



# The Khalkhin Gol Anniversary and the Historical Memory Policy in Relations Between Russia, Mongolia, and Japan

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# Preface

*Oleg Barabanov*

The summer of 2019 marks the 80th anniversary of the armed conflict on the Khalkhin Gol River. This conflict has both historical and political importance. Historically, the Battle of Khalkhin Gol put an end to a series of the 1930s clashes between Japan (and Manchukuo<sup>1</sup>), on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and Mongolia, on the other. As may be recalled, during the previous armed conflict on Lake Khasan in 1938, the actions of the Soviet border guards and the military were initially erratic, and they lost the initiative, which could have led the other side to believe that it was quite possible to mess with the Soviet army. The results of the battle of Khalkhin Gol (more large-scale than the one of Lake Khasan) demonstrated the superiority of the Soviet and Mongolian military power.

Memories of Khalkhin Gol, as it seems, played an important part in Japan's decision to conclude a neutrality treaty with the Soviet Union in April 1941 and re-focus its military activities from the USSR to the US. Needless to say, Japan's neutrality played a key role in the fact that the Soviet Union managed to withstand the initial, most difficult period of the war against Germany in the second half of 1941 and the summer and autumn of 1942. Had Japan sided with Germany during this period and declared war on the Soviet Union, fighting on two fronts would have significantly reduced the ability of the USSR to defend itself and would have likely led to a fatal outcome for the country.

It is also historically important that Khalkhin Gol became the first major military operation for future Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgy Zhukov. The victory in this battle attracted Joseph Stalin's personal attention to Zhukov and helped him move quickly up the military career ladder in 1940–1941 (at first, appointed Commander of the Kiev Special Military District and then Chief of the General Staff). The fact that Zhukov played the key role in victory over Germany can also be traced back to his actions at Khalkhin Gol.

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**Memories of Khalkhin Gol, played an important part in Japan's decision to conclude a neutrality treaty with the Soviet Union in April 1941 and re-focus its military activities from the USSR to the US**

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<sup>1</sup> Manchukuo was a puppet state of the Empire of Japan in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia from 1932 until 1945.

The outcome of the conflict at Khalkhin Gol had significant influence on stability and strength of the statehood of the Mongolian People's Republic. Later, during the Second World War, neither Japan nor Manchukuo took any military action against that country. At the same time, one should not forget that introducing the 57th Special Corps of the Soviet troops (which then fought on Khalkhin Gol) into Mongolia in 1937 served as a backdrop for a Soviet-style campaign of reprisals and cleansing in Mongolia in 1937–1939.

Khalkhin Gol had a major impact on international relations in Europe at that time. The success of the Soviet troops in holding a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the river in the second half of July 1939 and then at the beginning of a large-scale Soviet offensive on August 20, which led to the final defeat of the enemy forces and the end of the conflict, served as a distinctive background for concluding a non-aggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany on August 23, 1939. However, the military success at Khalkhin Gol and the easy liberation campaign led by the Red Army in Western Ukraine and Belarus in the autumn of 1939 resulted in certain arrogance in the Red Army, which largely accounted for its failures during the first period of the 1939–1940 Soviet-Finnish Winter War.

Khalkhin Gol is also important for the evolution of military strategy and tactics, primarily, from the point of view of organizing and conducting massive air battles with dozens of aircraft and in terms of encircling large enemy formations, capturing and holding bridgeheads located behind water obstacles, etc. From the military and political perspective, organizing interaction between the Soviet and Mongolian troops during combat, which became one of the first major examples of such cooperation between the Soviet Union and its allies, is also important.

The anniversary of Khalkhin Gol is important not only historically but also politically, first and foremost, in a wider context of the historical memory policies and the impact that history has on modern values and ideological tenets associated with national identities. The public debate about the parameters of a peace treaty, which has now become quite acute in Russia and Japan, has brought this historical memory policy almost to the forefront of the entire spectrum of bilateral relations. The overall importance of Khalkhin Gol also matters for Russia–Mongolia relations and the role of national identity and historical memory in public opinion in Mongolia today.

As a rule (although we are all aware of the exceptions), modern anniversaries of major military conflicts of the past are aimed primarily at historical reconciliation of previously warring states, on the one hand, and the impact of the allied fraternity of the past on positive dynamics of today's relations, on the other. In this regard, the Khalkhin Gol anniversary will hopefully serve these purposes of historical reconciliation and enhanced cooperation.

In the context of this anniversary, the Valdai Discussion Club presents the papers by renowned Russian orientalists, namely, Sergei Luzyanin, Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Dmitry Streltsov, Head of the Department

of Oriental Studies at MGIMO University. Sergei Lyzyanin analyses the historical context of the conflict at Khalkhin Gol using a large number of new and little-known sources and examines the dynamics of the historical memory policy in modern Mongolia. In his paper, Dmitry Streltsov provides a picture of the evolution of the historical memory policy in Japan and highlights the key differences in approaches to this issue between certain political forces in that country. Also, he provides an interesting and important analysis of the public debate in Japan on concluding a peace treaty with Russia.

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**Mongolia's President Khaltmaagiin Battulga seems to prioritize relations with Russia and China**

Clearly, the wars of the past should become exclusively the focus of attention of experts in history and should not provoke disagreements between states. It is supposed that the anniversary of Khalkhin Gol will serve this purpose.

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## The Undeclared War of Khalkhin Gol: Reality and Myths 80 Years On

*Sergei Lyzyanin*

As the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic mark the 80th anniversary of their victory in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol against the militarist Japan and Manchukuo, these events have once again drawn attention of historians and political observers, reviving old myths and giving rise to new ones.

Having built a multiparty dual executive government and a liberal and open economy in the 1990s and 2000s, Mongolia has emerged as a democratic state. Its foreign policy is based on the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2011, which provides for promoting international relations with three centres of power: Russia, China, and 'third neighbours' (the US, Japan, the EU, South Korea, etc.). In fact, this policy consists of balancing these three vectors, which reflects the preferences of various groups within the Mongolian elite.

Mongolia's President Khaltmaagiin Battulga seems to prioritize relations with Russia and China. Within the Democratic Party (headed by Erdene Sodnomzundui) most senior party officials are committed to developing relations

with third neighbours, while also recognising the economic value of Mongolia's relations with Beijing and Moscow. Members of the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) mostly favour neutrality in foreign policy. President Battulga's current team of senior government officials includes Prime Minister Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh and Speaker of the State Great Khural Gombojavyn Zandanshatar, both representing the MPP. They form what seems to be a solid and effective team that has been able to deliver, including on developing Mongolia's relations with Russia in key sectors and projects. The next parliamentary election to the State Great Khural is scheduled to take place in 2020, and their outcome will affect the domestic and foreign policy of the Mongolian government.

Russia and China are the key foreign policy priorities for the current Mongolian president, who seeks to promote joint infrastructure projects. These include creating economic corridors within the Russia–Mongolia–China triangle, building and modernizing railways, and creating a power grid encompassing all of Northeast Asia. President Battulga wants to upgrade Mongolia's status within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) from observer to the full member status, although the majority of State Great Khural MPs are not yet ready to back this initiative. Opposition leaders argue that the president is pushing the country towards colonial dependence on Russia. They oppose SCO membership, staging rallies and protests. It is not uncommon for media outlets controlled by the Democratic Party to publish articles denigrating Russia.

