

The Manichaean Worldview:

Japanese Foreign Policy and the Danger of Dualistic Interpretations of International Affairs.

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マニ教の世界観：
日本の外交政策と国際関係を二元論的に解することの危険

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Abstract

This paper examines the approach of the Japanese government to international crises in Libya, Syria, Gaza and the Ukraine and contends that Japanese assessment of the situations involved, has been overly simplistic, adhering to a Manichaean view which frames conflict into clearly defined good and evil camps, with the former invariably being the side supported by the USA. In actuality, each of these events was far more complex and less clearly delineable than the view put forth both by mainstream media and the Japanese government. The paper highlights the danger involved in subscribing to views which fail to recognize the complexities of critical international events and argues that recent Japanese efforts to promote greater military activity under the guise of 'proactive pacifism' are unlikely to advance the interests of the Japanese state or the cause of international stability, as long as such irresolute perspectives are maintained.

Key words: Japan, Foreign Policy, Syria, Russia, Crimea

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本論文では、リビア、シリア、ウクライナの国際的事件に対する日本政府のアプローチを検討する。これらの問題に対する日本政府の判断は非常に単純で、善と悪とを明確かつ安易に識別するマニ教のスタイルに従っている、と主張する。

実際にはこの問題ははるかに複雑で、状況の真の深さの認識を誤ると将来的に大きな危険を招くことになる。先ごろ「積極的平和主義」のために軍事介入のサポートを与えられた日本政府にとっては特に重要な問題である。

キーワード：日本、対外政策、シリア、露国、クリミア

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By the nature of their inherent depth and complexity, a tendency to oversimplify global affairs for political and media audiences has always been a problem, especially so in Western nations with strong religious influences toward a stark black and white view of morality. Such a view of perpetual war between good and evil was considered by some to have strongly impacted George W. Bush's 'War on Terror', with his exhortation that we all faced a choice, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."¹ Others, rightly, highlighted the 'Manichaeian paranoia' evident at the heart of such statements,² a moral system, grouping all into either good or evil camps, that some consider a holdover from the Cold War clash between communist and capitalist ideology.³ In its modern incarnation this tendency toward the promotion of clear-cut heroes and villains within international affairs invariably obfuscates the reality of events and, as a result, leads to policies being formed upon irrational and illusory beliefs that, adrift as they are from objective assessment, have no hope of achieving their aims.

For a long time Japan's subdued role in international affairs let it escape any major impact from such expressions of Manichaeian duality. Recently, however, changes to the state's constitutional restrictions on military activity seem likely to herald a new era of more forceful participation in international security affairs, a move which will greatly increase the possible repercussions of any militant advocacy of a belief in 'good' and 'bad' states. Looking at Japan's past record of discernment, in such instances as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, and the recent assault on Gaza, it becomes clear that both the Japanese media and the government itself are prone to a biased, and frequently inaccurate, representation of affairs that deeply compromises Japan's ability to form and carry out policy that will serve both the best interests of the Japanese state and those of international peace and security. By looking at Japan's response to the Ukrainian and Crimean Crisis, we can also see that the Japanese government is not only acting against its own best interests but also exacerbating a situation with the potential to ignite the largest international conflict since World War Two. The heart of the dilemma lies in this starkly monochromatic analysis of actors and can only be addressed by both the government and media adopting a view which exhibits and elucidates the greater complexity and ambiguity of critical international events.

Patterns in Japanese Foreign Policy

Since the 11th of September 2001 the US decision to engage terrorist groups militarily, rather than via international law enforcement, has resulted in well over 100,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan and Somalia. None of these countries have become significantly more stable or safe following military intervention,

instead, they consistently rank among the world's most dangerous terrorist hotspots.⁴ Regarding US efforts to combat opium production in Afghanistan, John Sopko, the US Special Inspector General, stated that despite spending "\$7.6 billion to combat the opium industry ...by every conceivable metric, we've failed."⁵ And yet, immediately prior to invasion in 2001 the Taliban had launched a crackdown on opium production that was widely regarded as one of the most successful anti-drug campaigns in history, with a 99% reduction in production (75% of the global supply).⁶ This is merely one example of the danger of making assumptions regarding the 'good' or 'evil' nature of international actors such as the USA or the Taliban, without making a deeper analysis of their motivations and impact of their actions.

Despite this, Japan is a resolute and reliably consistent supporter of the US application of military force,⁷ something that becomes more worrying with the Japanese government's decision in 2014 to engage in 'proactive pacifism', a buzzword that is merely a euphemism for more direct participation in multilateral international security operations. In itself, this would not be a bad thing as Japan has long been deficient in its non-fiscal contributions to UN peacekeeping activities. In practice, however, this is a further step toward what the government refers to as "*ittaika* with the use of force", *ittaika* (一体化) being a Japanese word meaning 'integration', a process unlikely to stop until Japan wields the same ability to launch 'humanitarian interventions' as the US, UK and France.⁸ These moves have also received strong endorsement from key elements of Japan's academic community, with many International Relations specialists supporting calls to participate in collective security actions, strengthen ties with the EU and USA, and take a stronger stance against Russia.⁹

