

## Japan's debate over Russia and the Ukraine conflict: a review of Japanese periodicals and think tank publications in 2014 and 2015

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# Japan's Debate over Russia and the Ukraine Conflict

A Review of Japanese Periodicals and Think Tank Publications in 2014 and 2015

*Leon Daiske Oberbäumer and Alexandra Sakaki*

German observers tend to view the causes and consequences of the Ukraine conflict in a Euro-Atlantic context. Their primary focus lies on Europe's economic well-being and stability. The political discourse in Japan reveals a very different perception of the events. In Japan, Russia is viewed not primarily as a European power but rather as an Asian power. In their analysis of the causes and consequences of the conflict, Japanese experts consequently concentrate on the Asian context. Many of them call on Japan to intensify relations with Moscow – even if doing so means departing from the G7 line and Western sanctions policy. Japan's interests, they argue, are best served by such a course of action.

Before the Ukraine crisis, Japan under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was set on achieving an historic breakthrough in relations with Russia. In his first fourteen months of office, Abe met with the Russian president five times – more than with any other head of state or government. Abe and Putin intended to negotiate a compromise to resolve the territorial dispute over the four southern islands of the Kuril archipelago and finally – seven decades after the end of the war – to conclude a peace treaty. These plans have been put on ice as a result of the Ukraine crisis and the sanctions imposed on Russia by the G7 nations.

Since then, the Ukraine conflict and its effect on Japanese-Russian relations have

been discussed in numerous political periodicals and think tank publications. Much of the analysis is focused on identifying the causes of the crisis. Japanese specialists place a much greater emphasis than their European colleagues on the Russian-Chinese relationship and the conflicting interests of the two nations in the post-Soviet space, above all in Central Asia and Ukraine. Second, many experts focus on the rapprochement between Russia and China that has taken place since the beginning of the crisis and which springs primarily from Russia's weakness as a result of its international isolation. Opinions are divided on the extent to which this convergence is likely to lead to a strong long-term partnership. A third area of research

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lies in extrapolating implications for Japanese policy. Many experts call for a change of strategy towards Moscow. They argue that Tokyo's interests are better served by rapprochement with Russia than by the current ambivalent course, which consists of Japan joining in Western sanctions while at the same time signaling to Russia its desire to maintain good relations. Calls by right-wing conservative groups in Japan for a military buildup, by contrast, represent but a minority opinion. Few Japanese researchers address the long-term effects of the Ukraine conflict on the international order.

### **The Goals of Russia's Course of Action**

Many German observers see the Ukraine conflict as a geopolitical power struggle between Russia and West. In their assessment, the crisis is a manifestation of Russia's efforts to bolster its political influence in the post-Soviet space and to put a stop to any further eastward expansion by the EU and NATO. But many Japanese experts consider such an interpretation one-sided. They see the geopolitical competition between Russia and China in Central Asia and the Ukraine as a second important motivation for Russia's course of action.

An essay by **Tetsuji Tanaka** in the conservative monthly *Bungei Shunjū* (circulation approx. 500,000) is representative of this view. Tanaka, who is the director of the Central Asia and Caucasus Research Institute in Tokyo, concedes that Russia and China have in fact cooperated in Central Asia in the past. The two countries have actively participated in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in order to counter the growing influence of the US in Central Asia. Immediately following the breakup of the Soviet Union the two countries also came together in the framework of the Shanghai Five, the precursor to the SCO, in order to resolve regional border disputes.

But Tanaka argues that in recent years, Sino-Russian relations have increasingly become tainted by strategic rivalry and distrust. The catalyst for this tension, he believes, is the Silk Road initiative, Beijing's attempt to build an economic belt extending from Central Asia across the Middle East to Europe. According to Tanaka, Moscow disapproves of the way China is employing massive investment to expand its political and economic influence to former Soviet republics. Tanaka bases his analysis primarily on statements made by various Ukrainian researchers.

Tanaka observes that Moscow views China's rapprochement with Ukraine with great suspicion, given that China has increased its acquisition of military technology from former Soviet stockpiles in Ukraine. China made its first purchase in 1998, when it acquired an old aircraft carrier, which it subsequently modernized and equipped for its own navy despite promises to the contrary. According to Tanaka, China has also purchased icebreakers and hovercraft and – it is rumored – even missile technology from Ukraine. It has also been active on the economic sphere. In 2008 China began promoting the expansion of an agricultural area in a region with defunct coal and iron ore factories – at first as an ecological project. Following the initial success, China expressed an interest in leasing the vast three-million-hectare area for no less than thirty years. In order to facilitate the transport of regional agricultural products to China, explains Tanaka, Beijing is planning to build a large commercial port on the Crimean Peninsula near Yevpatoria. This plan is alarming the Russian government, whose most important naval port for its Black Sea fleet lies only 100 km away in Sevastopol.

