

The future of Russia-Japan relations by Andrei Cazacu

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The security and defense bills up for consideration by Japan's Parliament signal the beginning of a potentially major shift in East Asian security. The changes grant the SDF (Self Defense Force) the right to enter combat in support of an ally, in effect altering pacifist prerogatives of the post-WWII Japanese constitution and, in turn, raise questions about the future role of Japan in the Asia-Pacific security landscape.

Having been isolated by the West after the Crimean annexation, the Russian government has been increasingly looking toward East Asia, particularly seeking to strengthen ties with China, Japan's main regional rival. Because of this, it has become imperative to reassess the future of Russian-Japanese relations.

Japan's aspirations

After a highly destructive first half of the 20th century and a crushing defeat at the hands of the United States, Japan adopted a constitution that renounced war as a sovereign right, relying heavily on the US to guarantee national security. Now the third largest economy in the world, the country is set to change its approach after PM Shinzo Abe's Cabinet endorsed two defense bills that include the right to exercise collective self-defense, i.e. to defend or to assist a friendly nation (which many interpret as 'the US') in defending in case of attack from a third party. The bills were passed on to the Diet despite heavy protests from both opposition politicians and the public.

At this stage, the precise course that the Japanese government will take is unclear, although it is willing and desires to take on a more prominent regional and global role.

[Some analysts](#) point to the possibility that the US-dominated "hub-and-spoke" network will give way to a multipolar web, as Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines etc. begin to cooperate more with each other and rely less on the US, which would have a considerable impact on the latter's 'pivot' to Asia. This is highly unlikely, particularly since the constitutional changes were accompanied by a revision of US-Japan guidelines for defense cooperation that enshrine Japan's right and obligation to support the US, both regionally and globally. The role of the US will not disappear.

Since this reassessment of security and defense comes at a time when Russia looks to reassert its own role as a global power, it brings us back to our initial question: what will the

future of Russia-Japan relations look like? For that we must understand Russia's regional interests.

Russia's regional interests

The focal point of East Asia in recent years has been the South China Sea. Russia, however, is not overly concerned with China's activities there since they do not affect its interests directly. On the other hand, Russia is very concerned with Washington's missile defense system in the Asia-Pacific. Just as the Kremlin does not believe that the missile defense system to be installed in Eastern Europe is aimed at Iran, it is distrustful of claims that the Asia-Pacific system is defensive and meant to protect against Pyongyang.

Japan under Abe has attempted to thaw relations with Russia. Washington's influence on Japanese foreign policy, however, has been an important factor preventing it.

Therefore, Russia's main regional interest lies in its relationship with China.

Sino-Russian relations

While officials from both sides boast of the highest levels of bilateral cooperation in history, the relationship between China and Russia might [not be as close as it appears at first glance](#). China has not been wholly supportive of Russian policy in Ukraine, going so far as to abstain from a vote in the UN General Assembly on March 27, 2014 which criticized the annexation of Crimea, to Moscow's displeasure. Russia has also been reluctant to accept the junior partner role which the relationship offers, sensing that it clashes with its own great power ambitions.

China's '[New Silk Road](#)' economic project also clashes with the Eurasian Union ideal, pointing to a possible clash of national interests in the near future over Central Asia.

That said, the two countries have enjoyed close military ties. The 2014 Russian-Chinese summit, attended by high-ranking officials including Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, was paralleled by a joint navy exercise off the coast of Shanghai (*Maritime Cooperation 2014*) which demonstrated the close relationship between the two countries' armed forces and sent a signal to the US and its allies about the future of East Asian security. At the end of August the two countries held "*Joint Sea 2015 II*," a week of naval exercises in the Sea of Japan.

Furthermore, in November 2014, after his visit to China, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that the Russia-Chinese strategic partnership would contribute to peace and stability in the whole Eurasian region, stressing in particular the need for cooperation in military operations and technology.

The US already sees both China and Russia as military threats, as evidenced by the newly released [National Military](#)

[Strategy](#), which also ranks the risk of a military conflict between the US and another great power at “low but rising.” In addition, more Pentagon generals openly describe Russia as an “[existential threat](#),” claims that only validate Russian concerns about belligerent US intentions and could be a strong impetus for the Kremlin to tighten security cooperation with China.

A serious Chinese-Russian partnership in defense and security in the region would arguably pose the biggest challenge to the US-led system of which Japan is a member.

The Kuril Islands dispute

A good barometer for the evolution of the Russian-Japanese relationship will be the Kuril Islands, which the Japanese call the “Northern Territories.” They stretch north of Hokkaido to the southern tip of Kamchatka and, while nowhere near as tense as the dispute over the Senkaku Islands, they are an emotive issue for the Japanese public.

Historically inhabited by Japanese people, the Kuril Islands were seized by the USSR at the end of World War II, which by 1949 deported all residents to Japan. Today they are home to roughly 30,000 Russians and host a considerable military presence. Because of the dispute, no formal peace declaration has been signed between the two countries.

Russia’s military reforms of the past few years have involved a number of large-scale military exercises and combat readiness snap inspections, a number of which were conducted in August 2014 on the islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri, part of the Kuril chain. These drew criticism from Japanese officials. Furthermore, similar to moves in Europe, Russia also conducted exercises that involved military aircraft flying worryingly close to Japanese territory.

It is unlikely that either side will back down from its position or that the islands themselves will be reason enough for tensions to grow. If the row over the Senkaku Islands is any indication, the Kurils could become a useful issue to be invoked by two governments that have not been afraid to stoke nationalist sentiment to deflect from more substantial problems.

Ukraine

The war in Ukraine is very important for the relationship. As mentioned, Tokyo’s approach to Moscow is heavily dependent on signals from Washington, which is why any rapprochement is unlikely as long as the crisis remains unresolved.

Japan has joined the sanctions regime and condemned the annexation and Russia’s role in the war in the east. This was not well received by Russia: Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that: “We view this unfriendly move as fresh evidence of Japan’s inability to pursue an independent foreign policy. By approving sanctions under external pressure, Tokyo is harming above all its own geopolitical standing.” The statement resonated with those in Japan who view the post-WWII period as nothing short of foreign occupation by the US.

Even though Japan’s contribution to the sanctions regime is minimal, it is a clear signal of commitment to the G7 and

the Western-dominated system, as well as a hint as to what Abe’s cloudy policy of “active pacifism” might actually entail.

Conclusion

This assessment is pessimistic. Japan’s current government, backed by a United States with its own interests in the region, has seized an opportunity conferred not just by China’s aggressive policy in the East China Sea, but also by Russia’s destabilizing role in Ukraine, to change a constitution renowned for its pacifism. As Japan begins to define its new role as a global and regional security actor while staying firmly in the Western camp, its relationship with Russia, whose main ally in the region is China, is bound to remain frosty.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.