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BELARUS – JAPAN: NEW OPPORTUNITIES UNDER NEW REGIONAL CONDITIONS

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This article is dedicated to the analyses of the development of the Belarus – Japan relations, traditionally friendly and constructive nature of the interaction is emphasized. The purpose of this article is to assess the effectiveness of bilateral relations, drawing attention to the large potential of cooperation. It is concluded that there is a need to intensify the political dialogue between the two countries, deepen the Belarusian-Japanese relations in the trade, economic and humanitarian spheres, as well as to strengthen international partnership.

Key words: Belarusian-Japanese relations; Belarusian foreign policy; humanitarian and economic cooperation; intensification of political dialogue.

БЕЛАРУСЬ – ЯПОНИЯ: НОВЫЕ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ В НОВЫХ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫХ УСЛОВИЯХ

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Анализируется развитие белорусско-японских отношений, подчеркивается традиционно дружественный и конструктивный характер взаимодействия. Дана оценка эффективности двусторонних связей, констатируется большой потенциал сотрудничества. Делается вывод о необходимости интенсификации политического диалога между двумя странами, углубления белорусско-японских взаимоотношений в торгово-экономической и гуманитарной сферах, укрепления международного партнерства.

Ключевые слова: белорусско-японские отношения; внешняя политика Республики Беларусь; гуманитарное и экономическое сотрудничество; интенсификация политического диалога.

2016 was a defining year for the multi-vector foreign policy of Belarus in many respects. Why? First of all, because it was able to convince our in-

ternational partners to get away from usual stereotypes and to take a look at Belarus in an unbiased manner.

With the eyes of a good neighbour and friend!

Belarus has shown to the world that a sovereign independent state, though not having economic and military potential of superpowers, can do a lot to maintain stability and security in the region against the backdrop of increasing global contradictions.

Firstly, the need for greater regional integration horizons was stated from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly. Briefly, this approach is shared by many countries in the world; it can be described as “integration of integrations” [1].

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Secondly, Minsk as a capital of the state that is considered as a “stability isle” in Europe, absolutely logically has become a discussion platform of the most pressing issues in East-West relations [2]. The effectiveness of the “Norman Four” negotiations confirmed that it was the right choice to make.

Thirdly, Belarus’ call to mobilize efforts of the international community in the fight against the threats of terrorism, illegal migration, deteriorating socio-economic situation, found the most active response and support on all continents.

Therefore, it is logical to strengthen the relations between Belarus and BRICS, SCO, ASEAN and Mercosur member countries. It is worth noting the admission of our country to the Association of Caribbean States and to the SCO in 2016 in the status of an observer. Behind it is a pragmatic interest to assist in solving the problem of expanding the presence on the markets of the “far arc” countries.

Thus, the cooperation with the newly established New Development Bank of BRICS has already been developing in order to attract funding for the Chinese-Belarusian Industrial Park projects.

Last year Belarus for the first time took part in the “16 + 1” Summit (the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and China), which took place in Riga. The key goal pursued by our country in the discussion of the summit’s agenda was to show to our partners how advantageous it is to use the transit potential of Belarus, including in the implementation of The Silk Road initiatives, to draw their attention to the opportunities offered to the Chinese-Belarusian industrial park investors.

Despite the ongoing disagreement with the EU on specific topics, the dialogue has entered a constructive direction in general. The lifting of the European Union’s quantitative restrictions to the import of the Belarusian textile and clothing in 2016, which had been in effect since 1993, was an important practical achievement.

EU countries understand that Belarus intends to accelerate the process of its accession to the WTO.

Belarus’ participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) besides strengthening trade and economic relations within the Union is also capable of successfully solving tasks of entering third country markets to increase the Belarusian export. The negotiations on trade agreements with China, Israel and Iran are being conducted. In the near future the negotiations with India, Egypt, Republic of Korea, and Singapore will begin. This creates more favourable conditions for growth and diversification of export and attraction of investments.

By virtue of the Union “Five” joint efforts today we already have the possibility to export a wide range of our products to the Vietnamese market duty-free in the framework of the free trade agreement concluded between the EAEU and Vietnam. An important aspect is that products of joint ventures in Vietnam have free

access to the markets of other ASEAN member states, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines.