Tanaka sees the Ukraine conflict as a strategy by Moscow to thwart China's plans and preserve Russia's sphere of influence and power. Even after the annexation of Crimea, China is still interested building its Crimean port and leasing farmland in eastern Ukraine; but Russia is doing every-

thing in its power to stop it. In Tanaka's assessment, Russia's ongoing support for the armed separatists in eastern Ukraine and for an independent "People's Republic of Donetsk" are aimed at hindering China from carrying out its leasing plans.

**Shinji Hyōdō** of the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), a think tank attached to the Ministry of Defense, also sees the geopolitical competition with China as a key factor in Russia's Ukraine policy. But he places more emphasis than Tanaka on the interplay with two other factors. First, Russia perceived the eastern expansion of NATO as a threat. For the loser of the Cold War, writes Hyōdō, it was humiliating to witness the accession of former Soviet countries to the alliance. By annexing Crimea, Putin prevented Ukraine from following suit. Hyōdō points out that Russia made use of the same tactic in the Georgia conflict: By recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia rendered Georgian accession to NATO impossible.

Second, Hyōdō focuses on the consequences of waning US power. Washington's decision not to intervene in the Syria conflict, argues Hyōdō, has made clear that the US is no longer able to play the role of "global policeman". In view of this fact, the Kremlin has excluded the possibility of a US intervention in Ukraine. Hyōdō believes that the loss of US power also explains why Moscow has annexed a region in the current crisis, whereas in the Georgia conflict it limited itself to recognizing regions as independent. Hyōdō reasons that all three factors – NATO's eastward expansion, US weakness and China's growing influence in Ukraine – have motivated Russia's course of action in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

**Yoshiki Hidaka**, visiting senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in the US and a journalist for the Japanese broadcasting company NHK, comes to a different conclusion. In an article published in the monthly magazine *Seiron*, which has a circulation of approximately 80,000 and is directed primarily at the right-wing con-

servative camp, he points out that Russia has become an aggressive and strong military power. Because the influence and the independence of the country depend primarily on access to natural resources and safe export routes, he explains, Russia wants to use Crimea to export raw materials via the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Hidaka predicts that in the future Russia will devote more attention to expanding its Pacific fleet in Asia. Moscow has become increasingly interested in the natural resources found in the Arctic and has ramped up its presence there. In Hidaka's assessment, the sea route from the North Pole across the Bering Sea (bypassing Japan) is pivotal as it provides Russia with access to these resources. Hidaka considers it unlikely that Moscow will make concessions in the territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, which are under Russian administration. Hidaka's assessment stands for the right-wing conservative camp, but not for majority opinion in Japan.

### **The Sino-Russian Relationship since the Beginning of the Crisis**

Japanese observers agree that Moscow is looking for new partners in Asia as a result of being economically and politically isolated by the West. Consequently, the Russian-Chinese relationship has suddenly improved. The authors discussed here are in agreement that China has benefited from Russia's weakness. For example, China has been able to negotiate favorable prices for Russian gas imports. But none of the Japanese experts believes that Moscow is content playing the role of junior partner to Beijing. Opinions vary on the prospects for Sino-Russian relations.

**Hiroyuki Tanaka**, Moscow bureau chief of the daily newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*, recapitulates the swift rapprochement between Russia and China since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in the liberal monthly magazine *Mainichi Foramu*. Tanaka believes the rapprochement is setting the

course for the coming years. In 2014 alone, he notes, President Putin and President Xi Jinping met five times. Numerous joint projects have been initiated, resulting in certain strategic interdependencies. As evidence, Tanaka cites the gas agreement of May 2014, according to which Russia committed to provide China with gas for thirty years beginning in 2019 via a new pipeline.

The author emphasizes that the bilateral cooperation is not limited to the energy sector. To support Russian enterprises, Chinese banks and investors have stepped in to compensate for the lack of Western capital. Chinese firms are also involved in construction of a planned high-speed train connection between Moscow and Kazan, which lies 800 km to the east. Supposedly Russia even wants to sell China its newest jet fighter, the Sukhoi-35. Though Beijing has not come out clearly for or against Russia's annexation of Crimea, it is providing de facto support. Tanaka views Russia's plans to involve Chinese companies in the construction of a bridge between the Russian mainland and Crimea as evidence of this support. Tanaka sees great potential for cooperation between the two countries in the coming years, even if Moscow wishes to avoid becoming overly dependent on Beijing and is looking for other foreign policy partners.

