Russia and Japan in the Face of Sanctions

One eloquent expression says: ‘The East is a delicate matter’, and in the contemporary world it is also influence-prone. Japan, like all G-7 countries piloted by the key player - USA, has joined in economic sanctions against Russia due to the situation in the southeast of Ukraine.

Japanese mass-media would one day scream about the Russian army ‘acting with impudence’ in Donbass and about illegal invasion in Crimea, and the next day about the purely formal nature of sanctions by Tokyo, adopted solely in solidarity with Western colleagues. In fact, all this mess with sanctions put the S. Abe Government in a rather awkward position: on the one hand they don’t want to mar the relations with Moscow improved in the past two years, and on the other, deviation from Washington’s strategy line can lead to ‘gloomy implications’. As the saying goes: ‘honey is sweet, but the bee stings’.

Russia’s market is huge making plenty of room for Japanese goods, and at the same time it is possible to bargain on gas and oil, all the more so that 86% of all Russian import consists of mineral fuel. And truly, in the face of China’s increased influence in the South-China and East-China Seas, Tokyo could be easily satisfied with Russia’s neutral position in relation to Beijing. But the Obama Administration jogs the Japanese Prime Minister’s memory, reminding whose money the post-war economy was built on and to whom Japan is indebted for its prosperity. So now, willing or not, they have to play by someone else’s rules.

Throughout last year the Japanese would say one thing and do something absolutely different. For example, during the G-7 summit in Brussels Mr. Abe urged the European colleagues to conduct a constructive dialogue with Moscow, as one of the key players in the international arena. Last September the Japanese, with the wave of a magic American wand, jumped on board with a fresh load of sanctions directed at Moscow. At the same time, Japanese politicians, together with the representatives of Japan’s business community, who are lined up with them, continued to affirm their goodwill towards Moscow.

At this point we would like to say a few words about the position of Japanese business in relation to economic sanctions against Russia, which, as might appear at first sight, should primarily hurt their interests. Many a time did Japanese businessmen claim that the restrictions of their country’s government are of most soft nature. For example, Chairman of the Russian-Japanese Economic Committee, Deputy Chairman of the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (Nippon Keidanren) Norio Sasaki repeatedly said that the sanctions did not influence the business environment. Besides, it is confirmed by the results of an annual survey of the above mentioned Federation’s members, in accordance with which 57% of Japanese businessmen are already investing in Russia’s economy, and 20% contemplate joining the first. But in fact, in 2014 no foundation stones were laid into large-scale bilateral projects. Even Hokkaido Bank, which planned to put the land in the Amur region under soya in spring 2015, suddenly decided to extend, for an indefinite term, the stage of assessing financial risks, associated with the new
project commencement. When it comes to the arrangements which were already in their final stages of realization at the moment of the imposed Japanese sanctions, their construction continued, and sometimes they even assert themselves as successful and almost brought to life examples of fruitful cooperation between economic circles of the two countries. All the above mentioned harmoniously fits itself into the Japan Government’s long-established behavioral pattern, which has escalated after the Second World War, when political interests prevail over economic ones. That is why it is not in reason to expect excessive activity from business that would be inconsistent with the country’s foreign policy course, even if it is soft, as Japanese businessmen keep insisting. One obvious example stands out. Tokyo recognized the project of ‘Sakhalin – Hokkaido’ power bridge construction, which could to a large extent satisfy Japan’s needs in electric energy due to the NPS putting out and energy sources deficit, to be over expensive.

But let us get back to the theatrics of Japanese authorities’ political games. In September 2014 after the friendly visit to Moscow from the former Prime Minister of Japan Y. Mori, ‘Kyodo Tsushin’, a large Japanese information agency, informed out of the blue about the withdrawal by the Head of the Japanese Government of the invitation to the President of Russia, at Washington’s request. In order to soften the straightforward speech in the shocking report, it was said that Mr. Abe planned to meet with V.V. Putin on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Beijing in November 2014. Also, the possibility of advancing the Russian leader’s official visit to Japan for spring 2015 was left open. But who has left this possibility open: Washington or Tokyo?

The Summit took place, the leaders of the two countries met, discussed the situation in the Ukraine and came to an agreement that the visit shall take place, but later, ‘at the proper time’, as Japanese mass media reported.

On returning home, the Japanese Prime Minister, during the meeting with the Governor of the Hokkaido island declared his intention to continue the dialogue with the Russian party in relation to resolving the ‘Northern territories’ dispute, as four southern islands of the Kurile Ridge are called in Japan. Tokyo does its best to prove itself as an independent player in the international political arena, capable of resolving geopolitical issues on its own. Mr. Abe made it clear that the Ukrainian crisis has a negative impact on ‘the key task of his whole premiership’ – conclusion of a peace treaty with Russia. But is everyone in the world ready to accept such ‘independence’ from the Japanese?

The tragic story related to the taking hostage of two Japanese journalists this January and their subsequent deaths at the hand of ISIL terrorists, dramatically illustrated that it is yet too early for Japan to demonstrate it’s ‘image’ in political games where it is traditionally left the role of the US’s younger sister. Of course, a hypothetical terrorist threat frees the hands of the Japanese authorities to revise the infamous Article 9 of the Constitution that prohibits the state to participate in military international missions. At the same time, even with the existence of the ‘official’ army, Tokyo will not manage on its own with the aggression of Islamic extremists who, as one of the terrorists’ video-messages says, are going to avenge for something. Like it or not, but the samurai have to sheathe the sharp blade of their political arrogance and get back under the wing of Washington.

Thus, it becomes crystal clear that in the near future one shouldn’t expect any radical changes in Russian-Japanese relations. Tokyo will follow the US-selected course of action even at the price of their personal interests, bearing in mind the threat that might arise with deviation from this course. Looking ahead, we can say that experts will discuss the Russian leader’s possible visit to Japan for a long time, but whether this visit really takes place – it is necessary to pose these questions not to Tokyo, but to Washington, where they know better what is good for the Land of the Rising Sun.

*Bakhtiar Usmonov, Doctor of Political Sciences, political scientist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”*. 