Such policies might be understandable, even laudable, if they were clearly in Japan's best interests. Yet, there is no clear evidence that aligning with the Western powers against Russia will in any way help Japan. In fact, there are several clear arguments against doing so. Japan is far more geostrategically vulnerable than either the US or the EU and cannot afford to erect barriers between itself and either Russia or its BRICS allies (Brazil, India, China, South Africa). Especially given the greater integration between these states following moves by Russia and China in 2014 to begin bypassing the dollar as a reserve currency,¹⁰ and the establishment in the same year of the BRICS Bank (whose New Development Bank will rival the US own World Bank, and with the Contingent Reserve Arrangement acting as an alternative to the IMF).¹¹ The BRICS nations already comprise roughly 45% of world population and 30% of global GDP, figures that will only swell with states such as Malaysia and Iran seeking to build stronger ties with the rising economic powers. By backing the US and EU's confrontational response to Russia, Japan is taking sides in a fight in which it has no real reason to involve itself. In practical economic, security and resource terms, Japan is far better served by acting

as a peaceful facilitator between both sides of the dispute and any claims that Japan's stance might be justifiable on moral grounds lose all impetus when it is shown that this moral conviction is simply another example of a growing pattern of Manichaeian distortion.

The roots of the recent clash between the West and Russia, stem indirectly from the ongoing Syrian conflict and Russian opposition to Western intervention there. Yet, this in turn leads further back to the Libyan conflict where Japan strongly supported Western use of force against the Gaddafi government. When looking at the Japanese government's reaction to this, and other international incidents, a few key terms are useful to bear in mind:

Fukaku yūryo shite ori (深く憂慮しており) - to be deeply concerned

Taihen ikan desu (大変遺憾です) - to be very regrettable

Tsuyoku hinan suru (強く非難する) - to strongly condemn

There is also another common phrase, "to deeply deplore", which carries a slightly different nuance in English to "very regrettable", yet in Japanese is also presented as '*taihen ikan desu*', and should therefore be taken as exactly the same in the original context. These three levels of reaction, as used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are a reliable gauge of Japan's official position regarding what it considers the negative actions of other states.

The Response to Libya (2011) and Syria (2011-)

In the case of Libya Japan was very quick (27th February 2011) to offer 'strong condemnation' of government violence against peaceful protestors.¹² In fact, even two days before this the Prime Minister had called the government's actions "unforgivable" with the Foreign Minister labelling them as "atrocities".¹³ Japan's view of the situation remained consistent throughout the months leading to the collapse of the Gaddafi government, and its leader's barbaric execution, with regular statements recognizing the opposition forces as Libya's legitimate government, welcoming the collapse of Gaddafi's administration and calling Gaddafi's death (executed out of hand by a mob) an "important event" for nation-building efforts.¹⁴

The Japanese government never wavered from its portrayal of Gaddafi as villain and the rebel forces as protestors motivated by a desire for democracy and freedom. Yet it was evident, as early as the Summer of 2011, that the West was supporting mujahideen against Gaddafi who had only recently been engaged in combat against Western forces in Iraq and Afghanistan where they had been described as 'terrorists', and, that the West's efforts in Libya would inevitably lead to the same violence and instability that plagued post-invasion Iraq.¹⁵ Public perceptions of the conflict were slow to shift, however, and it was only two years later

that the failure of the intervention became widely accepted. Analysis by Harvard's Belfer Center for International Affairs found the uprising to have been "never peaceful, but instead was armed and violent from the start," and judged that "NATO's action magnified the conflict's duration about six-fold and its death toll at least sevenfold, while also exacerbating human rights abuses, humanitarian suffering, Islamic radicalism, and weapons proliferation."¹⁶

It was equally clear, once again as early as mid-2011,¹⁷ that the pattern of intervention used in Libya would also be deployed against Syria. As in Libya, initially peaceful protests, motivated by the Arab Spring, quickly turned violent through the activities of militant Islamist groups. Once again, government efforts to suppress the overt violence were portrayed by Western media as attacks by government forces on unarmed Syrian protestors. In Syria, however, two key factors were different; firstly, the government forces were far stronger than the militant groups, and second, when the Western states sought to initiate military strikes they were blocked from doing so by Russia.

As was the case in Libya, the Assad government was no paragon of democracy or justice. It was guilty of corruption and abuse of human rights and for this and other reasons there was significant legitimate and justifiable opposition. There was not, however, a 'popular uprising' in which the majority of the people attempted to overthrow a despotic government. As with Gaddafi, the majority of Syrians continued to support the central government, including opposition groups who saw the armed uprising as an illegitimate and undemocratic means of promoting political change. The rebels were, from the outset, prone to infighting, something which only became worse as Jihadist militias, sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, began to enter the country. The latter groups clashed with both the government and the local 'Free Syrian Army', and eventually with one another. At one point the massacres carried out by some foreign elements became so heinous that even Al Qaeda openly condemned them.¹⁸