At the same time, the Mongolian public is often quite hostile to the Chinese, and a number of Mongolian politicians have adopted an anti-China rhetoric. This contrasts with the position of President Battulga, who did not try to play down the significance of Mongolia's relations with China during his election campaign and is currently seeking to build the same kind of relations with China as with Russia. Mongolia is proactive in promoting cross-border cooperation with China's neighbouring regions: the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. However, the visits by the 14th Dalai Lama to Mongolia remain a sticking point in its relations with China. The visit to Mongolia by the Buddhist leader in 2016 resulted in a row between Beijing and Ulaanbaatar over whether the Dalai Lama should be allowed to travel to Mongolia in the future, even if the visits are religious in nature.

The idea of expanding relations with Japan has been gathering momentum in Mongolia against the backdrop of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol. President Battulga has yet to pay an official visit to Japan, and Shinzo Abe has not visited Mongolia so far, even though the Mongolian president has stated on numerous occasions that the two countries should



develop their relations as a mutual partnership. Today, Mongolia does not view Japan as a strategic or major foreign policy priority, while the general public and senior government officials believe that Japan is an important third neighbour.

For instance, Mongolians live, study, and work in Japan, which has been facilitated by the signing of the Memorandum of Cooperation on Technical Intern Training Programme in 2017, and another Memorandum of Cooperation in 2019. Japan remains an important investor and has a major footprint in Mongolia's cultural sector. Many Japanese NGOs operate in the country. The Japan–Mongolia Centre for Human Resource Development is located nearby the central building of the National University of Mongolia.

While Mongolian political leaders may well adhere to various approaches and views, hardly any of them are ready to publicly call for reviewing the outcomes of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol. Most of the debate revolves around details and nuances rather than the conflict in general. Most politicians are eager to show that they honour the memory of the victory. This is in tune with Mongolia's popular sentiment which regards the victory by the USSR and Mongolian People's Republic in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol against the imperialist Japan as an axiom and a heroic deed. Although, this topic has been intensely debated by observers and researchers. For example, Mongolia's current Ambassador to Turkey Ravdan Bold, who served as a National Security Council Secretary in 1997–2003 and was a Director of the General Intelligence Agency of Mongolia in 2007–2012, has published several papers on the subject adding important details on the number of Soviet, Mongolian, and Japanese casualties. He also touched upon the Tanaka Memorial and a number of other historical topics. Bat-Erdeniin Batbayar (Baabar)<sup>2</sup> is one of the few observers who tries to reconsider these events and suggest that there was blame on both sides of the conflict.

Politicians and diplomats who accused Tokyo of military expansionism used to refer to the Tanaka Memorial to back their assertions. Its author served as Japan's prime minister in 1927 and is associated with Tokyo's militarist policy. At the same time, a number of Western and Japanese scholars believe that the document was crafted in the depth of the Communist International (Comintern) and had nothing to do with high-ranking Japanese officials. Having

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<sup>2</sup> *Bat-Erdeniin Batbayar (Baabar) heads Nepko Publishing Company and owns Baabar.mn news website. He was one of the leading figures of the 1990 Mongolian Revolution, and served as Mongolia's finance minister in 1998–1999, and advisor to Prime Minister Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj in 2004–2005.*

analysed the document's language and nature, Japanese historians concluded that its writers could not have been Japanese.

Whether the Tanaka Memorial was an authentic historical document or a fake fabricated by the Comintern – today, no one can say with certainty. There are strong arguments on both sides of the debate. In our opinion, in any case, i.e. whether Japan had a document to back its policy or not, Tokyo felt an objective need for expansion to the north (towards the Mongolian People's Republic and Russia's Far East). It was only a matter of timing and choosing the exact theatre for an offensive. These actions were also underpinned by Japan's strategy to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. There was also another factor, related to China: Tokyo needed to eliminate the main corridor that was used by the USSR to send help to southern China through the Mongolian People's Republic and Inner Mongolia.

Japanese NGOs have been consistent in their efforts in Mongolia to revise the outcomes of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol. In August 2014, the Japanese Society for Mongolian History and Culture, Sekiguchi Global Research Association, and Atsumi International Scholarship Foundation sponsored an international academic conference on the battles of Khalkhin Gol and Nomonhan. Here are the key points made by the Japanese experts:

- 1) The Tanaka Memorial is fake, and this fact has been definitely proven.
- 2) Japan did not aim to invade Mongolia, and the conflict resulted from a border demarcation dispute.
- 3) There was no Battle of Khalkhin Gol, only the Nomonhan Incident.
- 4) The responsibility for unleashing the conflict rests both with the USSR and Japan (limited to the Kwantung Army command).
- 5) Mongolia became a victim of the conflict between the two powers against its will.

Building on these points, let us have a look at the actual history of the Khalkhin Gol.

The situation in the Far East was largely dominated by the invasion of China by Japan, which started on July 7, 1937. All these developments, including the Sino-Japanese War, the establishment of Manchukuo, etc., are well-known and have been thoroughly studied. What is less known is that between 1935 and 1939 Mongolia and Manchuria held the Manchuria Conference to normalize their cross-border relations. While formally held by the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchukuo, the two had the backing of the USSR and Japan, respectively.

Manchukuo, being a puppet state, was similar to the Mongolian People's Republic in terms of its status. Both countries were *de jure* recognised only by their patron states, Japan and the USSR. Both formally belonged to China's jurisdiction, while in fact Manchukuo was controlled by Tokyo, while Moscow had the Mongolian People's Republic under its control. What made these two different is that Tokyo viewed its puppet state as a convenient military platform for preparing an attack by the Kwantung Army to the north (against the USSR) or northwest (the Mongolian People's Republic). At the same time, Moscow regarded Mongolia in defensive terms, seeking to defend the Mongolian People's Republic and the eastern borders of the Soviet Union. In 1936, Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed the Soviet-Mongolian Mutual Assistance Pact, which guaranteed military and political assistance to Mongolia in case of an attack by Japan. Japan was clearly intent on stepping up its operations in China at the time, seeking to win the war. Despite Moscow's efforts to form a single anti-Japan front (1937) with the Kuomintang army divisions and the Communist Party of China, developments took a grim turn for Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China, with 80% of its territory occupied. The USSR's growing military might irritated Tokyo.

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**Japanese NGOs have been consistent in their efforts in Mongolia to revise the outcomes of the Battle of Khalkhin Gol**

Beginning May 15, 1939, border incidents escalated into a full Japanese and Manchurian military expansion. Troops of the four, with the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic on one side, and Japan and Manchukuo on the other, confronted each other along the left side of the Khalkhin Gol River. The main battles took place between June and August 1939. The Kwantung Army penetrated deep into the Mongolian territory and crossed the Khalkhin Gol. It carried out three major offensives, using artillery and air power reaching as far as 80 km into Mongolian People's Republic's airspace. The Japanese tried to consolidate their positions on the Khalkhin Gol's left bank, but the Soviet and Mongolian troops vigorously defended it. In June, a counteroffensive was carried out against Manchukuo's territory. The final victory came after the August 20–24 general offensive, led by brilliant Soviet commander Georgy Zhukov. In terms of military prowess, this general offensive was carried out effectively and aggressively.

