

Japan Responds to Russia's War: Strong Solidarity with Ukraine with an Eye on China

by Giulio Pugliese

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has elicited a chorus of international condemnation. In Japan, the government led by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has similarly reacted with unequivocal criticism, as have local media outlets and eminent personalities, all of which have been united in calling out Russia's aggression as a military invasion and full-scale war.¹

Faced with Russia's blatant violation of international law and the possibility of ushering in a world defined by raw power politics, Japan has aligned itself with G7 counterparts. In so doing, Tokyo has ditched its balancing act vis-à-vis Moscow and approved tough sanctions on Russia. Moreover, Japanese lawmakers have started mulling the possibility of hosting nuclear weapons to deter potential Chinese coercion.

¹ Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Conference by Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, 25 February 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken24e_000105.html.

On 1 March, Japan's Lower House of parliament adopted a harsh resolution condemning Russia's move as "unacceptable" and a "serious breach of international law". The resolution, approved by an overwhelming majority, goes on to underline how Putin's actions in Ukraine could shake the very foundations of the international order, including that of Asia.²

Japanese public opinion has also demonstrated support for Ukraine's plight. This mostly stems from the territorial disputes and historical grievances against Russia dating back from the end of World War II. The Soviet Union's last-minute declaration of war on Japan in August 1945 allowed for the incorporation of the Japanese territories north of Hokkaido: what the Japanese refer to as the Northern Territories and Russia as the Southern Kurils. While Russia's

² Japan's House of Representatives, *Resolution Condemning Russia's Aggression against Ukraine*, 1 March 2022, https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_english.nsf/html/statics/english/ketugi_e220301-1.html.

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claim is buttressed by international law and effective control, Japan perceives their annexation as a historic wrong. Japanese mistrust is also fuelled by the trials and tribulations encountered by post-war Japanese Prisoners of War in Soviet labour camps, masterfully explored in a recent study.³

But it is not only about Russia. A recent survey conducted at the end of February, demonstrates how 77 per cent of Japanese respondents feared negative spill-over effects of the Ukraine conflict over Taiwan. China remains, after all, Japan's most pressing security challenge. Moreover, 61 per cent were in favour of strict sanctions on Russia in step with Japan's Western partners, a much higher level of support compared to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea.⁴

It is worth noting that these sentiments have also been matched by the concrete actions of private citizens: from a rapid surge of donations in support of Ukraine all the way to volunteers, mostly former Japan Self-Defence soldiers, willing to enlist in the "international brigade" set up by Kiev.⁵ Representatives from

ruling party, such as the Director of the National Defense Division of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) Policy Research Council, have also voiced support for these volunteers.⁶

On the sanctions front, Japan has frozen all yen-denominated assets held by Russia's Central Bank, banned the issuance of Russian sovereign debt, and targeted Russian leaders, including President Putin, as well as financial institutions. Tokyo has joined Western efforts to block certain Russian banks from accessing the SWIFT international payment system and announced a series of strict export controls.

Japan will now also prohibit the export of cutting-edge technology to Russia, such as semiconductors, and has presented a largely symbolic list of Russian military and security entities banned from accessing Japanese exports of any kind.⁷ The government also provided a further 100 million US dollars in emergency humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, adding this to a 100 million US dollars loan that was

³ Sherzod Muminov, *Eleven Winters of Discontent. The Siberian Internment and the Making of a New Japan*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2022.

⁴ Ryo Nemoto, "Ukraine Conflict: 77% in Japan Fear Taiwan Spillover", in *Nikkei Asia*, 28 February 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-conflict-77-in-Japan-fear-Taiwan-spillover>.

⁵ "Donations for Ukrainians Increasing Rapidly in Japan", in *Nippon.com*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2022030200258>; Yoshikatsu Nakajima, "Rakuten CEO Mikitani to Donate 1 Billion Yen to Ukraine", in *The Asahi Shinbun*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14560885>; Yusuke Kaite and Shu

Hatakeyama, "70 Japanese Apply to Become Volunteer Soldiers in Ukraine, Many Ex-SDF Personnel", in *The Mainichi*, 2 March 2022, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220302/p2a/00m/0na/007000c>.

