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Japan-Russia Ties Amidst Ukraine Crisis

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Russia has been involved in military action against Ukraine since February 26. The Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered deployments of troops into two regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. Russia's attack on Ukraine compelled Japan to enforce financial sanctions to isolate Russia as a way to put an end to Russia's military actions. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida imposed restrictions on the Russian Central Bank and also supported Russia's removal from the SWIFT international banking system¹.

Japan had previously imposed sanctions on Moscow in 2014 when the Russian troops occupied the Crimea region of Ukraine². However, the then Japanese government led by former PM Shinzo Abe did not react very harshly. It did not want to antagonise Putin because of the ongoing talks over the issue of islands in northern Japan. He also attempted to resolve the dispute through continued negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty between the two nations. Tokyo was quite keen on effective diplomacy with Russia and feared that condemning Crimea's invasion would hamper the progress in their relations.

Japan has been going through a territorial dispute issue with Russia over islands since World War II. The islands are named as the Southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan. They were seized by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, and both nations have yet to conclude a peace treaty³. Japan explicitly claims that the islands are the sovereign territory of Japan and should be returned to its control, while on the other hand, Russia has claimed its control over the islands. These islands comprise the Etorufu islands, the Kunashiri islands, the Shikotan islands, and the Habomai islands⁴.

This time around, Japan has adopted a tougher stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine than in 2014. Due to the Ukraine crisis, emphasising strengthening economic cooperation between Russia and Japan seems impossible for now as Japan has announced certain sanctions. Japan has announced visa bans and frozen assets on individuals related to Russia, an asset freeze on some of the Russian banks, and has also restricted the export of dual-use goods such as semiconductors to Russia. PM Kishida believes that the invasion of Ukraine is an attempt to change the status quo unilaterally, which is strongly condemned. Since Putin has invaded a neighbouring country to further ensure that it does not become a NATO member, the idea that he may allow the transfer of islands to Japan seems implausible. In a call between Kishida and Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine, Kishida affirmed its support for Ukrainian sovereignty and also emphasised the need for diplomatic efforts to resolve tensions between Russia and Ukraine⁵.

Japan is concerned about its energy security since 4 per cent of Japan's crude oil and 9 per cent of its Liquefied Natural Gas (LPG) is directly supplied by Russia⁶. Japan's Sakhalin oil and gas

development has owned a 30 per cent stake in the Sakhalin-1 oil project⁷. Moreover, some of the Japanese trading firms, such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui, have acquired shares in the Sakhalin-2 development. Even though Japan has been unwilling to accept refugees and has imposed an arms export ban due to its pacifist constitution, it announced that it would protect and accept refugees from Ukraine and also work towards sending bulletproof vests to Kyiv. Russia's actions have also cautioned Japan to think about its defence and security policies that have been sidelined amid China's growing assertiveness and the territorial threat. Japan will also consider raising its defence spending as a part of its national security policy review.

Japan aims to uphold the rules-based international order, and it fears that the Ukraine invasion by Russia may seek to exploit the rules in ways that would create an existential crisis. Furthermore, some of the top Japanese carmakers have halted their exports to Russia, and Japanese airlines have suspended flights to Europe. For instance, Toyota is Russia's top Japanese brand, which produces around 80,000 vehicles at the St. Petersburg plant⁸. Japan has also pledged to provide a loan of around \$100 million to Kyiv and also \$100 million for humanitarian assistance in Ukraine⁹.

Likely Future Developments

Amidst the Ukraine crisis, Russian counterparts will not let any progress happen in the Russian-Japanese political relations owing to the sanctions imposed by the Japanese government. The Japanese government has adopted a proactive role in the Russia-Ukraine tensions. It seems that Japan will consider expanding the sanctions on export restrictions for military aspects and technologies. Japan's response towards the crisis also comes from it being a member of the G7. Moreover, Japan is also concerned about how the Indo-Pacific will be affected due to the Ukraine crisis and what impact Russia's actions will have on China's behaviour in the region. In addition to this, PM Kishida is likely to visit India in March for a formal meeting with PM Narendra Modi, and discussions on the Ukraine crisis remain high on their agenda.

Japan feels that since the territorial agreement with Russia is not to be concluded so easily, it is free to join the western partners like the US in taking a hard stance in opposing Putin's actions. How Japan-Russia relations will unfold in the near future remains to be seen as the Ukraine crisis has ignited chaos in the international community.

NOTES

¹ Deutsche Welle, 'Ukraine conflict: Japan's resolve on Russia comes with a price', Frontline, March 3, 2022, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/ukraine-conflict-japan-resolve-on-russia-comes-with-a-price/article38446754.ece> (Accessed on March 5, 2022).

² Sylvanus Kwaku, 'Can sanctions on Russia be effective? Crimea's history shows Putin hasn't learned at all', The Print, March 5, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/can-sanctions-on-russia-be-effective-crimeas-history-shows-putin-hasnt-learnt-at-all/858159/> (Accessed on March 6, 2022).

³ Fair observer, 'Are Japan and Russia ready to resolve the Kuril Islands dispute?', Wion News, January 15, 2019, <https://www.wionews.com/opinions/are-japan-and-russia-ready-to-resolve-the-kuril-islands-dispute-190414> (Accessed on March 6, 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nate Cohn, 'Putin's Forces Attack Ukraine', New York Times, March 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/24/world/russia-ukraine-putin> (Accessed on March 6, 2022).

⁶ Deutsche Welle, 'Ukraine conflict: Japan's resolve on Russia comes with a price', Frontline, March 3, 2022, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/ukraine-conflict-japan-resolve-on-russia-comes-with-a-price/article38446754.ece> (Accessed on March 5, 2022).

⁷ Ibid

⁸ 'Japan's Toyota suspends operations at Russia plant', Bangkok Post, March 3, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2273359/japans-toyota-suspends-operations-at-russia-plant> (Accessed on March 7, 2022).

⁹ 'Japan moving to supply Ukraine with defense equipment', Asahi Shimbun, March 4, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14563974> (Accessed on March 7, 2022).