The jury is still out, however, on the terminology for designating the tragic events along the Khalkhin Gol. Some historians refer to them as a 'conflict', while others call them an 'undeclared war'. There are historians in Japan seeking to emphasise the local nature of the events by calling them the Nomonhan Incident, while the USSR used the official label 'conflict on the Khalkhin Gol

River'. Considering the scale of hostilities, the geopolitical reasons that had led to them, and the consequences, as well as the number of casualties (52,000 soldiers and officers for Japan and Manchuria, while the USSR and Mongolia lost between 12,000 and 14,000), we believe that the conflict was a local war between two regional military blocks: USSR and Mongolian People's Republic against Japan and Manchukuo.

The idea suggested by prominent Japanese expert on Mongolia, Professor Katsuhiko Tanaka, who argued that the clash between Japan and the USSR benefited both sides, is no less questionable. Following this logic, Moscow and Tokyo wanted to prevent Khalkha Mongols in Outer Mongolia (Mongolian People's Republic), Barga Mongols (Inner Mongolia and Manchuria), and part of Buryat tribes across the Mongolian People's Republic and Manchukuo from uniting all Mongol ethnicities into a single Mongol state in keeping with the pan-Mongolism doctrine. It has to be noted that this doctrine actually existed both in the era of Genghis Khan's Great Mongol Empire (13th–14th centuries), and during Mongolia's theocratic monarchy under Bogd Gegeen Ezen Khaan in 1911–1919. Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg tried to impose his vision of pan-Mongolism as a triumph of a more progressive Mongoloid race of the Mongols and Manchurians over the decadent Western race. The leader of the Mongolian People's Republic, Khorloogiin Choibalsan, also shared this vision. He talked to Stalin in the Kremlin on several occasions on the possibility of incorporating Inner Mongolia, which until the Japanese aggression in 1937 was part of Kuomintang China, and until August 1945 was under Japanese occupation – in the Mongolian People's Republic.

While pan-Mongolism actually existed as an idea, it is unlikely that Moscow and Tokyo chose to destroy it in 1939 at the cost of numerous casualties on both sides, including for Soviet and Japanese troops. Moscow and Tokyo were guided by geopolitical considerations of a grander scale. Soviet leaders wanted to avoid having to fight on two fronts, against the Nazi Germany and the militarist Japan. At the same time, Japan sought to deliver on two military and political objectives: defeat Outer Mongolia (Mongolian People's Republic), the only ally of the USSR, in order to expand the territory occupied by the Kwantung Army along the USSR border in the Far East, while also completing the Chinese blitzkrieg with the aim to cut off aid coming from the USSR and Mongolia.

The events that followed proved Moscow's calculations to be correct. After its victory at Khalkhin Gol, the USSR not only strengthened its 'younger brother', the Mongolian People's Republic, and created a military and political

buffer zone along its border with Japan, but also dissuaded Tokyo from opening a second front against the USSR in the Far East in 1941–1945. It is our belief that without the Khalkhin Gol victory, Japan would have launched an offensive against the Far Eastern strongholds of the Soviet Union in December 1941 while the Battle of Moscow was raging, which would have prevented the Soviet command from transferring divisions from the Far East and Siberia to the West. In fact, these troops determined the outcome of the battle for the Soviet capital, eventually paving the way to the great victory.

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**After its victory at Khalkhin Gol, the USSR dissuaded Tokyo from opening a second front against the USSR in the Far East in 1941–1945**

Little is still known about the maps that were used by the Mongolian and Soviet command in May 1939 to trace the boundaries of the Khalkhin Gol battle. When the hostilities broke out (after May 15, 1939), neither Moscow, nor Ulaanbaatar had a clear understanding of the geography of the ongoing hostilities. The lack of a clear demarcation line (border) made the highest Soviet command quite nervous, since they wanted to present the conflict to the Soviet and international public as a violation of the Mongolian People's Republic's border and an act of aggression by the Kwantung Army. However, the archival documents available to the Soviet cartographers contained only Chinese maps dating back to the last dynasty that ruled in Manchuria, the Qing dynasty (until 1911), whereby the lands controlled by Barga Mongols in Manchuria and Khalkha Mongols in Outer Mongolia were designated as a 'shared nomad territory stretching 200 to 300 km in every direction', and the Khalkhin Gol River was part of this region.

On May 21, 1939, when hostilities were already underway, Lavrenty Beria reported to Joseph Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov in a secret dispatch on the discovery in Ulaanbaatar of 'another map dated July 5, 1887; no other copies of this map had been discovered in the archives of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs or the Military Topography Division of the Red Army, or the Red Army General Staff.'<sup>3</sup> According to Beria, this map showed that the border lay 'to the east of the Khalkhin Gol River', which meant that the hostilities could be regarded as a war on the Mongolian People's Republic's territory. As for the maps published in the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic in 1934–1937 and their publishers, Beria reported the following:

We are investigating what materials and documents were used in January 1934 by the Military Topography Division of the Red Army to publish a map which shows the state borders coinciding with the Khalkhin Gol River; we are also investigating what led to the decision to draw the state border separating the Mongolian People's Republic from Manchukuo [as per the newly discovered map – *Sergei Lyzyanin*] to the northeast of the Khalkhin Gol River.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation, Molotov Secretariat Section, inv. 1, box 132, file 13, p. 62.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid, p.65.*

In other words, during the conflict the border was determined using the 1887 Manchurian map. It is now almost impossible to understand whether this map was accurate. It may well be that this was a fake fabricated in Beria's services so that he could report the desired information to his superior.

In any case, these archival documents do not refute the fact of Japan's territorial aggression against the Mongolian People's Republic. At the same time, they confirm that it is almost impossible to determine on whose territory the multiple border conflicts that eventually grew into a war took place between 1934 and 1939. These were probably reciprocal raids by Mongolian troops into Manchukuo and Manchurian troops into the Mongolian People's Republic. As for the demarcation line, it was traced along the Khalkhin Gol River after the hostilities ended and the conflicting parties signed a truce.

Another point is that the official status of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1921–1946 is not entirely clear. On the one hand, people well versed in history know that an independent Mongolian state came into being in 1921 following the Mongolian Revolution (July 5–7, 1921) assisted by the 5th the Red Army and was proclaimed in 1924. On the other hand, few are aware that from the perspective of international law, the Mongolian People's Republic was established only in 1946, and did not exist officially before that, remaining part of the Kuomintang Republic of China. Moscow confirmed that it belonged to China in the Sino-Soviet Agreement on the General Principles for the Settlement of Questions signed on May 31, 1924. Article 5 stated that Outer Mongolia was 'an integral part of the Republic of China'.<sup>5</sup> In the 1930s, China lodged a protest against the Soviet leadership when Moscow and Ulaanbaatar signed a Protocol on Mutual Assistance in 1936. China referred to it as a separate arrangement between the USSR and an entity within the Chinese territory (Outer Mongolia). The situation had not changed by the time the Battle of Khalkhin Gol broke out. Therefore, from a formal perspective the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia) remained within the Republic of China.

