Developments in Japan’s Foreign Policy in January 2019

The trends in Japan’s foreign policy that have been evident over the last few months have continued to play out, and in fact, intensified in January 2019. It is worth noting that Japan is one of several key players in the global political game during the current “post-Cold War” era. The same thing, by the way, could be said about Japan’s ally in the Second World War, Germany.

In this respect the commonly-held view that Japan and Germany are merely puppets occupied and controlled by the USA is clearly unfounded. Puppet governments (which generally have what could be described as a personal interest in the so-called occupation) do not cut out their “imperial overlord” and sign $70 billion trade deals with each other. With sums like that at stake, Japan can afford to put up with annoying eavesdropping (in the form of wiretaps and bugs) and bad-tempered reprimands on a variety of subjects. For example, in relation to the Nord Stream 2 project, and, in general, Japan’s “softness” towards Russia.

In the first few weeks of 2019, Russia has been one of Japan’s main foreign policy priorities. January 2019 saw the latest stage in the long-drawn-out bilateral talks on signing a peace treaty which would finally draw a line under the three-week conflict between the USSR and Japan in August and early September 1945.

Drawing that line would resolve all the outstanding problems between Russia and Japan, and the two countries
would be able to start over with a clean slate. This would put an end to the ongoing political disputes on the significance and purpose of a number of bilateral agreements concluded in the last 160 years (for example, were the actions of the USSR on 8 August 1945 in breach of the neutrality pact concluded with Japan on 25 April 1941?, and what does the 1952 San Francisco Peace Agreement mean for the two countries?) and these matters would henceforth be of purely historical interest.

It is true that, in the real-world game of international politics, the choice of “maps” and the effectiveness of a country’s chosen strategies in relation to significant partners are defining factors. And it is becoming increasingly clear that Japan is, very definitely, a “significant partner”.

But nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the importance of paperwork, duly signed and sealed. The peace treaty would give Russia a temporary breathing space, in which to overcome the ongoing consequences (particularly in the economy - and in people’s minds) of the collapse of the USSR some 30 years ago. In the future, everything would depend, not on past generations, but on us. However, the popular Japanese newspaper Mainichi Shimbun has described the results of the talks held in Moscow as “unclear.”

One circumstance that is in need of further comment and explanation, (and which met with rather negative reactions in Russia) is the fact that, ahead of the Japanese Prime Minister’s journey to Moscow, the visit was discussed with representatives of the US Presidential administration. But, in this case, Japan cannot be charged with inviting an unwanted third party to bilateral talks: it should be remembered that the USA is Japan’s key ally. It would be strange if Japan did not consult it about a (potential) document of great strategic importance.

It would be seen as highly advisable for Russia to consult its strategic partner, China, in similar circumstances. It is possible that a leak of information to the media about what is, for China, a highly sensitive issue - preliminary talks on territorial disputes with Japan (a successor-party to the San Francisco Peace Treaty) would prevent Japan from making ill-considered -and provocative- statements concerning Japan’s and Russia’s “shared fears” about the “Chinese menace”.

When implementing its policy of “turning Eastwards” Russia needs to bear in mind the key regional problem which is at the root of the ongoing tension in relations between Japan and China. It is essential that Russia does not let itself be used as an instrument or pawn in the complex political struggle between two leading Asian (and world) powers. Instead, Russia could act as honest broker between Japan and China and help them resolve their differences.

In general, there is little sense in discussing the question of a peace treaty between Russia and Japan without reference to the wider context: the current political situation in the Asia-Pacific region. What is more, it is entirely possible that the final stages of the talks on the peace treaty will, as they progress, provide opportunities to discuss an increasingly wide range of regional problems.

One of Shinzo Abe’s recent trips to Europe, two weeks before the talks in Moscow, was no less significant. The very fact that it took place after just three months after his five-day trip to a number of European countries (Spain, France, and then a visit to Brussels for the Asia-Europe forum) is a clear indication of the increasingly important role that Europe is playing in Japan’s foreign policy. Meanwhile, Japan’s importance in the complicated game played by Washington, Beijing and Moscow is growing as well.

One important milestone in relations between Japan and Europe was the signature in the June 2018 EU-Japan summit of two Agreements on economic and strategic cooperation, which had been under discussion since 2013. According to a statement issued by the European Commission on December 12, 2018, they will enter into legal force on February 1, 2019.

In the same statement, those Agreements create an open trading zone covering 635 million people and almost one third of the world’s total GDP.

However, the UK - until now one of the main members of the EU - is about to leave, and the uncertainty about the terms of its departure raises a major question about how the two Agreements will be implemented. Shinzo Abe’s main goal, in his trip to the Netherlands and the UK at the beginning of January 2019, was to find some answers to the many questions relating to Brexit.

There is good reason for Tokyo’s interest in this issue, as Japanese companies have long had a significant presence in all the leading European countries. In Britain, some 150,000 people work for Japanese companies. And how will they be able to continue to do business in a situation in which the technological supply chain between Continental and British companies remains, but the removal of customs barriers between Japan and Europe applies (as stated in the
Following the “divorce” between London and Brussels it will be possible to continue working, but the rules will need to be clear. Accordingly, Shinzo Abe’s main message (some commentators went so far as to use the word “prayer”) to the British Prime Minister Theresa May during his meeting with her in London was that the UK should avoid a situation in which it leaves the EU without a deal (a “hard Brexit”).

However, by the beginning of 2019 the question of what type of Brexit would take place was already out of the British Prime Minister’s hands. That is why the question of Britain joining an international joint project of any kind after its departure from the EU - with or without a deal - is a very real one. It is now a year since the British government expressed interest in participating in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, led by Japan.

It is likely that that is one of the issues that Theresa May and Shinzo Abe discussed. In fact, the Trans-Pacific Partnership’s management body met for the first time on January 19 in Tokyo, and discussed the question of the procedure for new members to join the organisation.

Finally, the last significant action of Japan’s foreign policy in January 2019 has been Shinzo Abe’s participation in the work of the Davos international forum - he went there immediately after his talks with the Russian president in Moscow.

For various reasons, the leaders of a number of major world powers - including the USA, China, Russia, the UK and France did not attend the Davos 2019 forum.

The most important world leaders to participate were thus Shinzo Abe and Angela Merkel, a fact which the present author finds rather symbolic, and a very revealing indication of the way the world order is changing. As was discussed at the beginning of this article.

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