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## **Japan and Ukraine/ Eastern Europe**

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## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has been met with the same sense of shock and alarm in Japan as in the rest of the world. The way that the West has stood up against a change in the status quo using military force has also changed, particularly compared to the relatively low level of general concern at the time of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 or at the outbreak of the conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine in the summer of that year. As Europe underwent a tectonic shift in the decades after the Cold War, Japan started to build cooperative relationships, first with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe that had newly joined the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) before gradually starting to strengthen relations with Ukraine and other former members of the Soviet Union in later years. As discussed in this article, although these efforts were not without their success, Russia continued to be the main pivot of Japan's diplomacy. This tendency remained fundamentally unchanged even after the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of fighting in the Donbas region. However, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 dramatically undermined the "Russia-first" Japanese diplomacy, forcing various revisions and changes.

This paper first provides an overview of a number of previous Japanese diplomatic

policies, including "Eurasian Diplomacy" and the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," before analyzing the main characteristics of Japanese diplomacy since 2014. Then we will examine the changes that the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought to Japanese foreign policy in the region. In keeping with the conventional EU practice, I will refer to EU member states such as Poland and the Czech Republic as "Central and Eastern European countries" and to non-EU states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as "Eastern European countries," following the definition by the European Union.

## From "Eurasian Diplomacy" to the "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity"

### (1) "Eurasian Diplomacy"

One example of Japan's early attempts to give greater attention to its relations with the former Soviet states was the "Eurasian Diplomacy," unveiled by Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in June 1997. The main focus of this framework was Russia, followed by the countries in Central Asia and around the Caspian Sea. Japan was actively engaged in development of the Caspian Sea together with the United States and European countries at the time, which is one likely factor in the background of this policy. Countries such as Ukraine and Moldova were not explicitly included as the targets of the framework.

The “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” announced by Foreign Minister Taro Aso roughly a decade later in November 2006, clearly marked a shift in focus from “Eurasian Diplomacy.” In his speech unveiling the idea, Aso stated that while the “basis of Japan’s foreign policy is to strengthen the Japan-US alliance, as well as to strengthen our relationships with our neighbouring countries, such as China, Korea, and Russia,” Japan was “aiming to add a new pillar around which our policy will revolve” by developing collaboration with Central and Eastern European countries as well as with Eastern European countries.

The same speech referred to a plan to support democracy across the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” stretching from North-eastern Asia through Central Asia and the Caucasus to Turkey and from there to Eastern Europe and the Baltic. The Arc covered the region that had changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War and the end of the East-West conflict. Countries mentioned as targets for support included the so-called GUAM nations (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) as well the Community of Democratic Choice that was launched with the aim of encouraging democracy and protecting human rights.

The important point about the policy framework was the fact that Japan launched diplomacy with the former Soviet states through collaboration with the Central and Eastern European countries to which Japan had provided

assistance in the years after the end of the Cold War, together with the EU and NATO. The policy framework was suggested in 2006. This coincided with the conclusion of the early stages of a major project of eastern expansion by both the EU and NATO, and a major transitional moment in international politics in Europe after the Cold War. Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were the first to achieve NATO membership in March 1999; they were joined in March 2004 by Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 2004, a total of 10 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean achieved EU membership, including the Czech Republic and Poland. These were followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. As a result, the borders of the EU and NATO shifted significantly eastward, and countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus came to share a border with the EU and NATO. It was a natural development that the EU and NATO started to step up their outreach activities in the region. In 2004, for example, the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) started in earnest, and the Union began to work on measures to strengthen its relations with countries that were not seen as likely targets for EU expansion in the short term.

Another important development was the so-called “Color Revolutions” that took place in several former Soviet states in parallel with these undertakings by the EU. A sequence of revolutions swept

across a number of former Soviet states—including the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia from 2003 to 2004, the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004, and the “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyz in 2005. This led to increasing expectations in Europe for accelerating democratization in these countries.

These conditions on the European side meant that the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” was a well-timed idea. However, it is hard to say that much substantial progress was made either with Japan-European collaboration built around the framework, or with the efforts to strengthen relations with the countries targeted for assistance. One major reason for this was that the frameworks including target countries such as GUAM and the Community of Democratic Choice faded before they had even started to function properly. Another factor, perhaps the most significant, was that the idea was largely a personal project of the then-Foreign Minister Taro Aso, and opportunities to speak about the idea in Japanese diplomacy dwindled rapidly after Aso left his position in August 2007.