The previously mentioned **Tetsuji Tanaka** is more skeptical when it comes to rapprochement tendencies. Tanaka ironically calls them a "honeymoon" resulting solely from Western sanctions and points out that the competitive relationship remains and will continue to impede close long-term cooperation. He also warns observers not to be deceived by Russia's involvement in the New Development Bank BRICS (with headquarters in Shanghai) or by possible participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiated by Beijing. In fact, Moscow's leading circles are deeply concerned about China's growing claim to power in Central Asia.

In an interview printed in the liberal monthly *Sekai*, **Tomoaki Nishitani**, director of the Toyota-financed Institute for Inter-

national Economic Studies, and **Kazuhiko Tōgō**, professor at Kyoto Sangyo University and former Japanese ambassador to the Netherlands, come to similar conclusions. Even if Russia has turned to China due to Western sanctions, they say, Moscow continues to harbor deep distrust towards its emerging neighbor. Russia therefore wants to avoid one-sided dependence on China at all costs. This is also evidenced by the planned route of the gas pipeline to China, which largely traverses Russian territory. This route allows Moscow to use the pipeline to deliver gas to other countries in the future. The two researchers believe that the Sino-Russian rivalry could have a negative effect on Japan if Russia expands its military presence in the Kuril Islands in the coming years. A return of the islands to Japan would then become even less likely.

## Implications for Japan

Nearly all the authors of the articles analyzed here call for a realignment of Japanese policy towards Russia. The government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has thus far pursued a dual-track strategy. On the one hand, the government has joined the other G7 countries in condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. On the other hand, it has only half-heartedly implemented the toothless sanctions imposed on Russia. This approach has enabled Tokyo to signal to Russia its desire to maintain good relations with Moscow, a message that Putin has understood. But most observers judge that this ambivalent policy does not sufficiently serve Japan's interests. They urge Japan to pursue closer ties with Russia.

Some authors justify this assessment by pointing out the advantages for Japan. They speculate that Russia, weakened as it is by Western sanctions, is likely to make concessions in the dispute over the Kuril Islands; the timing is therefore propitious for negotiations. This opinion is shared, for example, by the previously mentioned **Kazuhiko Tōgō** and by **Mitsuhiro Kimura**, head of the right-

wing nationalist political group Issuikai. In an interview with the conservative monthly magazine *Gekkan Nippon*, they allege that Moscow has a great interest in maintaining good relations with Tokyo, since Russia is anxious to reduce its dependency on Beijing. Japan should therefore lift its economic sanctions against Russia and seek to establish closer economic, cultural and military cooperation. If Tokyo holds out the prospect of technology transfer and bilateral energy trade, then Russia will open up to cooperation and dialogue. The authors argue that Japan should pursue an independent foreign policy and not allow itself to be guided by other G7 countries. The previously mentioned **Tomoaki Nishitani** believes that pursuing such an active, independent policy can strengthen Japan's role as a global actor and make it a worthy US partner.

Other authors draw attention to the risks of continuing to pursue an ambivalent Russia policy. **Taisuke Abiru**, a research fellow at the influential private think tank Tokyo Foundation, outlines two of these risks in an article on the think tank's website. First, though Tokyo has endeavored to diversify its energy imports since the Fukushima catastrophe, Abiru questions whether an intensified Japanese-Russian energy cooperation will develop as envisioned. He points out that there have been signs that Russia is withdrawing from plans to build several liquid natural gas plants in eastern Siberia following the conclusion of the Russian-Chinese agreement on gas deliveries in May 2014. According to statements made by the CEO of Gazprom and his deputy in September and October 2014, the company is in the process of determining whether gas acquired in Siberia can be delivered exclusively to China. Such considerations reveal how weak Russia's negotiating position vis-à-vis China currently is.

Second, Abiru fears the balance of power in Asia could be upset if Russia were to become more dependent on China. Forcing Moscow to play the role of junior partner to Beijing would simultaneously weaken those

powers that currently counterbalance China's growing regional and international influence. Given this state of affairs, Abiru recommends that Japan make clearer strides towards Russia, even if that means breaking ranks with the G7. Abiru points out that such a strategy also has its supporters in the US, citing as an example a *Foreign Affairs* article by Ely Ratner and Elizabeth Rosenberg from August 2014. The authors call on Washington to allow its Asian alliance partners greater room for maneuver in their relations with Moscow in order to reduce Russia's dependence on China. Abiru also notes that the first "search-and-rescue" training conducted by Russian and Japanese naval units since the Ukraine crisis, which took place in October 2014, met with a positive response by Robert Thomas, Commander of the US Seventh Fleet. In view of the lack of contacts between US and Russian naval forces, Thomas assessed the training as a particularly important point of contact with Russia.