The case on the ground in Syria was clearly complex, yet one would not think so from the position taken by the Japanese government, who began by calling on the Syrian government to refrain from using violence against 'peaceful demonstration', declared the use of weapons against 'protestors' "most regrettable", and soon after "strongly condemned" the violence against protestors.¹⁹ That the clashes referred to did not involve 'civilian protestors' is not in any doubt, yet even if we excuse the Japanese government's poor grasp of the situation we can at least expect some consistency from them. It was surprising, therefore, to see in June of the same year that Israeli soldiers shooting and killing more than a dozen Syrian protestors,²⁰ only elicited a statement of "deep concern" from the Japanese government. In fact, the statement went so far as to caution protestors against engaging in "any acts intended

to provoke violence”, a bizarre double-standard that was never applied to the brazenly violent militants fighting against government forces in Libya or Syria.²¹ Instead Japan remained steadfastly opposed to the Assad government’s efforts to combat the rebels, introducing sanctions and calling for the government to put an unconditional end to the violence, despite acknowledging that terrorist attacks and bombings were being carried out against government targets. In fact, at the same time it was declaring that terrorist bombings taking place in Damascus were “deplorable” Japan was also expressing the hope that Syrian dissidents (who would include the perpetrators of the aforementioned bombings) would unite behind the Syrian National Council.²² Various other statements by Japan refer to the “inhumane and undemocratic situation” in Syria, the “oppressed citizens of Syria”, and the need to achieve “Syrian citizen’s legitimate aspiration for reform”. Prime Minister Abe went so far as to call for the Assad regime to step down so a “government of the Syrian people” could be established.²³

Statements such as this ignore the significant political reforms which were introduced by the Assad government as a response to legitimate Syrian opposition. A February 2012 constitutional referendum (57% turnout, 89% support) set clear limits on the President’s term of office and removed provisions placing the Baath Party at the head of the state. Following this in May 2012, the first parliamentary elections to embrace political plurality were held, establishing a coalition government comprising Baathist, Communist, and Arab Socialist parties. More significantly, June 2014 saw a Presidential election which reelected Assad with 73% turnout and 88% of the vote (compared to a 58% turnout and 51% support in Obama’s last election). International observers (all parliamentarians) from over thirty countries, including: India, South Africa, Brazil, Bolivia, Russia, Iran and Iraq, declared the elections “free, fair and transparent” and held in a “democratic environment, contrary to Western propaganda”.²⁴ In a statement regarding the election the Russian government acknowledged that holding it during a civil war did inevitably prevent it from being fully democratic, yet it had, nonetheless, displayed a very high turnout and had been conducted with transparency in full view of foreign monitors, a process that gave no grounds to question its legitimacy.²⁵ Japan’s response was that the elections would be a threat to peace efforts and that the Assad government should instead step aside in favor of a transitional authority,²⁶ reiterating the unsupported belief that the incumbent government is somehow inherently illegitimate.

Once again, this is not to say that there are no grounds to oppose the Assad government, or that the opposition is not popular. It does suggest, however, that it is unfair to dismiss the Assad government as illegitimate or to suggest that the rebel forces somehow represent a more suitable government or the democratic will of the people. Setting aside the question of political legitimacy, another accusation against the Assad government is that it is guilty of

crimes against its people. Given the strong bias against the Assad government in the West it becomes necessary to consider whether this influences media coverage of such events and in many cases the answer is clearly that it does. One of the most egregious cases is the ongoing use of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights as a legitimate source for news information from Syria despite the fact that it is a pseudonym for a single Syrian expatriate and anti-Assad activist called Rami Abdulrahman.²⁷ Abdulrahman relies on unverifiable phone-calls for his own information, yet, has been used as a source hundreds of times by the leading Western media outlets, who portray his statements as reliable fact rather than (EU subsidized) hearsay that it is.²⁸ He is far from alone, however, as major news outlets have come to frequently rely upon 'activists', i.e. rebel forces or their supporters, as direct sources for news,²⁹ with Reuters going so far as to use them as photographers.³⁰ Russian media outlets have even accused the BBC of outright fabrication of chemical weapon attacks in efforts to boost public support for military intervention.³¹ Even US intelligence officials have complained about the blatant manipulation of information on Syria, with one asking "how can we help this guy (Obama) when he and his cronies make up the intelligence as they go along" and stating that the distortion reminded him of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.³²

Once more, these factors highlight the need for caution and critical appraisal of all sides of any contentious issue. Yet the Japanese government has been quick to point the finger of blame repeatedly at the Syrian government. The two major atrocities to occur during the Syrian conflict have been the Houla massacre (2012) and the Ghouta Sarin attack (2013). In both cases Western media immediately blamed the Syrian government and Japan was quick to follow suit, declaring that in the case of Houla, the massacre "stemmed from failure of the Syrian government to implement a peace plan."³³ Such criticism seems unfair, as if it were rebel forces who carried out the massacre it is hardly reasonable to expect government troops to abide by a ceasefire while villages are being purged. It is also singles out only the Syrian government for criticism, something that can probably be attributed to an acceptance of the reliability of Western news sources who stated that, "The UN now says most victims, including many children, were murdered inside their homes by President Assad's militias."³⁴ Yet, within days more diligent newspapers had uncovered reports that many eyewitnesses blamed rebel forces for the attack,³⁵ and the official investigations concluded that the identity of those responsible could not be determined.³⁶ The Syrian government was also roundly condemned by the UN Security council for the use of artillery against civilian population centers, a reasonable censure, yet one which should be remembered for later comparison.³⁷

