On Position of Japan in Ukrainian Conflict

As was noted in NEO, the conflict in and around Ukraine has started long before February 24, and has a quite ambiguous goal-setting. From the general positions, the current bloody phase of this conflict (where Ukraine itself is only “the place and the fuel” for the all-European fire) is the key link of the long emerging reformation of the “unipolar” world order, that has shortly settled in after the end of the Cold War.

Already not on the horizon, but before our very eyes emerges a new global power, China, which triggers bad mood in the present world hegemon. The mood worsens as the cooperation between China and one of the main nuclear powers, Russia, is becoming more advanced. Apparently, it has decided not to battle both opponents at once, but to put them out of order one country at a time. Due to some considerations Russia was picked to be the first.

It is these positions that serve as the background for everything happening in Ukraine since 2014, with Ukraine, to reiterate, being a tool in the struggle of western “well-wishers” against Russia. Their Kyiv vis-a-vis (with neighborhood level thinking) saw this as a suitable reasoning for trading strategic value of the controlled territory. A value that notably has been built for a long time and with difficulty without any significant participation from the current Kyiv “politicians.” It would hardly be a serious stretch to compare their behavior of the recent years in the exacerbated conflict “Russia vs. generalized West” to the way Mazepa acted in the no less critically definitive moment for Russia three hundred years ago.

Today Russia found itself with a choice: to be patient and keep watching the quick swelling (that started from the moment of gaining independence) of the pustule at its side (hoping for god knows what), or to finally get down to “treating” it with radical surgery.
The forced second option for solving the problem was undeniably expected by the opponents of Russia who used it as a reason for an all-around economic and commercial siege. The developing immensely complicated situation inside and around Russia can be compared only to an all-around siege of the Soviet Russia in the first half of the 1920s.

As was the case back then, today it is imperative to display exceptional skills in managing state affairs under the siege, hardly more auspicious than a hundred years ago. In order to do that it seems critical to provide an appropriate (meaning devoid of emotions and cycles of basic propaganda) estimation of distinctive positioning of each significant participant of the current phase of the “Big World Game” dragged into the complex of the recently enacted various anti-Russia sanctions.

The present article continues the topic of the nature of Japan’s participation in them, as Japan is one of the most important neighbors of Russia. First of all, note that it is “specific Japanese” characteristics mentioned above and not personal traits of one or another politician of this country that define its general behavior at the world playing table, as well as in this particular moment of the exacerbation of the playing process due to the Ukrainian events. Incidentally, the approval ratings of the incumbent Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in the Japanese society have been so far higher than those of his predecessor.

Japanese economy is world’s third economy, and the role of the country in global political processes has been intermittently growing. Specifically, Japan is on the list of the principal contenders for the place of permanent member of the (hypothetical) “reformed” UNSC.

At the same time Japan has serious problems in its surroundings. And if historically deeply rooted “frictions” with neighboring Korea (generally, it should be emphasized) can be chalked up to sideline factors, then political uncertainty in relations with China, the second power in the world, to put it mildly is gaining fundamental meaning for Tokyo.

For Japan, here lies persistent (and maybe increasing) significance of military and political alliance with the US. The presence of the American troops in Japan has no part in defining the nature of this alliance in Japanese foreign policy. The propaganda fighters call it “occupation.” Note once again that Japan itself is interested in this “occupation.” That’s why the main cause for headache of the official Tokyo is populist anti-American invectives from the incumbent governor of Okinawa Denny Tamaki.

It’s been only three years since the former US president Donald Trump threatened to withdraw American troops from Japanese territory as a means of leverage against the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, if the latter would not “within reasonable terms” rectify “apparent wrongdoings” in the bilateral trade with approximate annual volume of $70 billion in favor of Japan.

In other words, the intricate complex of US-Japanese relations retains its exceptional significance for both sides, but almost primarily for Japan. Japan cannot risk these relations for the “situated god knows where” Ukraine or even for the complex relations with Russia, highly critical for Tokyo.

Russian Foreign Ministry is apparently correct in thinking that Japan joining to practically the whole spectrum of anti-Russia actions in connection with the Ukrainian conflict is the consequence of Tokyo receiving from “up high” (from Washington) a certain circular containing a list of actions to be taken in this particular case. Although Japan most certainly will object, stating that “we directly participated” in preliminary development of the plan for possible actions. But the truth is, to reiterate, its real authors had all the reasons to believe that Japan will be forced in this case to sacrifice “some of its other” interests.

The incumbent Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida is not the first to join the “collective western” anti-Russia sanctions. Previously the same Shinzo Abe after his two-year factual sabotage of the American sanctions aimed at Russia eventually (spring of 2016) was forced to join, as Barack Obama’s administration pulled the same (and still viable) ace from up its sleeve in relations with its main Asian ally.

Nonetheless (and in the author’s opinion) the current Japanese administration leaves a certain “small window” in its relations with Russia, which can be used to make a speedy breakthrough in case of their restoration. Clearly after the current public “pro-Ukraine” psychosis with its street demonstrations, refusal by symphonic orchestras to perform music by Tchaikovsky, and anticipated speech by Volodymyr Zelenskyy (this time in the Japanese Parliament). This psychosis has nothing to do with Realpolitik.

Note one of such signals of Japan’s keeping this “small window,” which is Fumio Kishida’s statement (made during his speech on March 14 at the Parliament), that his administration will not revise the planned budget for 2022 which
contains a separate item intended for development of relations with Russia. This statement sounded perfectly clear in response to persistent calls from certain members of the Parliament to conduct such revision “under the conditions of Russian aggression against Ukraine.”

This is apparently the maximum positivity towards Russia allowed by the cabinet of Kishida under the aforementioned conditions. The last item warrants specific attention, since almost certainly Japan’s involvement into the system of current anti-Russia sanctions included promises to “automatic” decision on “Northern territories dispute” in case of downfall of Russia.

When it comes to sensational comments by Kishida about the four southern Kuril islands being the “native Japanese territory,” it is no more than a return of the Japanese government to the “traditional” look at this issue. There have been two relatively short “blanks” in this issue, with one taking place in the mid 1950s. The second abandonment of the mentioned “tradition” was marked by the same Shinzo Abe around 2013-2017. Attempts to reach a certain compromise in this issue with the Russian government were unsuccessful, and afterwards Shinzo Abe returned to the “traditional” positions later confirmed by his successors Yoshihide Suga, and now Fumio Kishida.

The author would like to stress yet again that the “Northern Territories dispute” itself is no more than just one (an not the principal) aspect of the overall interest in development of comprehensive relations between Japan and Russia. The reasons for such interest have been covered in NEO and in some ways are indicated in the present article.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that during the collective “shift to the East” in Russian foreign policy which should be initiated after the (officially announced) conclusion of the Ukraine conflict, the most important place should be assigned to various collaborations and solving problems between China and Japan. The same goes for relations between China and India.

Only under conditions of creating normal relations in the triangle comprised of three leading Asian powers “China - Japan - India” can the ever more frequent prophecies of the Indo-Pacific region emerging as a power spearheading the development of all mankind become true.

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