

# Japan Signals An Attitude Shift To The Growing Power Of The Global South



*Vijay Prashad - Photo:  
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In mid-April, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released its [\*Diplomatic Bluebook 2023\*](#), its most important guidebook on international affairs. Japan's foreign minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi, wrote the foreword, which begins: "The world is now at a turning point in history." This phrase is key to understanding the Japanese approach to the war in Ukraine. Hours after Russian forces entered Ukraine, the Japanese government signed the G7 [statement](#) that condemned the "large-scale military aggression" and called for "severe and coordinated economic and financial sanctions." The next day, Hayashi [announced](#) that Japan would sanction "designated individuals related to Russia," freeze assets of three Russian banks, and sanction exports to Russia's military. In its *Diplomatic Bluebook 2022*, Japan [condemned](#) Russia and urged the Russian government to "withdraw its troops immediately, and comply with international law." Russia's war, the Japanese argued, "shakes the very foundation of the international order," an order whose attrition, as the new *Bluebook* argues, has brought the world to this "turning point."

## *National Interests*

Despite all the talk of sanctions, Japan continues to import energy from Russia. In 2022, 9.5 percent of Japan's imported liquefied natural gas [came](#) from Russia (up

from 8.8 percent in 2021). Most of this energy came from Russia's Sakhalin Island, where Japanese companies and the government have made substantial [investments](#). In July 2022, Hayashi was asked about Japan's continued imports from Sakhalin-2. His [answer](#) was clear: "Sakhalin-2 is an important project for energy security, including the stable supply of electricity and gas in Japan." Since July, Japan's officials have [continued](#) to emphasize Japan's national interests—including through the Sakhalin-2 natural gas project—over its obligations to the G7 and to its own statements about the war. In August 2022, the Japanese government asked two private firms—Mitsui and Mitsubishi—to deepen its involvement in Russia's Sakhalin-2; "We will respond by working with the public and private sectors to protect the interests of the companies and secure [a] stable supply of liquefied natural gas," [said](#) former Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Kōichi Hagiuda.

In March 2022, Kyodo News [reported](#) that a leaked version of the *Diplomatic Bluebook 2022* used a rather startling phrase—"illegal occupation"—to describe Russian control over islands north of Hokkaido. The Japanese government had not used that [phrase](#) since 2003, largely because of increased diplomatic activity between Japan and Russia driven by the collaboration over the development of Sakhalin-2. As it turned out, the draft that Kyodo News had seen was altered so that the official [Diplomatic Bluebook](#) of 2022 did not use this phrase. Instead, the *Bluebook* noted that the "greatest concern between Japan and Russia is the Northern Territories issue," which "is yet to be resolved." Japan could have taken advantage of the Western animosity against Russia to press its claim on these islands, but instead, the Japanese government merely hoped that Russia would withdraw from Ukraine and return to "negotiations on a peace treaty" regarding the islands north of Japan.

### *Three New Points*

The [Diplomatic Bluebook 2023](#) makes three important points: that the post-Cold War era has ended, that China is Japan's "greatest strategic challenge" (p. 43), and that Global South countries must be taken seriously. The *Bluebook* highlights Japan's confusion, caught between its reliance upon Russian energy and the growing confidence of the Global South.

The *Bluebook* from 2022 noted, "The international community is currently undergoing an era-defining change." Now, however, the *Bluebook 2023* points to the "end of the post-Cold War era" (p. 3), which is illustrated by the collapse of

the U.S.-led world order (which both the United States and Japan [call](#) the “rules-based international order”). Washington’s power has declined, but it is not clear what comes next.

Anxiety about the growing role of China in Asia is not new for Japan, which has long contested the Diaoyu (China)/Senkaku (Japan) islands. But now, there is a much more pronounced—and dangerous—assessment of the situation. The *Bluebook 2023* notes the close alignment between China and Russia, although it does not focus on that strategic partnership. Rather, the Japanese government focuses on China, which it now sees as Japan’s “greatest strategic challenge.” Even here, the Japanese government acknowledges that the two countries “have held a series of dialogues to discuss common issues.” The “efforts of both Japan and China” are important, says the *Bluebook*, to build a “constructive and stable” relationship (p. 43).

Finally, the Japanese government accepts that there is a new mood in the Global South, with countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America [unwilling](#) to submit any longer to the will of the Western states. In January 2023, a reporter from Yomiuri Shimbun [asked](#) the Foreign Ministry’s press secretary Hikariko Ono how Japan defined the “Global South.” Her tentative reply is instructive. “The Government of Japan does not have a precise definition of the term Global South,” she said, but “it is my understanding that in general, it often refers to emerging and developing countries.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she noted, must “strengthen engagement with the Global South.” In the *Bluebook 2023*, the Japanese recognize that Global South countries are not following the Western position on Ukraine and that berating the countries of the Global South raises accusations of “double standards” (wars by the West are acceptable, but wars by others are unacceptable) (p. 3). Japan will promote multilateralism, building “an inclusive approach that bridges differences.” A new “attitude is required,” says the *Bluebook*.

In March, Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Ukraine. Both sides [said](#) that they were working to share security information, but Japan once more [refused](#) to send weapons to Ukraine. A few weeks after Kishida left Ukraine, Mitsuko Shino, Japan’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations [warned](#) in a guarded statement about the “risks stemming from violations of the agreements regulating the export of weapons and military equipment” and about the importance of the [Arms Trade](#)

[Treaty](#). Japan remains caught in the horns of its own dilemma.

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