As a result, the strategic task of significantly strengthening our positions in Southeast Asia, including the use of the axis “ASEAN – Japan”, is solved. Under the circumstances of current uncertain economic situation in China, worsening territorial disputes in the South China Sea, this direction is one of the most crucial on the world’s political arena.

The above-listed circumstances determine our interest to shifting to a qualitatively new level of cooperation with Japan, the Country of the Rising Sun, as the Japanese Prince Regent Shotoku called it more than 1400 years ago [3].

It may seem surprising, but the Belarus – Japan ties have a long history. The first Russian consul in Japan (1858–1865), our fellow native of the village Yakimova Sloboda in Rechitsky district, Joseph Goshkevich, played an important role in formation of these ties. Joseph had a theological education, studied Chinese and Japanese, Eastern philosophy and, natural science during a 10-year-old spiritual mission to China, he was an outstanding orientalist. Goshkevich’s major contribution to science is the first Japanese-Russian Dictionary, the treatise “On the roots of the Japanese language”.

By the initiative of the Consul in Hakodate on Hokkaido Island there were established Russian language and photography schools, and also Russian alphabet for the Japanese was published. In the consulate Hospital the poor Japanese could obtain medical care for free. The last years of life of the distinguished son of the Belarusian people were spent in his native land in the estate of Maly, near the town of Ostrowiec in the Grodno region. In Ostrowiec and Hokodate you can find J. Goshkevich monuments. There are a street named after him in Minsk, and a bay in the Sea of Japan [4].

In the 20th century, professional associations made a great contribution to the development of the Belarus – Japan social and political ties. Within the period of six years (1965–1970), Belarusian trade unions were attended by about 20 Japanese delegations. The head of one of the Japanese delegations H. Suetonsi appreciated the hospitality of the Belarusian people with these words: “We have heard from the Japanese trade unionists who visited Minsk earlier that you welcome warmly here. And it was fully confirmed. We were greeted like brothers. We feel at home in your city” [5].

Fruitful cooperation of sister cities of Minsk and Sendai did not go unnoticed: in 1980 our country was entrusted to compile a program of the Soviet culture days in Japan. The delegation then included representatives of the Belarusian friendship society and a folk group from Grodno. In 1982, Japan hosted the Belarusian culture days, the highlight of which was the performance by “Khoroshki”.

Strict adherence to the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, commitment to respect for inviolability of borders and other generally accepted principles have allowed Belarus to win high prestige in the international arena and to establish friendly relations with many countries.

Japan was one of the first (28 December 1991) countries to recognize the Republic of Belarus, and already on 26 January 1992 diplomatic relations between the two states were established. In January 1993, the Japan Embassy started to function in Minsk, and in June 1995 – Belarusian Embassy was opened in the capital of Japan.

An important event, that gave considerable impetus to the development of the Belarus – Japan cooperation in all areas, was the visit by the President, the Head of the National Olympic Committee of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko to Japan in February 1998 to attend the Winter Olympics in Nagano.

When speaking about the level of trade and economic cooperation, trade turnover statistics is usually cited. In 1995, it amounted to 21.7 million US dollars, and in 2007 it reached its maximum value of 322.3 million US dollars.

Belarusian export to Japan overcame the mark of 10 million US dollars in 2011 for the first time and in the past five years it has remained at a similar level (in 2016 – 11.9 million US dollars). Except from potash fertilizers, holding the lion's share of our exports to Japan, the Japanese consumers prefer Belarusian laser, optical and measuring instruments, fiberglass and dairy products.

It is obvious that the export potential is not being used fully. I will quote the following figures: in 2016 Lithuania's exports to Japan amounted to 130 million euros, the Czech Republic's – 840 million euros [6]. There is something to reconsider. We obviously do not have high-tech products with high added value, which would find high demand not only on the traditional markets of the CIS, but also in countries belonging to the world's leading producers of such products, including Japan.

