Russia: facing the war in Ukraine, an intransigent Japan

Description

As a member of the G7, Japan has applied sanctions against Russia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Unfortunately, these have exposed it to strong economic reprisals, even though the conflict did not threaten the country's interests. Tokyo is following a strategy that goes beyond solidarity with the Western camp: behind this war lie issues that directly concern Japan.

On 26 September 2022, a bizarre episode worthy of the Cold War took place in Vladivostok: the Russian security services arrested the Japanese consul Tatsunori Motoki, while he was receiving *"confidential information on cooperation between Moscow and an Asian country [...] in exchange for a fee"*(1). According to Russian sources, the Japanese diplomat also sought to gather confidential information about *"the impact of Western sanctions on the economic situation"* in the region. Declared persona non grata, he was ordered to leave Russia within 48 hours. The Japanese government denied the charges and *"strongly"* condemned the *"unbelievable acts"*(2): the official was *"blindfolded, had both hands and his head pressed to the ground [...] and then was interrogated in an authoritarian manner"*. In reaction to what it considers a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, Japan asked a Russian diplomat to leave Japan.

A firm stance on Russia

This episode is the latest in a series of tensions that have marked exchanges between the two countries since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, relations have been at a low ebb since Japan joined the Western sanctions. On 27 February, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida declared that the Russian aggression was *"a clear violation of international law that cannot be tolerated and that we strongly condemn"*(3). Indeed, Japan is among the few non-Western countries participating in successive economic sanctions against Russia.

Among the most coercive measures, Tokyo banned the sale of semiconductors to Russia on 25 February. Three days later, it froze the assets of Russian officials (including Vladimir Putin), a list of whom has grown over the months. In May, Japan declared an embargo on high-tech equipment and implemented the exclusion of Russia from the Swift banking system. Finally, on 7 October, new sanctions were imposed on hundreds of Russian officials, companies, and organizations.

These sanctions have triggered the anger of Moscow, which considers these measures illegal. Unlike the Western countries, considered de facto a coherent whole and a designated adversary, Japan surprised Russia with its radical approach to its "special operation." Immediately, Russia listed Japan as a "hostile country" and banned 63 Japanese officials, including the Prime Minister. In October, the Russian ambassador to Japan, Mikhail Galuzin, accused the Japanese government of *"maintaining a destructive policy towards Russia that further worsens bilateral relations"*(4).

The Russian response

Russia has many means of pressure on Japan, which has much to lose by falling out with Moscow. In 2014, Japan did not participate in Western sanctions following the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea. Instead, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe moved closer to Moscow to safeguard Japan's economic and political interests.

From the point of view of international law, Japan and Russia remain two countries at war. Although their relations have been normalized since the Joint Declaration of 1965, the signing of a peace treaty is a veritable sea serpent. The same

applies to the territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, which de facto biases their relationship.

However, from 2016 onwards, Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin engaged in a dialogue of “small steps,” especially in the economic field, to gradually allow an agreement on the Kurils and the signing of a peace treaty. Despite ups and downs, this agreement still seemed possible recently. However, this ambition was shattered by the first Japanese sanctions, and, as early as February, talks were broken off by Moscow. In the aftermath, the Russian Navy maneuvered near the Kuril Islands. In June, the Kremlin announced a tax exemption for any company wishing to set up in these islands; in September, it denounced the agreement that had established since 1991 a simplified procedure for visiting these islands for Japanese citizens who were natives.

The Japanese economy, which has become increasingly dependent on Russia in recent years, feels the impact of Tokyo’s strategy. In 2021, Japan already had a trade deficit with Russia of more than 5 billion dollars, notably due to its gas supply since the start-up of the Sakhalin-2 gas field (22% owned by Japanese companies but nationalized by Moscow in September in retaliation for the sanctions). Japan also depends on Russian oil (14% of its imports in 2021) and buckwheat (10%). But it is, above all, fishing used as a means of pressure by Russia. Since 1998, the two countries have been linked by an agreement authorizing the exploitation of fisheries resources in Russian waters by Japanese fishermen from Hokkaidō. However, in June 2022, the Kremlin suspended the deal, throwing the local industry into a violent crisis.