Proactive diplomatic efforts under Stalin's leadership during the Second World War helped Mongolia move away from this dual status. On February 8, 1945, at one of the meetings during the Yalta Conference, Joseph Stalin asked US President Franklin Roosevelt what he thought about 'preserving the status quo of Outer Mongolia'. To which Roosevelt replied that he had not raised this issue with Chiang Kai-shek but believed that 'the status quo in Outer Mongolia

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<sup>5</sup> 'Sovetskto-Kitaiskiye Otnosheniya 1917–1957. Sbornik Dokumentov' [*Sino-Soviet Relations 1917–1957. Collection of Documents*], 1958, Moscow.

should be preserved'.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Roosevelt, as well as other heads of states, agreed that preserving the status quo in Mongolia implied the existence of an 'independent state entity' within the USSR's sphere of influence.

On February 11, 1945, the USSR, the United States, and Great Britain signed an agreement setting out the terms of the USSR's entry in the war against Japan. The first provision of this agreement stipulated that 'the status quo of Outer Mongolia (the Mongolian People's Republic) shall be preserved'. It went on to say:

It is understood that the agreement concerning Outer Mongolia and the ports and railroads referred to above will require concurrence of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. The President will take measures in order to maintain this concurrence on advice from Marshal Stalin. For its part, the Soviet Union expresses its readiness to conclude with the National Government of China a pact of friendship and alliance between the USSR and China in order to render assistance to China with its armed forces for the purpose of liberating China from the Japanese yoke.

In the follow-up to the Yalta agreements, a Chinese government delegation arrived in Moscow on June 30, 1945, headed by Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Soong Tse-ven. Mongolia was one of the key points on the agenda of the talks. For China, it was the last chance to reach a high-level agreement on this matter in its favour, which would mean partially revisiting the Yalta agreement. However, Stalin cut short all attempts by the Chinese to raise the question of making the Mongolian People's Republic part of China, by saying that 'if the proclamation of independence of Outer Mongolia is not on the agenda, we will not discuss any other matters. In this case, let us suspend the talks.' At the same time, the Soviet leadership signalled to the Chinese delegation that the USSR would not enter the war against Japan unless China recognises the independence of the Mongolian People's Republic. As a result, on August 14, 1945, China gave in, having insisted, however, that the decision on the independence of the Mongolian People's Republic (Outer Mongolia) be validated by referendum. Held on October 20, 1945, the vote confirmed the will of the Mongolian people to be independent from

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**In January 1934  
the Military Topography  
Division of the Red  
Army published a map  
which shows the state  
borders coinciding with  
the Khalkhin Gol River**

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<sup>6</sup> 'SSSR na Mezhdunarodnykh Konferentsiyakh Perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny 1941–1945 gg. Krymskaya Konferentsiya Rukovoditelei Tryokh Soyuznykh Derzhav – SSSR, SShA i Velikobritanii. 4–11 fevralya 1945 g. Sbornik dokumentov' [USSR at International Conferences during the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. The Crimean Conference of the Leaders of Three Allied Powers: USSR, USA and Great Britain. February 4–11, 1945. Collection of Documents], 1984, Moscow.

China. It showed widespread support for the independence of the Mongolian People's Republic, while also reflecting the diversity of opinions among the Mongolian public on the relations between Russia, Mongolia, and China.

This is how the Mongolian issue was resolved from an international law perspective during World War II. The Mongolian People's Republic became a sovereign state following the implementation of the resolutions adopted at the Yalta Conference, the provisions of the Sino-Soviet agreement of August 14, 1945, as well as the referendum in the Mongolian People's Republic. China recognised the Mongolian independence on January 5, 1946.

The Moscow–Ulaanbaatar strategic axis was consolidated by the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic signed in Moscow on February 27, 1946. Article 2 stated: 'The governments of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Mongolian People's Republic, in case of a military attack against one of the contracting parties, shall assist each other in every possible way, including military assistance.'

In other words, from the perspective of international law the Mongolian People's Republic did not exist until 1946, and the Soviet Union was the only country that supported and recognised it. It is obvious that without the firm stance adopted by Stalin at the Yalta Conference and during the talks with China in Moscow, Outer Mongolia would have been designated as part of Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China. This would have made Mongolian statehood impossible both *de jure* and *de facto*. Today, Mongolian historians either fail to mention these historical facts or present them in an extremely distorted way.

In conclusion, the key points regarding the historical memory on this matter are as follows.

- The relations between Russia, Mongolia, and China were affected by China's rapid economic expansion and its emergence as a centre of gravity in international affairs, as well as by the termination of Soviet tutelage over Mongolia in early 1990s and the establishment of the latter as an independent international subject. Today, Mongolia is no longer hostage to the relations between Russia and China, as was the case in the times of the Russian and Qing empires, in the years of Sino-Soviet disputes, and in other periods. Mongolia is currently actively searching for its place in the economic and political world that would suit its national interests.



- The Battle of Khalkhin Gol was a milestone for preserving the national independence and territorial integrity of the Mongolian People's Republic. Moscow fulfilled its commitments under the 1936 Protocol with Ulaanbaatar, while preserving the Mongolian territory under its full political, economic, and military control.
- In the 1990s, Mongolia proclaimed a new foreign policy, by adding the 'third neighbours' pillar (the West) to its traditional partners, Russia and China, for a better balance in the external influences. In our opinion, this move was driven not only by an attempt to attract additional resources (donors) for development and modernization purposes but also by the desire to end the traditional dependence on its northern (Russia) and southern (China) neighbours. Today, the 'third neighbour' factor is not a serious obstacle for developing neighbourly relations with Russia. The restored memory of the victory by Soviet and Mongolian troops in the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in June–September 1939 reinforces the traditional ties of friendship between the peoples of Mongolia and Russia.
- Russia and Mongolia should work together to produce more research on questions that are still disputed or have not been sufficiently studied, including those mentioned in this paper. For better objectivity Russia and Mongolia need to undertake a joint effort to explore archives, hold roundtable discussions and conferences in Moscow, Ulaanbaatar, and Tokyo.

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**Without the firm stance adopted by Stalin at the Yalta Conference and during the talks with China in Moscow This would have made Mongolian statehood impossible both de jure and de facto**

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## Historical Memory in Russia-Japan Relations

*Dmitry Streltsov*

This year's 80th anniversary of the Battle at Khalkhin Gol raises the question about the effect historical memory has had on Russia–Japan relations. The rout of the Japanese army by the joint Russia–Mongolia forces in the summer of 1939 acted as a cold shower for the hotheads in the Japanese General Headquarters. It made them look more realistically at the Soviet military potential and change the direction of their foreign expansion. Their earlier plans of attacking the Soviet Far East were

reviewed and the aggression was directed southward. Soon the USSR and Japan concluded a neutrality pact that remained in force during the entire Great Patriotic War, providing additional insurance against Japan's attack during the most difficult periods of the war.