The Eastern European countries that had been the main focus of the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” entered a period of extreme instability that lasted until the second half of the first decade of the new century. Ukraine struggled with its domestic politics in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution and entered a prolonged period of confusion that

culminated in the Maidan Revolution of 2014, while Georgia experienced conflict with Russia in the summer of 2008. In the EU, the Russia-Georgia War led to a growing awareness of the urgency of building strong relations with the former Soviet states that lay in between the EU and Russia, and 2009 saw the full start of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a new policy framework focused on building relations with Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. This framework produced several important outcomes, including various reforms in the target countries, and the signing of association agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

There was considerable overlap between the countries covered by the EaP and those covered by the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” and if Japan and the EU had sought to coordinate their activities in these regions, they might well have been able to achieve cooperation on aid with a certain degree of synergy. The desire to find a way to cooperate in the region with the EU and NATO had also been mentioned in plans for the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity.” However, there are no signs that any such attempts were actually made between Japan and the EU. No doubt part of the reason for this was a mismatch in terms of timing, in the sense that opportunities to refer to the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” idea in Japanese foreign policy more or less disappeared right around the time that the EaP was launched. There was also a decisive difference between

Japanese and EU policies with regard to Eastern Europe. Since the EU now shared borders with Eastern European countries, the EU was engaged in its Eastern European policy with a real sense of concern that unrest in Eastern Europe could contribute directly to greater unrest in the EU itself. By contrast, Japan's policies on Eastern Europe lacked the same sense of urgency. The "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity," which had been launched as a pioneering attempt to collaborate on providing aid to Eastern European countries with the EU and NATO, as well as the Central and Eastern European countries that had newly been acceded to the EU, ended without leaving any tangible lasting results. It certainly did not compare with the international spread and impact of the later framework for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)."

## **(2) Occupation of Crimea and Japan's response: Balancing a focus on Russia with support for Ukraine**

In this context, Ukraine faced a number of severe challenges. The Yanukovich administration collapsed following the Maidan Revolution in February 2014, and in March of the same year, Russia illegally occupied Crimea. In response to the Russian occupation of Crimea, Japan shared with the G7 and the EU the view that no use of armed force to alter the status quo could be tolerated and that no violation of the integrity, sovereignty,

and territorial unity of Ukraine could be accepted, and imposed sanctions on Russia. However, it is also true that the Abe administration at the time continued to send a message to Russia that Japan was buckling under pressure from the United States and had no choice but to impose sanctions on Russia against its own will. In September 2014, former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori went to a meeting with President Putin carrying a letter from Prime Minister Abe. At the meeting, he is believed to have told Putin: "If we have imposed sanctions on Russia, it is only because the United States keeps telling us to do so. But I believe that they have been imposed in a way that has not caused any actual damage to Russia." (Komaki Akiyoshi (2020), Abe vs Putin) Certainly, it is fair to say that the sanctions imposed on Russia from 2014 were "peer pressure sanctions" whose economic impact was deliberately blunted. They were chiefly limited to the freezing of the assets of 40 individuals and two organizations and to the imposition of import restrictions on all freight originating from the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. Russia was overwhelmingly the main focus of the Abe administration's "Eurasian Diplomacy," and Japanese foreign policy clearly made it a priority not to damage its relations with Russia, even after Russia was guilty of a clear breach of international law by its occupation of Crimea.

On the other hand, it is also true that the Japanese government has continued to provide steady assistance to Ukraine,

where fighting has been ongoing in the eastern parts of the country since 2014. To give one example, from 2018 to 2019, the Japanese government formulated a plan “to improve civilian safety and bolster the response capability in areas affected by the crisis in the eastern regions of Ukraine” (worth a total of US\$123,000) and provided, through the United Nations (UN), latest medical supplies to UN hospitals in Ukraine, including ventilator machines, anaesthesia facilities, and emergency aid kits. From 2014 to 2019, the Japanese government provided medical equipment worth approximately US\$1.5 million to Ukraine. Japanese diplomacy at the time thus had two sides to it: although maintaining relations with Russia continued to be the major precondition of Japanese foreign policy, Japan also provided assistance to Ukraine, which was facing an increasingly protracted conflict in its eastern regions. To put it another way, we might say that diplomacy with Russia and assistance for Ukraine were able to coexist without conflict or contradiction in Japanese foreign policy at the time.

### **(3) Eastern Europe in the context of “Connectivity” between Japan and the EU**

In the second half of the 2010s, after the idea of the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” fizzled out, that of the EU and Japan cooperating in supporting other regions resurfaced. This was the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity

and Quality Infrastructure, which was announced in September 2019 during the Abe administration. Thus, Japan and the EU aimed to work together “in the four areas of digital, transport, energy, and people-to-people exchanges, with a commitment to establishing a Connectivity Partnership based on sustainability as a shared value, quality infrastructure and their belief in the benefits of a level playing field.” Along with the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, “Eastern Europe” was also explicitly mentioned as an area where Japan and the EU would cooperate under the Connectivity Partnership.

Part of the background to this idea was the emergence of problems stemming from China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vision for a huge economic zone linking China and Europe. As a result of this initiative, launched by China in 2013, there were worries about environmental damage caused by irresponsible development and the risk of countries falling into the so-called “debt trap.” The idea was that Japan and the EU would work together to prevent any negative influences that might be brought by the BRI by providing sustainable and high-quality infrastructure in the areas targeted by the BRI.

However, it would be hard to cite any notable successes for the project with regard to the Eastern European countries, although some cooperative successes were achieved in the West Balkans, where there were some

synergistic effects with the “West Balkans Cooperation Initiative” launched by Prime Minister Abe in 2018.

