiting Russian employees to Japanese firms, Russia’s image is changing for the better in the eyes of the Japanese. The stereotype of the Russian man as “unfriendly and lazy” due to “old Western films” is gradually giving way to the fair view that the Russians “bear a great resemblance to the Japanese” in their serious attitude to work, humility and high capacity for learning, according to an extensive study conducted in 2021 by the government’s Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO).

Such high professional, intellectual and moral qualities, as restraint and modesty, especially important to Japanese culture, in fact, traditionally inherent in the Russian national character, are highly valued in the Japanese labor market, bringing the two cultures closer together.
It is hoped that in the future the difficult issue of Russian-Japanese relations will find a positive solution for the benefit of the two countries.

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