

Japan's diplomacy in shambles over Ukraine crisis

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The sudden eruption of the Ukrainian crisis following the February 22 fascist-led coup has thrown Japanese diplomacy into turmoil. The Japanese government has formally aligned itself with the aggressive US-led confrontation with Russia, but, in doing so, is undermining Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's assiduous diplomatic efforts over the past year to forge closer ties with Moscow.

Under pressure from Washington, Japan joined with the US, France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Canada in a G-7 statement, issued on Sunday, suspending involvement in the preparations for the scheduled G-8 summit in Sochi in June. The US-sponsored statement condemned Russian actions in Ukraine as a contravention of G-8 principles and declared its support for "Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity"—a "principle" that the US flouts at will, including in its collaboration with fascistic parties in Ukraine.

The Japanese government's own statements on the crisis have been far more cautious. Speaking on Monday, Abe expressed his hope that "the situation in Ukraine can be settled in a peaceful manner." While urging respect for Ukrainian sovereignty, he appealed for the "countries concerned to act cautiously with self-restraint and responsibility" and did not condemn Russia's actions.

Behind the carefully calibrated official statements, however, there was considerable consternation. One diplomatic source told Reuters: "They are in a state of shock... It is a big pain in the back for the Japanese government."

An *Asahi Shimbun* article on Tuesday explained that Abe had sought to curb criticism of Russia so as not to jeopardise warming relations. But, as a high-ranking Japanese government official explained, Tokyo cannot afford to alienate Washington. "If Japan takes a pro-

Russia stance, the Japan-US alliance could collapse," the official bluntly noted.

The US alliance has been central to Abe's diplomatic strategy since taking office in December 2012. He has fully backed the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which seeks to undermine Chinese influence through an aggressive diplomatic campaign and military build-up throughout the region. With Washington's backing, Abe has ratcheted up pressure on China over disputed islands in the East China Sea and sought to extend Japanese influence in South East Asia, particularly with the Philippines, another US ally.

At the same time, Abe has devoted considerable efforts to improving relations with Russia. Last April, he became the first Japanese prime minister in a decade to visit Russia and has subsequently met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on four more occasions. While Obama and many European leaders boycotted the opening ceremony of the recent Winter Olympics in Sochi as a protest over "human rights" in Russia, Abe attended and met with Putin, who agreed to visit Japan later this year.

Abe's determination to improve relations with Russia is driven by both strategic and economic ambitions. As his government stokes up a confrontation with China, Abe is seeking to prevent the formation of a strategic bloc or alliance between Beijing and Moscow. Japan's own remilitarisation has been premised on a strategy of shifting military forces from their Cold War posture in the north against the former Soviet Union, now Russia, to "island defence" in the south, opposite the Chinese mainland.

Last month, Abe vowed to settle the longstanding territorial dispute with Russia over four islands to the north of Japan. The islands, which the former Soviet army seized during World War II, have remained a

bone of contention ever since, blocking the signing of a formal peace treaty between the two countries. While a solution is far from obvious, Abe insisted that he would resolve the issue during his period as prime minister.

Japan also has an interest in securing access to Russian energy reserves in Siberia. With its nuclear power plants shut down, the country has been forced to increase imports of oil and gas, which reached more than \$500 billion last year. Japan secures 10 percent of its overall liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from Russia and last year increased the portion of oil imports from Russia by nearly half to 7 percent.

Russia, which has been seeking to reduce its dependence on energy exports to Europe, is keen to expand its markets in Asia. It is also looking to Japan to provide technical and financial support for energy projects, including the development of gas fields in Siberia and the construction of a gas pipeline to Vladivostok, as well as an LNG plant near the port city.

The Obama administration's confrontation with Russia over Ukraine has now called Abe's diplomacy with Putin into question. Abe will undoubtedly come under pressure from Obama to stiffen his stance against Russia, including by joining US and EU sanctions against the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and other officials ousted in last month's fascist-led putsch.

The Abe government is clearly concerned that the US will escalate economic sanctions to include energy exports. These would seriously impact not only on the European economies, but also Japan. Washington's reckless and provocative actions also threaten to precipitate a war that could rapidly escalate and draw in all the major powers, including Japan.

Japan's trade minister, Toshimitsu Motegi, insisted on Tuesday that "there has been no change in the direction of economic and resource diplomacy between Japan and Russia." On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida said there was no alteration in the diplomatic schedule with Russia, but Japan was closely watching the situation. As well as Putin's visit to Japan, Abe was scheduled to meet the Russian president at the G-8 summit, and Kishida was due in Moscow during the northern spring.

In reality, the Obama administration's belligerent intervention into Ukraine is shattering all these plans.



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