Deteriorating China-Japan Ties amidst Rising Global Tensions

Despite the fact that China and Japan are neighbors with thousands of years of cooperation, their relations in the modern history have actually begun only after World War II: the military operations in the East Asia were so hard, and the Japanese committed such atrocities against the Chinese people that relations between the two countries had to be built almost from scratch. Moreover, in 1949, a new state was established in the Mainland China, the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The progress in the relations between China and Japan was rather slow, as both parties remembered the war all too well. In addition, despite the fact that after losing the war Japan opted out of its aggressive policy, disbanded most of its armed forces, with only Self-Defense Forces left, this country still remained a military threat to China, since its territory was occupied by the US troops and became a launching ground for the US military operations in the East Asia. Washington considered this region to be the home for the “Red Threat”, and to combat this threat Americans hurriedly invaded first Korea, then moved further, to Vietnam. China supported both Korea’s and Vietnam’s people in their fight against the US invasion, and this too had an adverse effect on the relations between China and Japan.
However, in 1972 China and Japan started negotiations about normalizing relations which resulted in the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed by both countries in 1978. Afterwards, China started receiving financial aid - official support for the country’s development, which was meant as a partial refund for the damage and suffering of China’s population during World War II.

In fact, the relations between China and Japan were never warm in the 20th century, and by the end of the century they started deteriorating again. Thus, the amounts of “official financial aid” from Japan began to decrease after China’s nuclear tests in 1995. In the 2000s, a territorial conflict began between China and Japan, a dispute over the Senkaku Islands (which the Chinese call “Diaoyu”) in the East China Sea. These small islands have strategically important position in terms of military shipping. The surrounding waters are rich with fish, and significant reserves of oil and gas may be buried under the sea. For some time Japan and China were negotiating joint mining operations in that area. However, in 2012, the confrontation between the parties escalated so much that anti-Japanese violence burst out in China, prompting the Chinese government to send its maritime forces to the area of the disputed archipelago. Naturally, the negotiations about the joint mining operations were terminated.

There is an opinion that the above facts made the relations between the countries worse, but not as much as more global challenges forcing the two countries to mutual unfriendliness.

In recent decades, the Asia-Pacific region (APR) encountered a rather challenging situation: recognized as the “economic miracle” and ranking second among the world’s greatest economies, China has begun to rapidly increase its regional and global presence, including by enhancing its military power, so the leading Asian-Pacific players, such as Japan and even the United States, realized that they now were facing a serious threat. At the same time, even though unwilling to do so, Japan is forced to resist the Chinese “giant”, since it is occupied by US troops and is supposed to remain loyal to the States under any conditions.

The relations between the US and China in the recent years have also become significantly worse. The economic competition between these superpowers has developed into a true “trade war” which burst out in 2018, when China and the US imposed a barrage of sanctions on each other. The same year, Japan too stopped its “official financial aid” to China.

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in 2020 and caused global economic recession, the civil disorders that occurred in 2020 across different countries, and the resignation of Donald Trump took the “trade war” away from the headlines of the world media, but the economic and political confrontation between China and the United States is going on, and the situation in the Asia-Pacific region is becoming increasingly explosive, which forces Japan, ever so dependent on the will of Washington, to be drifting apart from China.

However, Japan itself is willing to become an independent actor in the global geopolitical game and to compete with China: over the past ten years, there were numerous appeals heard in the Land of the Rising Sun, demanding to get rid of the US military forces and to create the country’s own powerful army, to cancel the laws restricting Japan’s right to increase military power and pursue a power policy.

In late 2021, there were media reports that in the 2022 fiscal year, Japan’s military budget will increase by more than 1% and will exceed USD 47 billion. At the same time, it was reported that a proposal is being discussed in Japanese ruling circles about increasing the military budget up to 2% of Japanese GDP, which has not been the case since 1976. The Land of the Rising Sun is starting to increase its military power. Interestingly enough, these 2 per cent are the amount that the US wants their allies to spend on the military purposes. About 50,000 US soldiers were based in Japan in late 2021. The US troops and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have high operational compatibility which is continuously improved as a result of joint military exercises. It looks like a joint US-Japan military force is being formed now in the Japanese Islands, which according to Washington’s and Tokyo’s idea is supposed to become one of the dominating players in the Asia Pacific region.

In February 2022, Japanese ex-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that Japan should abandon the “taboo” on discussing the possibility of deploying American nuclear weapons in its territory. Among the reasons listed by this Japanese politician were the global security challenges, such as the possibility of China’s attack on Taiwan - an unrecognized state that is considered by Beijing as the Chinese territory. The current head of Japan, Fumio Kishida, rejected this proposal, saying that it violates Japan’s fundamental principles, such as the renouncement to create weapons of mass destruction, to own such weapons and to deploy them in its territory. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Abe’s statement was sharply criticized by Beijing. China appealed to the former Japanese leader to remember the history of his country and to be more careful in his statements. But these words were said, and the fact that Mr. Abe dared to make this statement, demonstrates that the situation in the Asia Pacific region has dramatically changed, and the Japanese
society is approaching the idea to abandon the previous peaceful course of actions.

China, for its part, does not seem willing to maintain good relationship with its neighbor either. In March 2022, Chinese warships repeatedly entered the waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which caused protests from the Japanese side. Return to negotiations on the joint use of the resources of this archipelago is also highly unlikely. It looks like the situation in this region will remain tense for quite a long time.

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