The Khalkhin Gol Battle, which became the pinnacle of the USSR–Japan confrontation in the 1930s, was followed by a brief respite of a four-year-long neutrality that was interrupted by the war between the two countries in August 1945. As a result of these events, the 1930s and early 1940s are seen as a period of the greatest hostility and confrontation in the history of bilateral relations since their inception. Although the level of conflict during these 15 years was not always the same, the risk that they would slide into a full-scale war remained throughout. It is this period in bilateral relations that probably had the strongest negative effect on the collective memory of both nations for a long time to come.

In general, historical memory is a powerful foreign policy instrument today. Not infrequently, the existence of 'historical grievances' is a criterion for assessing the level of threat emanating from a partner country.<sup>7</sup> The goal of this paper is to assess the influence of historical memory on bilateral relations in the post-World War II period.

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## Historical Memory in USSR/ Russia–Japan Relations: Moscow's Perspective

In the post-war USSR, Japan was in no way associated with unresolved problems or 'historical grievances'. The post-war Soviet generation no longer remembered the Russian–Japanese war, which, owing to the political education of the masses, was rather seen as an illustration of the crisis of tsarism, a fight of imperialist 'predators' than a 'sacred' war for the interests of a great country. As for the Japanese intervention in Siberia and the Far East in 1918–1922, it was still viewed

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<sup>7</sup> Pollman, EM, 2016, 'Japan's Security and Historical Revisionism: Explaining the Variation in Responses to and Impact of Textbook Controversies', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, no. 3(3), doi: 10.1177/2347797016670704, p. 308.

as an episode of the civil war, as a result of which the Soviet state came into being. For this reason, it often became a subject of propaganda mythology aimed more at glorifying the Red Army and the partisan movement that established the Soviet regime than escalating hatred towards the Japanese occupation troops.

Although this was the only case in bilateral relations when the war took place on Soviet territory and the Japanese were the occupation troops, the majority of Soviet didactic materials on the intervention in the Far East laid the blame for all the losses and suffering primarily with the White Guard and White Cossacks. Compared with the Japanese, they committed far more atrocious crimes against the civilians that supported the Reds.

To be fair, it must be said that the Japanese punitive troops also left a bad memory (it is enough to recall the punitive expedition of the Japanese to the village of Ivanovka in March 1919, as a result of which several hundred civilians, including women and children, were killed).<sup>8</sup> The story about Red partisan Lazo, who was handed by the Japanese to the White Cossacks and ostensibly burned alive in a burner of a steam train, became widespread although it had nothing to do with reality (he was shot). However, this myth turned out to be so enduring that the alleged steam train was put on a pedestal with a sign in Ussuriysk in 1972. The Japanese were also often represented in a derisive manner. The 1937 film *Volochayevka Days* portrays Colonel Usijima as a bit of a fool. Yet, grievances against Japan were largely linked with their predatory exploitation and export of natural resources from Siberia and the Far East during the military occupation and their refusal to return the ‘tsarist gold’ rather than Japanese atrocities.

As for the World War II period, the conflict with Japan was short (it lasted for less than three weeks) and victorious. The Japanese troops did not do much damage to the Soviet people or the Soviet economy because all hostilities took place outside Soviet territory. Since Tokyo made an announcement on accepting the terms of the Potsdam Declaration a week after the USSR declared war on Japan on August 8, 1945, this war did not entail huge human losses in the USSR the way the war in Europe did. And even though Stalin appealed to the feeling of historical justice in his radio address following Japan’s surrender on September 2,

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**The Battle of Khalkhin Gol was a milestone for preserving the national independence and territorial integrity of the Mongolian People’s Republic**

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<sup>8</sup> In 1995 the Japanese built a monument here to commemorate the victims and express repentance for these events.

1945, by explaining the entry into the war against Japan not so much by Soviet allied commitments as by 'historical grievances' (the Russo-Japanese war and the intervention in the Far East), the Japanese did not evoke 'noble rage' in the hearts of the Soviet people, not to mention a desire for revenge.

Stalin himself thought in the categories of the global post-war order and did not consider the defeated and occupied Japan worthy of attention in his strategic thinking. He easily left it in the US zone of influence. Solidarity with the communist China, the USSR's main ally in Asia, which was not invited to the September 1951 San Francisco conference, was the main reason for Moscow's decision not to sign a peace treaty with Japan. Stalin thought that only a Third World War will put a final stop to all disputes in the Far East and considered any peace treaty with Japan to be temporary for this reason.

However, after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leaders proclaimed a course towards peaceful coexistence and the issue of settling relations with Japan became relevant again. In the 1950s, the Soviet policy towards Japan was based on the need to alienate it from the alliance with the US and turn it into a peaceful and democratic state that did not pose a military threat. This policy resulted in the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956, which defined terms for a peaceful settlement. The sides agreed that they did not have any mutual grievances after World War II and the USSR waived its right to reparations from Japan. From Moscow's standpoint, this meant that the USSR 'forgave' Japan not only for its militaristic policy in the 1930s and 1940s but also the events of the more remote past. Nikita Khrushchev's promise to transfer to Japan two of the South Kuril Islands actually amounted to an attempt to bribe Japan by compelling it to renounce its alliance with the US. This attempt was doomed to failure because by that time Tokyo had already determined its foreign policy position.

The 'forgiveness of Japan' did not evoke any resentment inside the USSR because the post-war generation of the Soviet people had only a vague memory of Japan's historical sins associated with the intervention in 1918–1922, not to mention the Russo-Japanese war. And it was not so difficult to 'forgive' the Japanese for their crimes outside the USSR, even if they were committed on the territory of the allied China. Moreover, by the beginning of the 1960s China was rapidly turning from an ally into the worst enemy and it was not logical to say the least to support its verbal attacks against Japan at that time.

There was another factor. Soviet propaganda presented Japan, which allowed the deployment of US military bases on its territory under a security treaty, as a country occupied by the United States, which, in accordance with Lenin's theses, was to achieve its national liberation on a par with other Asian and African countries. The stereotype of Japan being a satellite country that was directly dependent on the US in its foreign policy took hold in the minds of the entire Soviet generation. They believed that Japan, which was suffering under the US yoke, had already received a cruel lesson of history and spurning it for the past was like kicking a man who was down, which is considered a big sin in Russia.

Later, when Japan reached high economic growth rates and began to show interest in developing the natural resources of Siberia and the Far East in the 1960s, inclusion of the historical grievances in the bilateral agenda, which had already been aggravated by the territorial issue, would have become a big obstacle for economic cooperation in which Moscow was interested as much as Tokyo. Moreover, under Leonid Brezhnev, the USSR waged a war on two fronts – against the United States and China. When the first signs of the US–China reconciliation appeared in the early 1970s, Moscow tried to court Japan because it was scared of a behind-the-scene anti-Soviet collusion of its two rivals and offered it two islands in exchange for friendly neutrality (then Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, even made a special trip to Tokyo in January 1972 for this reason). Although Moscow's initiative failed, the USSR tried not to irritate Japan by criticising its historical past because it was interested in building stable economic relations with it. However, the USSR maintained a tough position on the territorial issue.