Japan was also quick to declare that the Ghouta Sarin attack was "highly likely" to have been the work of the government.³⁸ Perhaps relying upon US claims to have had evidence of

Syrian government culpability.³⁹ Yet, this evidence was never revealed, while the official UN investigation also failed to determine responsibility.⁴⁰ The final report did, however, clearly state that in other cases government soldiers had been targeted by Sarin attacks.⁴¹ Despite this the Japanese government felt comfortable in using the anti-Assad media storm following Ghouta as justification for supporting US efforts to attack Syria under UN Chapter 7.⁴² Japan thus found itself calling for military intervention against a democratically elected government engaged in a struggle with terrorist groups guilty of using Sarin weapons. While such a depiction of the situation is clearly contentious, it is no more unbalanced than the official Japanese position that the Assad government is inherently illegitimate and that his opposition are freedom loving 'activists' and 'protestors'. Clearly the situation needs a more nuanced appraisal.

Rebel forces in Syria, who are by their own admission directed, funded and armed by the CIA,⁴³ have now splintered so much that even their American handlers are unsure to what extent they are made up of 'moderate' or 'extremist' elements. "In places like Syria, vetting can be unreliable and inconsistent," said Representative Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. "So far, the administration has not made a compelling case that it can differentiate between the factions, or that it even knows the makeup of the factions....The briefings I've received....are 50 percent and rising. These fighters coming globally are not coming in as moderates. They are coming in as jihadists."⁴⁴ In response to these criticisms prominent US Senator John McCain argued, "Obviously, there are some risks, but what's our other option here?"⁴⁵ Other options would have been to either support the Assad government in its crackdown on militant extremists, or, failing that, to have remained neutral in Syria's internal affairs rather than arming groups directly linked to terrorist organizations. In September 2014 the US, acknowledging that fundamentalist militias fighting the Assad government now represented the greatest threat, began airstrikes against IS targets in Syria. The Syria government had declared that any attacks carried out without their consent would be considered an attack on Syria and illegal under international law,⁴⁶ something both Russian and French officials agreed upon.⁴⁷ Despite the fact that Syria said it would be willing to coordinate strikes with other states, US officials declared they had not sought Syrian permission before launching their attacks.⁴⁸ Even the UK refused to participate in the strikes due to government concerns over the legality of the action.⁴⁹ In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, which US-allied rebel forces claim have already resulted in civilian casualties,⁵⁰ the Japanese government remained silent. No 'condemnation', 'deploration' or even statements of 'concern' regarding what is an important precedent for the unilateral use of aggressive force in international relations, a worrying position given Japan's deepening military alliance with the US.

Treatment of the Gaza Crisis (2014)

This absence of condemnation of US actions, the opposite side of the Manichaean mindset through which the actions of some states are always accepted as justifiable, can also be seen in Japan's treatment of the Israeli assault on Gaza in July and August 2014. Japan has, in the past, been supportive of the Palestinian people, offering substantial financial aid to projects in the West Bank, Gaza and Palestinian refugee camps. It has also frequently spoken out against the building of settlements by Israel. It should be noted, however, that in such cases it limits itself to 'deploring' rather than 'condemning' such activities.⁵¹ Japan has, however, between instances of such deploration, hosted summits with Israeli leaders at which it sought to advance bilateral defense cooperation and claimed that Japan and Israel share universal values, such as "freedom, democracy and human rights."⁵²

The idea that Israel represents such values is, however, very much open to question. The harsh restrictions imposed on Palestinian's right of movement is considered a form of collective punishment and a violation of international law by Amnesty International. The group also reports that Palestinians regularly experience housing discrimination, arrest without charge or trial, torture and ill treatment, and are unable to engage in peaceful protest without harsh military reprisals.⁵³ Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are also deprived of voting rights in Israeli government elections, despite the fact that the latter body controls the former's most fundamental affairs, including the collection of taxes. The UN has estimated that \$300 million dollars of this money fails to reach the Palestinian authorities after being collected by Israel,⁵⁴ while more is subject to arbitrary 'freezes' as a form of punishment for non-compliance with Israeli wishes.⁵⁵