Japan doesn’t give in and gets stronger

Against all odds, despite these counter-sanctions, Japan maintains its firmness towards the Kremlin and seems to have resigned itself to the rupture. Therefore, to understand the determination of the Japanese government regarding the war in Ukraine, one must look at the geopolitical news in Northeast Asia.

On 26 February, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi declared that this war would *“not end in Europe”*(5). From that moment on, the government feared that a lack of firmness towards Russia on its part and that of Western capitals would contribute to giving a free hand to countries whose ambitions would ultimately threaten Japan’s territorial integrity.

Tokyo is deeply concerned about the rift over Taiwan. The start of the war in Ukraine coincided with high tension between Taiwan, Washington, and Beijing. Japan, a historical ally of the United States, would inevitably be involved in an isolated conflict in Taiwan.

Moreover, the Senkaku archipelago, barren islets close to Taiwan, is owned by Japan but claimed by China since 1945. Besides being rich in hydrocarbons, the islands and their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) are an obstacle to Beijing’s access to the Pacific Ocean. As with the disputed islets in the South China Sea, China is pressuring Japan to recover these territories, even if it means using threats against it. Tokyo’s firmness towards Moscow is thus indirectly aimed at China to dissuade it from acting in the same way in Taiwan and, above all, in the Senkaku Islands.

Finally, since the beginning of 2022, Japan has been threatened by regular missile launches by North Korea. Some of these missiles have flown over its territory or fallen directly into its economic zone, putting the country on alert. However, North Korea enjoys the joint protection of Russia and China in the UN Security Council. Therefore, Japan cannot afford to show any weakness in the region.

The strategy under Shinzo Abe was to avoid a joint position between China and Russia in the area at all costs. The failure of this approach led Tokyo to abandon its policy of balancing Moscow, Beijing, and Washington and turn entirely to the United States. Historically linked to liberal democracies, Japan continues to host US bases on its territory and actively participates in Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy. This posture explains its sanctions against Russia and the massive increase in its military budget. In August 2022, a special appropriation by the Diet raised the defense budget to a record $40 billion (1% of GDP).

Furthermore, in December, the government announced that 43,000 billion yen (306 billion euros) will be spent on the military over five years to increase the annual defense budget to 8,900 billion yen and the expanded security budget to 11,000 billion yen by 2027. At the same time, a revision of the defense doctrine has been adopted to enable Japan to

develop counter-attack capabilities. Another vital measure was signing a "reciprocal access agreement"(6) with London on 11 January 2023, which allowed both armies to deploy on each other's territory.

Accelerating the new division of the world that seemed to be taking shape over the past few years, the war in Ukraine has, therefore, had a significant impact on Japanese policy, which has sided with the West and assumed its opposition to Russia, despite the risks. Although Russia seems to be suffering less from Japanese sanctions than Japan is, Moscow will have to deal with Japan's massive rearmament and the strengthening of its alliance with the United States in the medium and long term. However, suppose Japan, because of its pacifist constitution, had never constituted a threat to Russia since the end of the Cold War. In that case, a rupture could make the latter fear a potential conflict on two fronts, a Russian strategic haunting since the 19th century.

Notes:

(1) "Russia detains Japanese consul on spying charge; Tokyo hints at retaliation," *Reuters*, 27 September 2022.

(2) "Japan demands apology from Russia after diplomat allegedly blindfolded and interrogated," *CNN*, 27 September 2022.

(3) "Kishida condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine, vows to cooperate on further sanctions," *The Japan Times*, 24 February 2022.

(4) "Russia's ambassador to Japan blames crumbling relationship on Japan," *Fox News*, 11 November 2023.

(5) "In signal to China, Japan, and the U.S. say Ukraine impact 'will not stop in Europe,'" *The Japan Times*, 26 February 2022.

(6) "Défense : Londres et Tokyo signent mercredi un 'accord d'accès réciproque'", *Le Figaro*, 11 January 2023.

Thumbnail: Press conference by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida after a telephone conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, 30 September 2022 (Photo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan).

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