Soviet propaganda also largely neglected the historical issues that worried Asian nations who had suffered from Japan's aggression. This was about reparations, problems of historical manuals, which became particularly urgent in the early 1980s, and the visits by Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine that started in 1985. As for Japan's territorial claims, this issue was taboo both in propaganda and academic research. Tokyo's stubborn attempts to include this issue in the bilateral agenda was explained by its revanchist aspirations and a desire to revise the results of World War II.

It was Mikhail Gorbachev who opened Pandora's box in 1991. His 'new thinking' implied renunciation of former stereotypes and a critical attitude

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**Historical memory  
is a powerful foreign  
policy instrument today**

to national history. In the context of Russia–Japan relations this meant the admission of a number of unfair moves made by the USSR as regards Japan during World War II. Hence, it was necessary to develop bilateral relations from scratch, without recalling the ‘dark past’. Acting in the spirit of the ‘new thinking’, Gorbachev admitted the existence of the four Kuril Islands issue in bilateral relations. These islands were named one by one in the joint declaration signed during his visit to Tokyo in April 1991. After his departure, this line was continued by Boris Yeltsin, who officially apologised for the inhumane treatment of 600,000 Japanese war prisoners and recognised the existence of the problem of the four islands.

The situation changed dramatically since the start of the 2000s, when Vladimir Putin became president. He emphasised Russia’s identity as a victor in World War II and its status of the Soviet Union’s legal successor, which was one of the founders of the post-war world order. The previously vague position on the Soviet Union’s entry into the war was buttressed by new arguments – this decision was claimed to have been based on the provisions of the UN Charter, which overrode all contractual commitments of the signatories, including the Soviet–Japanese neutrality pact.

Russia believed that the only outstanding bilateral issue of the historical past – the border problem – should be resolved on the basis of the 1956 Declaration. However, the prospect of turning over two South Kuril Islands to Japan after signing of a peace treaty even in line with the terms of the 1956 Declaration is not popular among Russian citizens, to put it mildly. Its implementation is bound to deal a blow to the prestige of a Russian president and the government. Against this background, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov voiced a demand that was a priori unacceptable for Japan: if it wants to discuss the Declaration, it should first officially recognise the results of World War II, which established Soviet sovereignty over the South Kuril Islands. The media wrote in July 2019 that Russia is refusing to discuss this issue altogether (there were worries that US military bases may be deployed on these islands and that such a step would have negative domestic political consequences).<sup>9</sup> Thus, it seems this unsolvable high-profile issue of the historical past will continue to poison the atmosphere of bilateral relations for a long time.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Japan Times: Rossiya Otkazalas’ Obsuzhdat’ s Yaponiyey Peredachu Dvukh Ostrovov’ [Japan Times: Russia Refused to Discuss the Transfer of Two Islands with Japan], 2019, InoTV, July 15. Available from: <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2019-07-15/Japan-Times-Rossiya-otkazalas-obsuzhdat>.

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## Japan's Approaches to Certain Aspects of the Historical Past in Its Relations with Russia

Japan has both a conservative and a progressive tradition in approaching its place and role in World War II.<sup>10</sup> The conservative approach involves a 'glamorous' look at the country's history. According to its supporters, the post-war Japanese state is the successor to the pre-war imperial Japan, so it would be wrong to disown the entire legacy of the pre-war era, drawing a thick line under it – the way the post-war Germany completely dissociated itself from its Nazi past. This approach implies downplaying the aggressive nature of Japanese militarism (otherwise the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese troops would have been futile) along with glorifying the sacrifice made by the country's war generation for the glory of their nation and state. Proponents of this tradition argue that Japanese wartime policy was actually defensive, that Japan's advancement (rather than aggression) on the mainland was a response to the 'white colonialism' policy and was even aimed at freeing Asian peoples from it, that the talk of Japanese wartime crimes (the Nanjing massacre, Unit 731, 'comfort women', etc.) were at least exaggerated and devoid of evidence, and that Japan itself became a victim of the victors' justice over the vanquished.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the country is not guilty of any expansionist policy crimes – only of having lost the war.

It follows from the above that the legal outcome of World War II, documented without Japan's involvement or consideration of its interests, is equally unfair. There is a widespread view among a large part of the country's political leadership and the public that the basic conditions of the post-war world order, Joseph Stalin's agreements with the Allies concerning Japan, which returned the southern part of Sakhalin and awarded the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union in compensation for its entry into the war, are a manifestation of territorial expansionism and contradict the Atlantic Charter signed by the Allies (which states that the signatories seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other). It

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<sup>10</sup> Dean, M, 2015, 'Interpreting Japan's Contested Memory: Conservative and Progressive Traditions', *International Relations*, no. 29(3), p. 363–377, doi: 10.1177/0047117815600932

<sup>11</sup> Rothermund, D, 2011, 'The Self-Consciousness of Post-Imperial Nations. A Cross-National Comparison', *India Quarterly*, no. 67(1), p. 1–18, doi: 10.1177/097492841006700101

is particularly emphasised that the Yalta agreements were concluded secretly and Japan was not involved, which makes them unfair to Tokyo in the first place.

As for the UN Charter, which required Japan to recognise all the agreements between the Allies that led to the end of World War II, and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, according to which Japan gave up the Kuril Islands, the conservatives in Japan view the recognition of these documents as a necessary evil, only justified because it allowed Japan to join the UN and become a full member of the international community. At the same time, many in Japan do not consider the Yalta-Potsdam system a 'sacred cow' and point out that many of its elements are losing their significance in the modern world and therefore need to be modified.

In turn, supporters of the progressive approach emphasise in their rhetoric the wartime sufferings of the Japanese people, who were hostages of the militaristic elite. In their opinion, the civilian population suffered enormous losses during the war, including from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The progressive tradition emphasises pacifism and protests against nuclear weapons that have spread throughout the world since the war. It should be noted that the progressivists consider the Japanese primarily as the victims of the militarist regime – not other Asian peoples – and therefore see no need to repent or feel collective guilt before these peoples.<sup>12</sup> However, when it comes to the northern territories, the progressivists show solidarity with the conservative approach, although the emphasis is not on the Yalta Agreements being unfair or the Soviet territorial expansionism, but on the humanitarian aspect of the problem – the suffering of the former inhabitants of the islands, who in 1945–1947 were forcibly relocated to the main territory of Japan and had to live their lives in exile, as well as the difficulties experienced by their descendants deprived of the right to freely visit family graves, etc.