The simple fact is that Israel is not at its heart a democracy, instead its founding principle is the maintenance of a 'Jewish' state rather than a democratic one, to the extent that its constitution explicitly prevents participation in elections of anyone who might seek to remove the Jewish element from the state's fundamental character. As a result Israel has frequently been classed as an ethocracy, wherein "ethnicity (and not territorial citizenship) is the main determinant of the allocation of rights."⁵⁶ This aspect lies behind Hamas refusal to recognize the right to exist of the state of Israel, something the Israeli government demands as a foundation for lasting peace. There is, however, no 'right to exist' in international affairs. A state is deemed legitimate or illegitimate based upon how it acts in relation to its people and the international community, though some states argue against this, as can be seen by the US decision to withdraw funding from UNESCO following that organization's vote to recognize Palestinian membership. Despite the approval of 107 other states the US and Israel criticized the decision as a "unilateral" effort to achieve statehood, something that is not apparently an

inherent right of the Palestinian people.⁵⁷

Bearing this in mind, we can consider how Japan viewed the recent 2014 attacks by Israel on Palestine. Previous attacks in 2008 had been characterized by then Prime Minister Aso as, “a long sequence of events - beginning with rockets launched from the Gaza strip”,⁵⁸ a gross oversimplification of the roots of that problem. Similarly, in treatment of the 2014 assault Japan shows clear hesitance to engage in strong criticism of Israeli actions. The initial kidnapping of Israeli teenagers, which was the justification for the large-scale military operation, a retributive killing of a Palestinian teen, and rocket attacks launched by Hamas, were all “strongly condemned” by Japan.⁵⁹ Yet, Israeli air strikes that caused civilian casualties were merely a cause for “deep concern”, and, when they continued, were “deplored” and “saddening”.⁶⁰ Even when Israel targeted UN run school shelters, resulting in the deaths of numerous children, the attacks only elicited further “deploration”.⁶¹

In 2009 the UN Human Rights Council released the Goldstone Report, harshly criticizing Israel for using excessive force against Palestinian civilians. Japan, however, abstained from endorsing the report on the grounds that it did not wish to denounce only one side in the conflict.⁶² Despite the fact that the Goldstone report also criticized Hamas, Japan has shown (with Libya and Syria) that it is more than capable of denouncing only a single side in a conflict. In fact, there are certainly cases where, without taking a wholly one-sided view, apportioning the criminal culpability of a conflict predominantly to one side, is justifiable based upon the evidence. Gaza provides a clear example. While the Japanese government called on both sides to refrain from excessive use of force, it is hard to argue that both engaged in such displays.⁶³ During the 2014 conflict 72 Israelis were killed, 92% of them military personnel. In comparison 2,143 Palestinians were killed, and 70% of these were civilians. Another 11,000 Palestinians were wounded in the violence and 273,000 displaced from their homes, with entire districts reduced to rubble. The Japanese media expressed the view that it was “difficult to comprehend the rationalization behind the destruction,”⁶⁴ but this is not true. Israelis frequently speak of the policy of “mowing the lawn”, a euphemism for initiating regular assaults on the Palestinian people as a means of breaking their will to oppose Israeli rule.⁶⁵ Excuses, such as the kidnapping of the Israeli teenagers (whom Israeli officials knew were dead before they began their military operations)⁶⁶ are used to generate public support but are mere window-dressing on actions that at their core are deeply criminal. While Israel’s Netanyahu accused Hamas of using human shields and attempting to create “telegenitically dead Palestinians for their cause” and of seeking to “pile up as many civilian dead as they can”,⁶⁷ the reality is quite different. Although Hamas did encourage civilians to ignore Israeli warnings of attacks targeting specific areas, those attacks, by targeting

civilian areas, were themselves entirely illegal, a point reiterated by Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁶⁸ Furthermore, at no point did Hamas attempt to forcefully place non-combatants in or around combat targets.⁶⁹ In contrast, Israel troops repeatedly force Palestinian civilians, including children, to act as physical shields for their troops.⁷⁰

The lack of stronger condemnation of Israeli military activities by Japan is more surprising when you consider that Japan has invested more than \$1 billion in aid in these areas. The cost of reconstruction in Gaza following the devastating 2014 assault is estimated at \$6 billion, and likely represents a nullification of the impact made by any previous Japanese aid. If Japan's assistance to the people of Palestine is intended as anything more than an image boosting gesture, it needs to issue stronger 'condemnation' of flagrant acts of violence against civilians, not only when they are ascribed to the governments of Libya or Syria but also when carried out by allies of the US.

The Response to Events in the Ukraine (2014)

At least in Israel-Palestinian affairs, Japan is relatively uninvolved, and the issue is thus more one of moral concern and a question of Japan's reliability as an independent adjudicator of international laws. In the ongoing clash between Russia and the Western states, however, Japan has finally entangled itself in an issue which will have significant repercussions for its adoption of Manichaeon views. By binding itself blindly to US and EU interests and forsaking a more neutral and balanced analysis of the situation Japan is compromising its own national interests for no perceivable gain.

The Crimean region had, of course, been part of Russia until 1954, at which point it was transferred to Ukraine, primarily as an act of statesmanship to bind the two nations closer together. The population of Crimea remained predominantly Russian though, and sought to retain its independence from Kiev, with a referendum in 1991 changing it to an Autonomous Soviet Republic. Many in the country wanted to fully separate from Ukraine and return to Russia, a proposal first raised by the regional government in 1994 and reinvigorated during the protests against the government of Viktor Yanukovich.