⁶ "70 Japanese Heed Ukraine's Call to Join Fight Against Russia", in *The Asahi Shinbun*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14561765>.

⁷ "Japan's Sanctions Related to the Situation in Ukraine", in *White & Case Alerts*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.whitecase.com/publications/alert/japans-sanctions-related-situation-ukraine>; Jesse Johnson, "Japan Joins West in Unleashing 'Powerful' Economic Measures against Russia", in *The Japan Times*, 1 March 2022.

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announced before Russia's aggression.⁸

A further measure was announced to allow the roughly 120 Japan-based Ukrainian citizens with temporary visas to extend their stay in Japan. Other measures to allow Ukrainian refugees, starting with spouses and relatives of Japanese expatriates as well as "relatives and friends of people living in Japan", to relocate to Japan are also being considered.⁹

In short, with Putin entering Ukraine and the West uniting in condemnation, prime minister Kishida seems to have dropped his traditional risk-averse decision-making style, as well as Tokyo's traditionally prudent balancing act vis-à-vis Russia.

Indeed, and particularly since Abe Shinzo's return to power in late 2012, Tokyo's efforts to find a solution over the disputed Southern Kurils/Northern Territories with Russia accelerated. The thinking at the time was that a deal on the territorial dispute would have also allowed Tokyo to reorient its military forces towards its south-western flank to counter China.

⁸ Eric Johnston, "Following Ukraine Invasion, Japan Takes Much Tougher Line on Russia", in *The Japan Times*, 28 February 2022.

⁹ Japanese Government, *Japan Stands with Ukraine*, 1 March 2022, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/ongoingtopics/pdf/20220301_2_Response_to_the_situation_in_Ukraine.pdf; "Japan to Accept People Displaced by Russian Invasion of Ukraine", in *The Mainichi*, 2 March 2022, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220302/p2g/00m/0na/069000c>; "Japan to Accept Ukrainian Refugees", in *Nippon.com*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/news/yjj2022030201346>.

During the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, Japan did side with the US's sanctions policy, but it did so with limited enthusiasm, leaving the door open for talks with Russia.¹⁰ Under Abe, the Japanese government personally engaged Vladimir Putin (and failingly so) also on the basis of cool-headed calculations concerning Russia's supposedly shrinking strategic horizons.¹¹

According to a former high-ranking government official, Moscow was thought to eventually respond positively to Japan's overtures to avoid an overreliance on China.¹² Russia's strengthening of its already rather solid hold over the Southern Kurils – notably through new clauses in the revised Constitution of 2020 that banned territorial concessions – should have dashed the hopes of most Japanese policymakers. Yet, the Kishida government was still prone to dialogue with Moscow, also in light of geo-strategic and economic, especially energy, considerations.¹³

¹⁰ James D.J. Brown, "Abe's Russia Policy: All Cultivation and No Fruit", in *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2019), p. 148-155.

¹¹ Matteo Dian and Anna Kireeva, "Wedge Strategies in Russia-Japan Relations", in *The Pacific Review*, 18 February 2021, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2021.1887331; James D.J. Brown, "Japan's Security Cooperation with Russia: Neutralizing the Threat of a China-Russia United Front", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (July 2018), p. 861-882.

¹² Interview with high-ranking Japanese government official, Tokyo, 20 December 2019.

¹³ Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Conference by Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa*, 11 November 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken24e_000075.html.

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Japan's energy dependency on Russia is not as stark as Europe's but still relevant given its over-reliance on fossil fuels following the triple disaster in Fukushima in 2011. As of today, seven nuclear reactors are in operation in Japan.¹⁴ While energy consumption relies for as much as 90 per cent on fossil fuel imports the total share of those imports from Russia gravitates at just 6.5 per cent. Russian natural gas, crude oil and coal imports account respectively for 8.7 per cent, 4 per cent and 10.2 per cent of Japanese energy imports.¹⁵ Still, since the mid-2000s, Japanese business had injected capital and technology into joint ventures with Russian companies with an eye towards energy diversification from the Middle East.