The next question is how these two traditions actually manifest themselves in Japan's policy in regard to the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

In the post-war period, Japan adhered to the Yoshida Doctrine, which said Japan was to broadly support the US in the world arena, focusing on the goals of peaceful economic development. Japan relied on a military and political alliance with America, because, as Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone said in 1983, the two countries shared a 'common destiny'. Among other things,

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<sup>12</sup> Dian, M, 2015, 'Interpreting Japan's Contested Memory: Conservative and Progressive Traditions', *International Relations*, vol. 29(3), p. 363–377, doi: 10.1177/0047117815600932



this approach was based on the gratitude to the US for saving Japan from the Stalinist occupation. For the post-war Japan, the Soviet Union was the main external enemy, which also seized and occupied part of its ancestral territories.

During the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) dominance, Japan was mostly governed by pro-American and anti-Soviet cabinets, which zealously implemented the Yoshida Doctrine. The only two prime ministers who tried to conduct dialogue with the Soviet Union neglecting the basics of the Yoshida Doctrine were Ichiro Hatoyama (1955–1956) and partly Kakuei Tanaka (1973). However, those attempts were unsuccessful: a peace treaty between the two countries was not signed in the post-war decades, and the political dialogue was actually frozen, although official relations were restored in 1956. The failure of efforts to establish neighbourly relations was largely due to the prevalence, at the mass level, of the interpretation of the recent historical past that demonized the Soviet Union.

In the part concerning the Soviet Union's role in the war, the way history was taught in Japan contributed to forming a 'victim complex' among the entire post-war generation, i.e. a feeling of being a victim of Soviet expansionism. The Japanese were taught that the Soviet Union had treacherously attacked Japan, violating the neutrality pact, 'marauding during a fire' in the last days of the war (seizing the inherent Japanese lands – the South Kuril Islands – on the sly), forcibly leading about 600,000 former Japanese troops into Siberian captivity, while in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, they were to return home immediately after the Emperor of Japan officially declared capitulation on August 15, 1945. Since neither the Soviet Union nor modern Russia have properly 'repented' of their deeds, the Japanese consider it to be an 'unfriendly' state: according to statistics, the number of respondents 'sympathetic' to Russia almost never exceeded 20%, with the exception of the short period of Mikhail Gorbachev-led Russia's popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

This actually gave the Japanese psychological comfort, as being a collective victim is always better than being a collective aggressor. As far as politicians are concerned, citing the victim complex was a win-win move, because there was

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**Stalin appealed to the feeling of historical justice in his radio address following Japan's surrender on September 2, 1945, by explaining the entry into the war against Japan not so much by Soviet allied commitments as by 'historical grievances' (the Russo-Japanese war and the intervention in the Far East)**

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<sup>13</sup> Chugrov, SV, 2016, 'Obraz Rossii v Yaponii i Obraz Yaponii v Rossii: Rabochaya Tetrada 33/2016 [The Image of Russia in Japan and of Japan in Russia: Working paper]. Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Moscow. Available from: <https://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/Russia-Japan-Paper33-ru.pdf>

a national consensus behind it. For example, in the early 1980s, with a new round of the Cold War, the ruling party initiated a massive movement for the return of the 'northern territories', and the Northern Territories Day was established: on that day, the prime minister publicly inspected the South Kuril Islands with binoculars from a border patrol boat, with the media closely following the process. About 84 million Japanese – more than 80% of the country's adult population – signed a petition for the return of the northern territories.<sup>14</sup> This to a large extent contributed to boosting the ruling party's popularity.

In the early 1990s, Japan, already the world's second biggest economy, began showing ambitions to be a global political leader. The country intensified efforts to become a permanent member in the UN Security Council and to promote a revision of the UN Charter, which contains the Enemy State Clause. The country's political leaders in their speeches voiced the need to 'draw a line' under the post-war past and become a 'responsible' power, an 'ordinary country', not burdened by any pacifist restrictions. A revision of the country's pacifist constitution was added to the political agenda.

They explained the need to 'draw the line' – along with Japan's strengthened economic and political positions – by some 'qualitative shifts' in the entire post-war system that occurred after the Cold War, such as the breakdown of the bipolar world, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist system, NATO's eastward expansion, and precedents of moving borders, including in Europe. According to that logic, the policy of 'drawing the line' under the post-war past, apart from internal aspects such as renouncing the post-war pacifist heritage and becoming a full-fledged military power, essentially implied recognising the need to introduce certain adjustments in international norms and rules based on agreements between the World War II Allies in accordance with the new realities.

That course was also the result of the qualitative changes in Japan's domestic policy since the end of the Cold War. The change of generations led to a rightward shift in the electoral strata, a growing nationalist sentiment in Japanese society, and a demand for a proactive foreign policy aimed at protecting the country's national interests with the help of not only economic but also military levers. The 'anti-mainstream' part of the LDP came to power in the early 2000s. The party traditionally focused on Japan's own foreign policy interests (i.e. distinct from America's). The most notable cabinets reflecting that trend were the governments of Junichiro Koizumi (2001 – 2006) and Shinzo Abe (2012 – present).

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, JD J, 2016, *Japan, Russia and Their Territorial Dispute: The Northern Delusion*. NY, Routledge, p. 81.

As for relations with Russia, that policy had mixed implications. The first surge of hope for a revision of the post-war world order paradigm occurred at the end of the bipolar period. With the proclamation of Gorbachev's 'new thinking', hopes arose in Japan that a decisive rejection of the Stalinist legacy would lead to a revision of Russia's rigid position on the Japan-related outcome of World War II. They seemed to believe that Moscow, in its 'new thinking', would seek to correct – among other Stalinist crimes against Japan, which included the inhumane treatment of Japanese prisoners of war and 'treacherously violating' the 1941 Neutrality Pact – the injustice of annexing the South Kuril Islands and, accordingly, would return them to Japan. That argument was often made by the Japanese side throughout the 1990s with the aim of encouraging Russia to make concessions on the territorial issue.

As Russia's foreign policy to uphold its national interests grew more assertive, a trend associated with President Putin's taking over in 2000, there were growing sympathies to Russia among the part of Japan's conservative political establishment dissatisfied with its subordinate position in its military and political alliance with the US. They saw Russia as a natural 'counterbalance' to the global hegemons – the United States and China. These views are largely expressed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who advocates stronger relations with Moscow and a peace treaty based on a mutual compromise on the territorial issue.

However, this particular idea enjoys only limited support, both in the leadership and in the lower ranks of LDP. Rather, the ruling party is dominated by the nationalist groups that are strongly anti-Russian and believe that Japan should push stronger until Russia gives way on the territorial issue. Some of them believe Russia would become more 'accommodating' on the territorial issue with the loss of its economic and political positions, which means Japan does not need to compromise in the spirit of the 'Abe diplomacy' but should take an extremely tough stance instead. For example, when in May 2019, the phrase 'Japan's position is that the four Northern Islands belong to Japan' was removed from 2019 Diplomatic Bluebook published by the Japanese Foreign Ministry (obviously at the insistence of Abe's foreign policy advisers to avoid the adverse effect on the negotiations with Russia), the move was sharply criticised by the LDP foreign policy planning bodies reflecting the opinion of the party elite.