While admittedly quite corrupt, Yanukovich was the democratically elected leader of Ukraine and strongly supported in the Crimea. In 2013 he had entered into negotiations for a major trade agreement with the EU, something that appeased the population of Western Ukraine, who sought closer ties with the EU to replace preexisting economic ties with Russia. This deal would, however, have been an economic disaster for Ukraine as it would have cut off considerable bilateral trade with Russia in energy supplies, iron and steel that the EU

could not hope to make up for. The benefits of EU integration would have been, at best, mid to long-term returns, compared to the immediate impact of Russia's economic punishment.⁷¹ The deal would have also been damaging to Russia, both economically and militarily. In 2008 US embassy memos revealed that the Russian government had expressly told the US that it would oppose Ukrainian participation in NATO, something it believed would lead to civil war in Ukraine.⁷² Despite this the US promoted the EU deal which included provisions for NATO membership. In response Russia offered an alternate trade package that would allow Ukraine to engage with both Russia and the EU and which gave Ukraine generous trade concessions.⁷³ It was Yanukovich's acceptance of this deal that initiated the major protests which led to his overthrow.

The protests in Kiev became increasingly violent with shooting breaking out that was immediately attributed in the Western press to government forces.⁷⁴ Until this point though the security forces had been restrained in their use of force, while news crews on the scene identified numerous protestors armed with sniper rifles, firing on police.⁷⁵ The head of state security accused the opposition forces of fomenting the sudden increase in violence,⁷⁶ a view bolstered by reports from a doctor at the site of the protests that both police and protestors had been targeted by the same snipers.⁷⁷ In response to the violence Yanukovich agreed, on 21st of February, to an EU brokered deal that would have set early elections. He also agreed to pull back security personnel from the site of clashes with protestors, a move which immediately saw the more violent protestors storm and seize control of several government buildings. Yanukovich fled the immediate area and a vote was called to impeach him. The vote, though strongly supported, failed to reach the constitutionally mandated requirements to remove him from power and Yanukovich appeared on television to declare that he remained the country's democratically elected President. Despite this, the opposition organized a new government with their supporters attempting to seize control of regional administrative buildings. These groups were stridently anti-Russian, a factor highlighted in their raising, as their first bill, a law repealing the use of Russian as an officially recognized second language,⁷⁸ and later in attempts by the government to ban the Ukrainian Communist Party.⁷⁹ The new government was also deeply infiltrated by groups influenced by neo-Nazi ideology, such as Svoboda and Right Sector. The former group was described as racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic by the European Parliament,⁸⁰ while the World Jewish Congress sought to have it banned.⁸¹ Nonetheless, Svoboda members managed to acquire positions as Deputy Prime Minister, Prosecutor General, Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Education, Minister for Resources and, most importantly, Minister for Defense.

It was under these conditions that the citizens of the Crimean Autonomous Republic

sought to establish a referendum seeking to determine whether they would prefer to remain within the Ukraine or secede and rejoin Russia. In both the Crimean referendum and the Kiev coup, constitutional protocol was not followed and in both force was involved. However, the fact that the earlier coup had rendered the sitting Ukrainian government itself unconstitutional, makes it absurd to recognize the first as legitimate but not the second. Either both were illegitimate due to unconstitutionality, both were legitimate because they represented the 'will of the people' or only the Crimean referendum was legitimate because it was responding to an unconstitutional coup. The use of force in the establishment of the Crimean referendum was also limited to seizure of the parliament by troops whose sole purpose was to safeguard against a repeat of disruption by pro-Ukrainian protestors which prevented efforts to establish a referendum on 26th February.⁸² There is no justification through which the constitution can conveniently be switched off for the duration of the Kiev coup, and then turned on again in order to decry the Crimean referendum. Despite this, on the 16th of March when the people of Crimea voted on the future of their republic the US and EU immediately dismissed the results as illegitimate due to the fact that it did not follow the Ukrainian constitution. The constitution of Ukraine has no bearing on the matter though, particularly if one accepts, as the US, EU and Japan did, the secession of Kosovo from Serbia in breach of the latter's constitution. As far as the UN is concerned the point is moot with the UN International Court declaring: "No general prohibition may be inferred from the practice of the Security Council with regard to declarations of independence" and "general international law contains no prohibition on declarations of independence."⁸³ In other words the constitution of the Ukraine cannot be used as an inherent claim of illegitimacy and the status of newly independent states rests solely upon their recognition by the international community, which in turn rests upon a subjective assessment of whether independence is justifiable based upon extenuating circumstances. Robert McCorquodale, Director of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, argues that such circumstances can include the inability of the people to participate in governance free from oppression as a group.⁸⁴ It can certainly be argued that the unconstitutional seizure of power from a democratically elected President, dissolution of the Constitutional Court, efforts to suppress use of the Russian language, and the dissolution of the Ukrainian Communist Party have significantly compromised the Crimean people's ability to engage in the democratic process.