Other Western sanctions, such as Shell's decision to divest from the Sakhalin-II LNG pipeline project connecting Russia with Japan will be a hard act to follow for Japanese businesses, since it constitutes the main route for gas imports from Russia and walking out will no doubt come with a major price tag attached.¹⁶ Still, as veteran

businessman intellectual Terashima Jitsurō acknowledged, divestment remains a distinct possibility and Russia will then depend even more on China's energy imports.¹⁷

Finally, Russia's aggression may have important strategic repercussions for Japan's military posture. Former Prime Minister Abe and Ishin no Kai party leaders have recently called for a debate on nuclear sharing, thereby allowing US nuclear warheads to be stationed in Japan, presumably because these would deter Chinese aggression.¹⁸

Such action is opposed by the government however. Prime minister Kishida has noted that it would violate Japan's 1967 three Non-Nuclear Principles, according to which Japan will not possess, not produce and not permit the introduction of nuclear weapons into the country.¹⁹ It is worth recalling that prime minister Kishida's family history and electoral constituency in Hiroshima are reflected in his self-representation as a pacifist with an emphasis on non-proliferation and even support for a ban on nuclear weapons.

More subtly, these debates may actually weaken the government's effort to acquire offensive (missile) strike capabilities. The prime minister has

¹⁴ "Japan Nuclear Reactor Operations: Kyushu Electric Shuts Sendai No. 2 Reactor", in *Reuters*, 24 February 2022, <https://reut.rs/3Hkjniwi>.

¹⁵ Data from an interview with Terashima Jitsurō: "ウクライナ侵攻と日本" (Invasion of Ukraine and Japan), in *The Asahi Shinbun*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15219954.html>; Takeo Kumagai and Meghan Gordon, "Japan Does Not See Sanctions on Russia Causing Major Energy Supply Disruption", in *S&P Global*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/022422-japan-does-not-see-sanctions-on-russia-causing-major-disruption-to-energy-supply>.

¹⁶ James D.J. Brown and William Sposato,

"Japan Steps Up on Ukraine", in *Foreign Policy*, 2 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3HC3D7W>.

¹⁷ Interview with Terashima Jitsurō, cit.

¹⁸ "Nippon Ishin Drops Call to Review Anti-Nuke Principles", in *The Asahi Shinbun*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14562855>.

¹⁹ "PM Kishida Rules Out Japan's Possession of Nuclear Weapons", in *The Mainichi*, 25 February 2022, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220225/p2a/00m/0na/018000c>.

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indicated that Japan should be allowed to strike enemy bases in case of conflict and has not ruled out the installation of intermediate-range missiles, which may be co-developed with the United States following Washington's withdrawal from the INF Treaty in 2019.²⁰ Nuclear sharing however is likely to be opposed by Japanese citizens, given that such missiles could, in the future, carry US nuclear warheads.

While hawkish Japanese lawmakers may mull over the issue of nuclear sharing, the government is aware that it cannot entertain that option given a diffuse public allergy to such notions. Post-Fukushima Japan will have to withstand a big security shock, and one that is much closer to home, before an open conversation on nuclear weapons, including nuclear sharing, can be envisioned.

In sum, Japan has fully aligned with the West in condemning and sanctioning Russia's unprovoked act of aggression. This has likely put an end to Tokyo's balancing act towards Moscow for the sake of preserving what the Japanese government calls "the international rules-based order".

Japanese policymakers likely reason that Russia's aggression requires a strong economic and normative reaction, because an aging and shrinking Japan may be particularly troubled by the emergence of an international order increasingly

defined by the logic of "might equals right". As the US is also marred by relative decline and its security guarantees cannot be taken for granted indefinitely, Tokyo is clearly viewing the tragic events in Ukraine with an eye on its military and economic balancing vis-à-vis China, worrying that a non-reaction may embolden its influential Asian neighbour and further constrain Japan's posture.

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²⁰ Corey Wallace, "Kishida's Opportunity to Shake Up Japanese Defence Policy", in *East Asia Forum*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/?p=430578>.

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