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**With President Putin's taking over in 2000 Japan's political establishment saw Russia as a natural 'counterbalance' to the global hegemons – the United States and China**

It should be noted that these views largely reflect the broad public sentiments. Japanese, for the most part, still consider Russia an unfriendly state, seeing it as 'red', 'Soviet', and extremely unpredictable. It is noteworthy that the negative associations with Russia prevail in Japan even outside the context of Crimea and Ukrainian events: they were shaped much earlier, during the Cold War, and have a high degree of stability since they are automatically replicated in each new generation. It is indicative in this regard that, unlike the rest of the world, where attitudes towards Russia deteriorated sharply after Crimea, nothing like that has happened in Japan – its attitude was already bad and remained so. For example, according to a Pew Research Center survey, while in 2013, 43% of US citizens held a negative opinion of Russia, their number grew to 72% in 2014 after Ukraine; in Europe, these figures were 54% and 74%, respectively. In Japan, the darkening of Russia's image was insignificant, by 5% – from 64% to 69%.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the number of Russia's advocates among former supporters of the pro-Soviet leftist parties in Japan has shrunk significantly. During the bipolar world period, the supporters of the Socialist Party, and partly the Democratic Socialist Party and the Communist Party, had a positive view of the Soviet Union's role in World War II, believing that its entry into the war accelerated peace and helped Japan to avoid more victims. The leftists' pathos was directed against the American imperialism, which dragged Japan into its orbit after the war, forcing it to sign the treaty. However, in the mid-1990s, the Socialist Party of Japan, which traditionally relied on the Soviet Union in shaping its foreign policy, left the political arena almost completely. Communist ideas lost their appeal within Japanese society, while the new Russia could offer little to attract the sympathies of the Japanese public. In this context, the Soviet-phobic and Russo-phobic sentiments associated with the territorial issue ceased to be balanced by the sympathies for post-Soviet Russia among the leftist parties' supporters, who had regarded the Soviet Union as an ideal and natural alternative to the capitalist system.

At the same time, the farthest left-wing party – the Communist Party – initially adhered to the strongest anti-Soviet views on the World War II problems. Its official position was not to recognise the legitimacy of assigning the South Kuril Islands, or even South Sakhalin and all the other Kuril Islands (!) to the Soviet Union, seen as an act of the Stalin regime's territorial expansionism. Yet, after the socialists' exit from the country's political arena in the late 1990s, that party actually became one of the main agents of the progressive anti-militarist tradition.

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<sup>15</sup> Kazakov, OI, 2015, 'Rossiysko-Yaponskiye Otnosheniya V 2014 Godu' [*Russian-Japanese Relations in 2014*], *Yearbook Japan*, p. 20-35.

In the post-bipolar period, the left and centre-left forces were more critical of Russia than the conservative LDP in the territorial issue context. For example, it was during the dominance of the centre-left Democratic Party (DPJ) in November 2009 that the Japanese Foreign Ministry adopted the official wording ‘illegally occupied territories’, a move that caused a crisis in bilateral relations.<sup>16</sup> The party’s essentially populist motive was obviously to get internal political dividends from using Russia as a punching bag.

The parties that succeeded the DPJ after its dissolution in 2017 shortly before the parliamentary elections, including the second strongest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), adhered to the same tradition. When in November 2018, Shinzo Abe proposed resolving the territorial issue with Russia on the basis of the 1956 Declaration, it was the CDP representatives that slammed his position most harshly. For example, CDP leader Yukio Edano said in November 2018 that Japan should not depart from the line that all four islands belong to Japan, both historically and legally.<sup>17</sup> CDP Secretary General Tetsuro Fukuyama also criticised Abe for the inability ‘to express his own country’s position’ in negotiations with Russia.<sup>18</sup> Kenji Eda, a CDP parliament member, called Abe’s frequent trips to Russia ‘a foreign policy of paying tribute’.<sup>19</sup>

As for Abe himself, for him relations with Russia are linked with a very pronounced domestic political context involving the possibility of gaining additional trust from voters, something he desperately needs amid the internal political scandals he is involved in. Even realizing that the ‘northern territories’ problem is probably hopeless, Shinzo Abe appeals to its humanitarian component, the need to alleviate the suffering of the former islanders and their descendants, and his efforts on this track get translated by the media into the image of a caring ‘father of the nation’.

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**Tokyo seems to fear that soured relations with Russia and its international isolation are fraught with the risk of it rallying with China**

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Pravitel’stvo Yaponii Okonchatel’no Ob’yavilo Yuzhnyye Kurily “Nezakonno Okkupirovannymi” Rossiyei [The Japanese Government Has Finally Declared the South Kuril Islands “Illegally Occupied” by Russia], NEWSru, 2009, November 24. Available from: <https://www.newsru.com/world/24nov2009/kurily.html>

<sup>17</sup> 父の遺志引き継ぐ安倍首相、北方領土解決へ正念場—政権レガシーにHenry Meyer、延広絵美、Isabel Reynolds, Stepan Kravchenko 2018年12月21日 9:20 JST, Available from: <https://www.bloomberg.co.jp/news/articles/2018-12-21/PJZAJ06JTSE801>

<sup>18</sup> ‘PM Abe Avoids Describing Russian-Held Northern Territories as Inherently Japanese’, Mainichi Japan. 2019, February 2. Available from: <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190202/p2a/00m/0na/023000c>

<sup>19</sup> Brown J.D.J. Abe’s Underperforming Russia Policy Faces Growing Political Backlash // East Asia Forum. 2019. March 13. URL: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/03/13/abes-underperforming-russia-policy-faces-growing-political-backlash/>

With the border problem unresolved, the anti-Russian public sentiment will always put serious limitations on the development of political dialogue with Russia, and it would take the country's political leadership some courage to try to build neighbourly relations with Russia. At the same time, Tokyo seems to fear that soured relations with Russia and its international isolation are fraught with the risk of it rallying with China, which in the future may pose a much bigger problem for Japan's national security than Russia. Firstly, the Russian military technical potential can boost China's military power. Secondly, Tokyo is worried about the prospect of a potential foreign policy alliance between Beijing and Moscow on an anti-Japan basis, with Moscow actively supporting China's territorial claims against Japan. It is for a reason that Japan was alarmed by Vladimir Putin's visit to China in September 2015 to participate in a ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, or rather, the 'Chinese people's victory over the Japanese aggressors'.<sup>20</sup>

It is this negative motivation – to a greater extent than direct benefits from the development of bilateral relations – that makes the Japanese leadership focus on (even if not prioritize) the Russian track of its diplomacy. It would be logical to assume that Tokyo's risk-hedging policy would make it avoid seriously quarrelling with Russia over the border issue or inflating other 'historical grievances', especially since there are almost no prospects for resolving them. Therefore, the policy of historical memory has a serious impact on present-day bilateral relations between Russia and Japan. Its influence has to be taken into account both in foreign policy planning and, which is especially important, in shaping constructive public opinion on both sides.

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<sup>20</sup> Strokan', S. 'Druzhba Dvukh Ploshchadey' [Friendship of two Squares], *Kommersant*, 2015, no. 157, August 31. Available from: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2799924>

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