Another complaint was that ballots did not offer an option to retain the status quo. If such an option had appealed to the majority of Crimeans it seems unlikely that the referendum would have ever been initiated. It was clear that the vast majority of people instead favored either rejoining Russia or remaining part of Ukraine but with stronger autonomous rights (the two choices offered). Even so, citizens unhappy with these choices had the option of

showing their opposition by either casting spoiled ballots or not participating (a less than 50% turnout would have rendered the referendum void). Instead, turnout was reported at 83% with 96% choosing to return to Russia. Following the referendum the regional government declared independence from Ukraine and asked to join Russia. This was portrayed in Western media as Russian ‘annexation’, something technically accurate yet decried as being more militarily aggressive than the process of accession involved. Prominent academics in Japan went so far as to claim Russia “forcibly took over the Crimea” in “square defiance of the spirit of renouncing war”,⁸⁵ a description that does no justice to the complexities of the problem and distorts the situation dramatically by asserting that “force” and “war” played a significant role in the referendum. Though perhaps they were merely echoing statements from the US government that the vote was “administered under threats of violence and intimidation” from the Russian military.⁸⁶ Such views are thoroughly contradicted by the reports from international observers, 135 individuals from 23 countries, 623 journalists from 169 media organizations, and more than 1,200 local observers, who repeatedly stated that the elections were popular, free, transparent and followed international standards.⁸⁷ Crimean authorities also invited observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe but the group announced that it viewed the referendum as illegitimate.⁸⁸

The legitimacy of the election should not, however, be accepted out of hand. The majority of observers appear to have been strongly pro-Russia and a number belonged to far-right political groups. Many though, were also elected political officials, including several Members of the European Parliament, and their reports cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. Both reports of free elections and allegations of intimidation should be carefully considered, yet, it would have been highly unlikely, given the regions past display of affinity for Russia, the unconstitutional nature of the coup and the clearly anti-Russian views of the coup government, that the referendum could have resulted in anything but a vote for accession, with independent German polling suggesting only 11% of Crimean residents wished to remain part of the Ukraine.⁸⁹ This being the case, why would the Crimean authorities seek to rush the referendum? No doubt they feared the same application of military force that the Kiev authorities used to suppress the revolution in the Donbass region (an attempted secession that far more closely resembles the Kiev protests than the comparatively smooth Crimea secession), something that would have rendered any form of referendum impossible.

Once again, the purpose is not to suggest that Russia is in the right, but rather to highlight complexities and the existence of an opposing point of view that raises questions about Japan’s reflexive and resolute adherence to the Western/anti-Russian interpretations. A more neutral stance would have been possible, perhaps one which acknowledged

Crimea's legitimate concerns and supported their right, as an Autonomous Republic, to self-determination but which criticized Russia's interference. This would have allowed Japan to refuse recognition of the accession but call for a new referendum to be held under rigid international monitoring. In all likelihood such a position would have had negligible impact upon the actual events in the region but it would have allowed Japan to hold a middle ground between Russia and the West and offered a possible means of avoiding serious damage to its relations with either faction. Instead, Japan immediately condemned Russia, declaring "the annexation of Crimea is a clear violation of international law and changing the status quo through coercion could never be overlooked".⁹⁰ A difficult claim for Japan to make given how frequently it has overlooked, or condoned, US and NATO military action that contravened international law. This would have been enough to show support for the Western position and earn some slight enmity from Russia, yet, Japan went further, imposing sanctions on Russia that has now made it an active participant in the conflict.

These sanctions followed the MH-17 disaster in July 2014, for which the Western media, in the absence of any evidence, immediately blamed Russia.⁹¹ In its wake the US began to put pressure on its allies to enact sanctions,⁹² with Japan complying almost immediately.⁹³ Russia's foreign Ministry was disdainful of Japan's stance stating that the "stunt proves that Tokyo's numerous assurances of attempting to continue its efforts in developing relations with Russia are simply a smokescreen covering the inability of Japan's politicians to break out of Washington's wake and carry out their own individual line [of policy] that corresponds to the root national interests of their country."⁹⁴ This view was only reinforced by the cancellation of a planned visit by Japan's Foreign Minister to Moscow, due to fears that the US and EU would disapprove.⁹⁵

It should be remembered that Japan did not take any significant action following the US shooting down of Iran's Flight 655 in 1988, or Ukraine shooting down Russia's Flight 1812 in 2001. More importantly, no reliable evidence has yet been offered to suggest Russian involvement. Despite the Kiev government immediately claiming to have "compelling evidence" of Russian involvement, none was ever produced.⁹⁶ While the US had cutting edge surveillance satellites in the area it revealed nothing connected to flight MH-17, instead producing images of alleged use by separatists of Russian artillery against Ukrainian ground forces.⁹⁷ A Dutch investigative team released its initial findings in September 2014, declaring it believed the plane had been shot down but neglecting to offer any analysis of the type of weapon involved or who may have been responsible.⁹⁸ In contrast, Russia's Defense Ministry released data showing a Ukrainian fighter jet approaching MH-17 shortly before the crash, satellite imagery showing the presence of Ukrainian anti-air missiles in the immediate area,

and claimed that the US own satellites should have been capable of detecting the precise location of any launches.⁹⁹ On top of this, a report released by the Russian Federation of Engineers claimed that evidence from the wreckage clearly suggested the plane had been shot down by another plane rather than a missile, something which would implicate Ukraine as no other aircraft were in the vicinity.¹⁰⁰ This is only a further case of the known information on an international incident being far less clear-cut than media and political statements have made them out to be. It can also be compared to Japan's stance on the Houla massacre, wherein it placed blame on the Syrian government for failing to bring an end to violence in the region. In this instance, no blame whatsoever was apportioned to the Ukrainian government. Instead, Japan has chosen to take direct action against Russia without any apparent strategic reasons for doing so.