## The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Japanese diplomacy

As fears mounted about a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine from the end of 2021, Japanese diplomacy faced a difficult dilemma. The G7 countries issued a statement (at a meeting of G7 finance ministers on February 14, 2022) announcing that “any further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine will be met with a swift, coordinated and forceful response.” It was a strong warning designed to deter Russia from going ahead with a military invasion, and Japan fell in line with this as a member of the G7.

On the other hand, even in the days immediately before the invasion, there was still a deep-rooted opinion in Japan that said that maintaining Japan’s relationship with Russia should be the top priority. This view was clearly apparent in the debate held in a regular session of the House of Representatives on February 8 to discuss the motion (which was eventually passed) on the “Resolution calling for improvement in the situation of concern around Ukraine.” The language of the resolution showed clear signs of the care that had been taken to avoid pointing the finger at Russia directly, noting only that “the

situation around Ukraine’s borders has been destabilized due to moves by *external forces* (italics mine), and the tense situation continues” and also stressing that “changes to the status quo through force *by any country* must not be tolerated.”

Even so, once the actual invasion was launched on February 24, the government shifted its priorities to walk in step with the other G7 nations and imposed unprecedentedly harsh sanctions on Russia. They included financial sanctions, restrictions on exports to Russia, cancellation and withdrawal of most-favoured-nation (MFN) status, restrictions on imports from Russia, and freezing of assets belonging to the oligarchs. Japan continued to impose sanctions largely in line with those imposed by the G7 and the EU, expanding its sanctions further in response to the so-called “annexation” of four provinces in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

In response to a request from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Japanese government has also provided support for Ukrainian refugees as a “humanitarian international aid program” in accordance with the Act on Cooperation with UN Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations (the International Peace Cooperation Act). In line with the government’s plan for humanitarian international peacekeeping operations to provide support to affected people in Ukraine, passed in the Cabinet on April 28, approximately

103 tons of aid supplies, including blankets, plastic tarpaulins, solar lamps, kitchen sets, and other equipment, were shipped between May and June of 2022 on eight cargo flights from the United Arab Emirates, where they had been stored, to Poland and Romania, the chief destinations for refugees from Ukraine. It is commendable that by April, some two months after the invasion began, US\$7.25 million in aid had been provided to Ukraine as well as US\$365,200 to Poland and US\$365,200 to Moldova, among the surrounding countries.

But it is the provision of non-lethal equipment to Ukraine that also deserves special mention. At the end of February 2022, the then-Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov sent a letter to Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, asking for provision of equipment, and on March 4 deliberations began in response to the letter. As a result, Japan started to provide non-lethal equipment within the limits allowed by the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology. The equipment provided included bulletproof vests, helmets, protective masks, protective clothing, and small drones. Since the bulletproof vests counted as defense equipment under the Three Principles, the government added, on March 8, a new clause “Ukraine, which has come under aggression in violation of international law” to the operational guidelines to allow for their provision. In August of the same year, a further donation of civilian vehicles was also announced.

Further, following the revisions to the National Security Strategy in 2022, the government decided in January 2023 to relax the guidelines for the operation of the Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, thus making it possible to export defense equipment with lethal capability to friendly countries. It has been reported that the government is looking to revise the guidelines so that countries that have been invaded in violation of international law, such as Ukraine, will be included within the category of countries eligible for such exports. If this change becomes a reality, it will mean a major shift in the export of Japanese defense equipment. In May 2023 the government also confirmed its intention to provide treatment for wounded Ukrainian soldiers in Japanese Self-Defense Force hospitals. The horizons of Japanese support are steadily expanding.

## Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought various changes to Japan’s diplomacy with regard to Russia and to its diplomacy with regard to Ukraine and the countries surrounding Ukraine, and also—although the following aspect has not been discussed in depth in this article—to its diplomacy with regard to the United States and European countries that provide assistance to Ukraine. While Japan’s relationship with Russia, which used to be regarded as an overwhelming priority, has entered into a



period of stagnation, that with Ukraine and with the other countries supporting Ukraine have been strengthened since the invasion.

Japan's somewhat passive attitude toward sanctions against Russia stands out in the field of energy, where exceptions are still made at present for crude oil from the Sakhalin 2 oil and natural gas development project in which Japanese companies participate. Nevertheless, especially since the start of 2023, Japan's diplomacy with regard to Ukraine and its collaboration with the G7 and the EU in providing support for Ukraine have produced numerous positive results. In March, Prime Minister Kishida was finally able to visit Kyiv. President Zelensky was also able to participate in the Hiroshima G7 Summit in May in person. At the summit, Japan not only helped put together the G7 Leaders Statement on Ukraine, which combined strongly phrased language including "Today we are taking new steps to ensure that Russia's illegal aggression against the sovereign state of Ukraine fails and to support the Ukrainian people in their quest for a just peace rooted in respect for international law" but also played a role in bringing about meetings between President Zelensky and the leaders of invited countries including India and South Korea.

Japan can also play a large role in assisting Ukraine's recovery, and Ukraine has high hopes for Japan in this regard. Japan has accumulated know-how in

providing assistance to other nations in the past. The question now is how it will be able to put this know-how to use in assisting Ukraine.

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