China - Vietnam - Japan - South Korea: War of School Textbooks

The recent worsening of territorial disputes between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea and with Japan in the East China Sea, plus Japan and South Korea in the Sea of Japan, has led to a shift in the cultural and ideological sphere of these four countries.

No war was ever conducted without ideology and propaganda, and after the end of a conflict, the sides usually set out their own interpretations in history books, designed to direct the younger generation in the “right” way, according to certain ideologues, depending on the circumstances. Under the new political conditions, there is another ideological shift, which is immediately reflected in the freshly corrected textbooks. At this time, all the above-mentioned countries: China and Japan, and South Korea, and Vietnam began to correct their world outlook.

The country that first announced about its desire to revise school textbooks was Japan in December 2013, being tired of fighting over several islands with Russia, South Korea and China. The Minister of Education Hakubun Shimomura said that “the main problem of education in the country was the low self-esteem among young people” and cited data from an international survey among senior pupils. According to this study, 84% of Japanese students responded positively to the question “Do you sometimes feel worthless?”. Students in China and South Korea performed twice better on this index. Thus, to raise the self-esteem of Japanese youth, in January 2014, they decided to move the focus in the history of Japan from the 20th century “war crimes” to “patriotism” and key issues “of paramount importance”, namely territorial disputes with the country’s immediate neighbors - Russia, China and South Korea. At the same time, they cited in these textbooks as the “national treasure” and “native Japanese territory” such islands as Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu in China), Takeshima islands (Dokdo in South Korea) and the “native Japanese islands” in the southern Russian Kuriles - Shikotan, Etorofu and Habomai.

Seoul and Beijing immediately expressed their strong indignation for these changes. However, they did not do this for the first time. In 2001, they condemned the new edition of Japanese textbooks, where there were added comments that the number of victims of the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, committed by the Japanese military, “may be greatly exaggerated by the Chinese side”, and they did not touch upon the atrocities of the Japanese military in South Korea. (By the way, the textbooks of 2014 edition do not contain these and other facts).

Taiwan expressed its desire to diminish the importance of the Nanjing Massacre in 2007, and thus, also received sharp criticism from China.

In response to their unhappy neighbors, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, on December 26, 2013, visited the Yasukuni Shrine, where war criminals, convicted by an international tribunal, are buried, and who are considered heroes in Japan. The Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has visited this temple 6 times since he came to power in 2001 (the first time in the preceding two decades). Seoul and Beijing especially remember his last visit to the temple on August 15, 2006 – as this is a very important date in China, South Korea and other countries of East Asia, which suffered in the first half of the twentieth century from Japanese aggression. This day is celebrated as the day of the defeat of Japan and the end of the Japanese occupation. Governments of these countries have repeatedly warned Koizumi that his visit to the temple that day will mean Tokyo’s desire to revive Japanese militarism. Moreover, such
acts will make them doubt the sincerity of the earlier made apology for war crimes.

This time, at the end of January 2014, the visit to the Yasukuni Shrine by Shinzō Abe made a “dignified” response: “Tokyo needed to send an official protest to China and South Korea in connection with the opening of a memorial in Harbin, dedicated to the Korean operative, who assassinated the first Japanese governor-general of Korea in 1909.”

Meanwhile Abe’s desire to change the approach to history is personal. His grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, during the Second World War was the Minister of Industry. After the surrender of Japan, he was arrested on suspicion of war crimes, but was never convicted, and later became the Prime Minister.

The second country that began to correct its textbooks was South Korea. The South Korean President Park Hyo Ken also took up the correction of schoolbooks from personal reasons in January 2014. He wanted not only to remove references to “Korean women for Japanese pleasure”, but also to hide the fact of the Koreans’ collaboration with their Japanese occupiers, based on the fact that his own father, Park Chung-hee, served in the Imperial Japanese Army and during his tenure in power (1962-1979) cooperated with Tokyo.

However, Beijing is a little disingenuous when accusing its neighbors of changes in school textbooks: in fact, Chinese history textbooks do not contain references to the Chinese aggression against India in 1963 and the invasion in Vietnam in 1979. This is done in order “not to make the younger generation feel guilty and responsible for past mistakes.”

In turn, Vietnam – another state challenging China for a number of islands in the South China Sea – also engaged in revising its history. In mid-February 2014, one of the most respected Vietnamese professors proposed to introduce the “Defensive War against Chinese Aggression in 1979” into the school curriculum. “This historic event is no less significant than the defensive wars against France or the United States,” explained Professor Le Mau Han. “The youth of today must feel that national pride, which helped the Vietnamese defend their country’s sovereignty,” he added.

It was after the end of the conflict in 1979 that Vietnam was left without several islands of the Spratly Archipelago in the South China Sea, which China wants to completely take today.

However, will this fortified spirit of the next generation of Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans and Japanese, raised with this new ideology of history textbooks, help them forget about their ancestors apologies for war crimes and find new ways to “restore historical justice” in the battle for marine space?

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