Shigeki Hakamada, Professor of Russian Affairs at Nigata University, feels that "Japan doesn't appear to have a clear-cut policy toward the Ukraine crisis," while Minori Kiuchi, head of the LDP's Foreign Affairs Division, suggested that acceptance of Russian actions might send a bad signal to China regarding the Senkaku Islands, apparently overlooking the fact that initiating economic warfare against Russia would only encourage Russian support for Chinese territorial claims.¹⁰¹ The collected academics of the Japan Forum on International Relations actually suggest that economic sanctions are "not enough" and dismiss arguments that: Japan has no clear purpose intervening in affairs on the other side of the world, opposing Russia will derail settlement of the Northern Territories issue, and that it will have significant negative impact on Japan's trade and energy relations with Russia.¹⁰² Instead they contend that Japan must take a more proactive role in international affairs and finally set aside the Yoshida doctrine which they recall, led De Gaulle to dismiss Japan as "a salesman of transistor radios."¹⁰³ Nowhere do they, or other Japanese advocates of confrontational policies, allow for any possibility that Russia is not completely in the wrong, or show a clear advantage to be gained by Japan antagonizing its powerful neighbor.

Russia is now moving away from the West and deepening ties with the other BRICS states as well as many Middle Eastern, South American, Asian and African states. There is a distinct possibility of a second Cold War developing between these two opposing blocs, yet there is no clear need for Japan to choose between them. Sergei Naryshkin, Speaker of the Russian Duma, expressed surprise that Japan chose to "entrust the key to its relations with a major and reliable partner to a third party" saying he had previously believed Japanese officials "had a rather constructive attitude and were able to assess current events impartially".¹⁰⁴ Sergey Glazyev, an advisor to President Putin, recently argued that US actions in Ukraine were destabilizing not just for Russia, but for the entire international system, and that a

“global anti-war coalition” advocating for stability and a reconfiguration of “the international financial and economic architecture on the principles of mutual benefit, fairness, and respect for national sovereignty” would be required to prevent future chaos.¹⁰⁵ Japan would seem eminently suited for a role in such a venture, using its geographical location and diplomatic ties to act as a facilitator between the opposing sides of the growing East-West divide. Instead, it has opted to choose sides in a conflict which, if it spirals out of control, could have serious repercussions for the geostrategically vulnerable state. What is more, it has done so under a banner of “proactive pacifism”, a buzzword that seems to have no bearing on actual policy. Without consistency a country cannot claim to be pacifist, yet Japan repeatedly applies double standards to the actions of countries based purely upon whether they oppose or support the policies of the USA, something which compromises any ability to make rational and incisive long-term analysis of the state’s strategic options. This mindset, if not set aside in favor of one which allows a more neutral and pragmatic analysis of affairs, is something likely to have major negative impact upon the Japanese state, the East-Asian region and the wider international system.

Conclusion

Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, expressed an awareness of the dangers of the Manichaeian point of view, saying “Back then it was “either or”, “either you’re with us or you’re against us”. We have left this concept behind a long time ago. But unfortunately many decision-makers in the West still have this mentality.”¹⁰⁶ It gives some understanding of the power of the modern media that in the West and Japan the multi-layered details of many complex international issues have indeed been reduced to a simple issue of good and bad, black and white.

One last time, it should be clear that anyone portraying Libya (Gaddafi), Syria (Assad) or Russia (Putin) as blameless victims would be equally guilty of adopting a simplistic view of the dynamics involved in each case. Yet, there is little question that not only are such voices practically non-existent in both the West and Japan, those attempting to present a neutral assessment are almost as rare. While, during the ‘War on Terror’ there was a vocal international anti-war movement that campaigned against media distortion, in recent years use of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ has undercut this criticism by creating villainous caricatures of political opponents which frequently turn the question of ‘whether such people should be punished?’ into one of ‘whether to use sanctions or military force?’ Japan’s increasing freedom from military restriction and its vocal support for just such missions of ‘humanitarian intervention’ make it important to assess whether Japanese politicians and political analysts have succumbed to mass media influence and failed to recognize the complexities of these

situations, or, whether they realize things are not as transparent as presented and are simply making mercenary choices that advance unrevealed personal agendas.

Unless such policies can be justified by aims that are clearly directed at, and capable of achieving, the promotion of Japan's national interest or the advancement of ethical values, they should not be blithely accepted by the general populace or their political representatives. The stakes are far higher than they have ever been in recent history and the ramifications of attempting to use such aggressive tactics on a state as powerful and well-connected as Russia are still not clear. Unless actions are taken to rectify hasty and ill-thought out policy, and to readjust over-simplified perceptions, the failures made in 2014 may be seen by later generations as having helped lay the first steps toward global conflict.

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