



## UKRAINE: A TURNING POINT IN JAPANESE FOREIGN POLICY?

BY KRISTI GOVELLA

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted an unprecedented global response. Despite their geographic distance, many Asian countries have joined the United States and Europe in imposing a [wide range of sanctions](#). Japan surprised many with its condemnation of the invasion, in contrast to its hesitancy to take action against Russia after the [2014 invasion of Crimea](#) or following the [Myanmar](#) coup.

But while these moves reflect shifts in Japan's approach to the international order and its relations with both Russia and Europe, the specifics of the Ukraine crisis suggest that this trend may not necessarily apply to Japan's foreign policy in the future.

### Japan's response to Russia

Prior to the invasion, Japan monitored the situation in Ukraine closely and took small steps to signal its alignment with the West. For example, Japan [announced](#) on Feb. 9 that it would divert some its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports to Europe, where supply was tight. As Russia amassed troops near the Ukraine border, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida

Fumio told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Feb. 15 that he would extend at least \$100 million in [emergency loans](#), and Japan signed on to a [G7 Foreign Ministers' statement](#) expressing concern on Feb. 19.

On Feb. 23, after Russia ordered troops into separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, Japan [joined](#) Western nations in imposing sanctions and threatening to go further if Moscow launched an all-out invasion. Japan's [initial sanctions](#) included prohibiting issuance of Russian bonds in Japan, freezing the assets of specific Russian individuals, and restricting travel to Japan.

After the Russian invasion began on Feb. 24, Japan ramped up its response in tandem with G7 countries and other partners. Kishida [joined with other G7 leaders](#) in condemning Russia's actions as "a serious threat to the rules-based international order, with ramifications well beyond Europe." Japan's sanctions have since expanded to include restrictions on transactions with Russia's central bank, freezing assets of Russian entities and individuals, excluding Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system, imposing export controls on goods such as semiconductors, and suspending visa issuance, among other things. Japan has also imposed sanctions on Belarus and provided \$100 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, at least \$100 million in loans, visa extensions, and [basic supplies](#) for its military. It also announced steps to accept [refugees](#).

Japan coordinated its actions closely with the United States and others. It took many steps simultaneously with Washington and other first movers, although Tokyo has sometimes been a day or so behind, as in the [blocking](#) certain Russian banks' access to SWIFT. Still, Japan's stance on Russia has emerged as one of the toughest in the Indo-Pacific.

### Motivations and limitations

Several factors combine to motivate Japan's response, and also offer insights into the limitations to generalizing from this case to predict Japan's responses to other crises.

First, the scale and nature of the conflict differ dramatically from the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea or other cases in which Japan displayed much more hesitancy. There is little ambiguity to the current situation: the conflict is far more intense, and Russia's role as aggressor is undeniable. Moreover, the Ukrainian people's resistance in the face of the invasion has inspired the sympathy of governments and publics around the world, including a growing segment of the Japanese population. Poll data suggests that the proportion of Japanese people supporting alignment with US sanctions has grown from 43% [in January](#) to 61% in [late February](#) after the start of the conflict.

Second, Russia's actions undermine the rules and norms governing the international order, as Kishida has [declared](#). Japan has been a major beneficiary of the post-World War II international order, and over the past decade has taken an [increasingly high-profile role](#) in defending its principles and institutions, from its leadership on trade to its promotion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. If countries violate the fundamental principle of state sovereignty without consequences, it destabilizes international relations in a way that threatens Japan's national interests, with potential parallels to China looming large. Elites as well as the Japanese public fear such spillover. For example, a [Nikkei poll](#) released Feb. 28 showed that 77% of Japanese respondents were concerned that the Ukraine invasion increases the odds of China using force against Taiwan.

Third, while it was once common to treat events in Europe and Asia as separate, the importance of developments in one region for the other are now clearly understood. Japan welcomes [increased engagement](#) by Europe in the Indo-Pacific as a way to build coalitions with like-minded partners to help address thorny regional problems. By displaying solidarity with Europe on Ukraine, Japan helps amplify the effect of other countries' sanctions and signals to its European partners in hopes they will reciprocate in the event of a similar contingency in the Indo-Pacific—such as in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea.

Fourth, Japan's economic interdependence with Russia is limited. In 2020, Russia was Japan's [13<sup>th</sup>-largest](#) import partner and accounted for about 1% of Japanese exports. Under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, the Japanese government attempted to build a closer relationship with Russia in hopes of negotiating a favorable resolution to the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands. Although Japanese companies were encouraged to do business with Russia as part of this process, Russia ranked only 31<sup>st</sup> as a destination for Japanese [outbound investment](#) in 2020. Japan's most significant economic connections with Russia come in the field of energy: [imports](#) of LNG, coal, and crude oil, plus [Japanese involvement](#) in the Russian energy sector. Japan has [discussed](#) banning Russian energy imports with the United States and Europe, a step that Washington [decided](#) to take on March 8. However, many in Japan are concerned about [energy prices](#) and shortages, despite Kishida's [reassurances](#) that the country has sufficient reserves of oil and LNG to avoid a significant impact on supplies in the short term.

Finally, the failure of Japan's conciliatory policy toward Vladimir Putin to produce improvements in their territorial dispute during previous administrations paved the way for Kishida's harder line. Japan's recent actions vis-à-vis Russia likely dashed any hopes of regaining the Northern Territories—at least while Putin remains leader—but this was already recognized as a [lost cause](#) by the final days of Abe's time in office. Over the last year reports of increased activity in [Russian military planes](#) and [warships](#) around the disputed territories have prompted additional concern. Kishida was foreign minister under Abe and helped promote this prior agenda. The current crisis, however, is Kishida's opportunity to break with past precedent and distinguish himself from Abe, while demonstrating solidarity with the West.

Still, Japan is unlikely to endorse a values-based diplomacy and will instead likely continue its traditional pragmatic approach. When the nature of a conflict is more ambiguous or its economic stakes higher, Japan is likely to display more hesitancy—both conditions are likely with China, with which

Japan is highly interdependent, and which tends to favor [gray zone conflict](#) over outright aggression.

Even with Ukraine, it remains to be seen how far the United States and Europe will go with sanctions, and to what extent Japan will follow. As pressure mounts to extend sanctions to the energy sector, Japan will face difficult decisions.

While the Ukraine crisis may not herald a sea change in Japan's overall foreign policy, it does mark a turning point in its policy toward Russia. Japan's actions thus far also reveal important changes in the way Tokyo sees its role and its willingness to confront new global challenges.

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