It is striking that most proponents underestimate the negative effect that a change of strategy towards Russia could have on the observance of internationally binding norms and rules. If Tokyo were to stop implementing sanctions, Beijing might conclude that breaches of international law, though temporarily condemned, are ultimately tolerated. Many Japanese government officials thus fear that China could follow Russia's example and occupy the Senkaku Islands (Chinese: Diaoyutai) in the East China Sea, which are currently under Japanese administration.

Only a few of the authors discussed here draw attention to this possible consequence. One of them is **Shigeki Hakamada**, professor at the University of Niigata Prefecture. In an article in the magazine *Gaikō*, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he advises Japan to maintain good relations with Russia but to also make clear that it is unacceptable to violate the sovereignty of Ukraine. If Japan does not position itself clearly vis-à-vis Russia, it can hardly expect the international community to sup-

port it should China occupy the Senkaku Islands or even Okinawa Island, the main US military base in Japan. For Hakamada, Tokyo therefore has no choice but to continue pursuing its dual-track policy – a difficult diplomatic balancing act.

**Yoshiki Hidaka** comes to exactly the opposite conclusion. In an article for the monthly magazine *Voice*, which like *Seiron* is directed at the right-wing conservative camp, he argues that Japan must arm itself, as it is facing two major powers that disregard international law. Tokyo cannot rely solely upon its alliance partner, the US. Hidaka argues that it is unclear whether Washington would stand by Japan militarily in a conflict situation, for example over the Senkaku Islands. The domestically weakened Obama administration, Hidaka points out, lacks the financial resources to engage in another conflict. Thus, Japan needs to provide for its own protection. But Hidaka does not stipulate the extent to which he believes Japan should arm itself.

### **Implications for the International Order**

The long-term effects of the Ukraine conflict on the international order receive little attention in the Japanese debate. None of the authors discussed here addresses how the crisis is affecting international disarmament efforts, particularly the resultant loss of trust among negotiating partners. Also lacking are proposals for how to institute effective crisis management in the future. The consequences of the crisis for Europe's security order are also neglected.

When aspects of political order are discussed, Japanese experts concentrate primarily on the question of whether this conflict has the potential to split the international community into two power blocs. **Tatsuhiko Yoshizaki** draws attention to this very danger. Yoshizaki, an economist at the Sojitz Research Institute, which is sponsored by the Japanese trading company Sojitz Corporation, argues in the conserva-

tive monthly magazine *Chūō Kōron*, that a split between the BRICS and the G7 countries and their allies is looming on the horizon. Yoshizaki points out that Russia has intensified its cooperation with the other BRICS partners since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. At their summit meeting in July 2014, the BRICS countries agreed to establish their own New Development Bank as well as the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, a monetary reserve fund – thus challenging the West and the established international financial institutions. Yoshizaki sees China and Russia, in particular, as working together in this area in order to defy the West. Nevertheless, he believes that the BRICS countries are destined to fail because they lack both political unity and economic stability.

The already-mentioned **Shigeki Hakamada** dismisses as unrealistic the idea that blocs could be established similar to those formed during the Cold War. He concedes that the Russian president intends to form a Eurasian Economic Union of former Soviet republics as a counterweight to the EU and that Putin wants to add further Soviet successor nations to the current list of five members (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Belarus). Due to the close ties between some of these countries and the EU, however, this plan is unlikely to come to fruition. In the end, Hakamada concludes that the mutual economic dependencies in today's globalized world run counter to the formation of such a bloc.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the conflict over Ukraine, most Japanese experts agree that Russia is seeking to secure its political influence in the post-Soviet space vis-à-vis the EU and NATO as well as an ever-stronger China. They believe Moscow is alarmed at Beijing's intention – which has become apparent in the past few years – to strengthen its ties with Ukraine and Central Asian countries.

The sudden improvement in Russian-Chinese relations since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis despite geopolitical competition is attributed to Russia's international isolation and the sanctions imposed on it. At the same time, there is some disagreement as to whether the current improvement has the potential to lead to close partnership. Due to the ongoing competition between the two sides, many researchers call this prospect into question. In their view, the rapprochement is not based on trust and conviction, but rather on Russia's weakness alone.

The advice Japanese experts are giving their own government provides German policymakers with food for thought. Japanese researchers favor rapprochement with Moscow for several reasons. They suspect that due to its current weakness, Russia is willing to make concessions in order to gain international partners and overcome its isolation. This stance could facilitate an agreement in the Japanese-Russian territorial dispute. Furthermore, by continuing its current Russia policy, Japan could obstruct its own plans to diversify its energy imports. As Russia is both a European power and an Asian power, the two regions interact on many levels. Both Japan and Germany, as well as Europe as a whole, would benefit from a better understanding of one another's respective vantage points. Active exchange on the academic and political level would facilitate discussion regarding the aforementioned interaction and promote improved foreign policy coordination between the two sides.

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