Therefore, the priority agenda to create new export-oriented enterprises in Belarus at the expense of our own resources or foreign investments. There already is a similar experience of cooperation with Japan. The peak of business activity of Japanese companies in our country occurred in 2010–2011, when over 37 million US dollars of investments were received from Japan to the Belarusian economy.

It is being planned to start the production of OCTG on JSC "BSW" plant with participation of the Japanese capital, at JSC "Grodno Azot" – of ammonia and carbamide. The creation of an enterprise producing video chips in Belarusian-Japanese Industrial Zone in the Mogilev region is being worked on.

In modern conditions it is not correct to evaluate the effectiveness of international cooperation using

only turnover figures, especially with such a country as Japan. The priority direction of work should be the search and use of points of mutual interest in science and technology. We have world-class developments, for example, in health care, which Belarusian and Japanese scientists could jointly develop and promote in the form of commercial products. Combined efforts can bring to life the most ambitious projects, even those that currently seem fantastic.

We would like to note that recently one of the largest deals was worth 900 million US dollars. It was concluded in 2014 between a Japanese e-commerce company "Rakuten", and a resident of High Technologies Park, mobile service Viber, which has Belarusian origin [7].

Over the years, the Belarusian and Japanese people have experienced severe consequences of man-made disasters at nuclear power plants. The experience of medical assistance to those who suffered from deadly radiation and of fight against radioactive contamination was generously shared by the Japanese experts and is successfully used in Belarus.

Within the framework of the "Roots of Grass" program, the Government of Japan finances the supply of equipment to Belarusian medical facilities. 37 projects worth about 3 million US dollars were implemented [8]. In addition, to more than 20 years of government assistance, public associations from various cities of Japan have been supporting Belarus.

Belarus in its turn was on the side of Japan's misfortune after the accident at the NPS "Fukushima-1". Help in overcoming the consequences of the accident was provided both at the state level and through the "people's diplomacy".

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has decided to allocate funds for recreation of the teenagers affected by the disasters in Japan and since 2012 Japanese students have been coming for recreation to the National Children's educational and health center "Zubrenok" [9].

"Such a friendly support of Belarus, both in material and moral shape has played an important role in the process of restoring Japan and reviving the spirit of the Japanese people. Taking the opportunity, Japan expresses its deep gratitude to Belarus for the help and attention", – this entry can be seen on the website of the Embassy of Japan in Belarus [10].

In December 2012, Belarus and Japan concluded an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the field of overcoming the consequences of accidents at nuclear power plants. The Delegation of Fukushima has repeatedly visited Gomel, Minsk and other Belarusian cities in order to study the experience of Belarus in the field of radiation safety.

In May 2016, there was jointly laid a cherry alley in the capital's Peoples Friendship Park, confined to the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster and the 5th anniversary of the "Fukushima-1" accident [11].

Cultural traditions of Belarus and Japan are multifaceted, original and unique. In Japanese and Belarusian cities events that familiarize us with cultural and historic traditions of the Belarusian and Japanese people are often held. Significant events in the cultural life of the Belarusian capital are the “Week of Contemporary Japanese Film”, “Japanese Autumn in Belarus” festival. The film “Anohito (choice)”, directed by Ichiro Yamamoto received a diploma on 13 November 2015 at the XXII Minsk International Festival “Listapad” in the nomination “For the miracle of faith in cinema, for believing in the miracle of life” [12].

Fans of ballet know Belarusian school well, a bright representative of which is a former soloist of the Belarusian ballet troupe Mikie Watanabe. In March 2013, together with the National Artist of Belarus Valentin Elizariyev, Japanese ballerina starred in the “Swan Lake” ballet at the main Bunka Kaigan Theater in Tokyo [13]. In November last year, another Japanese ballerina Miki Suzuki performed Odette-Odile in the same performance, but this time at the Minsk Musical Theater [14].

A number of organizations have been established in Belarus and Japan, including “Belarus – Japan”, the “Belarusian Friendship Society”, and the “Japanese Association of Friendship and Parliamentary Relations with the Republic of Belarus”, which implement cultural programs. In particular, the Belarusian Friendship Society is engaged in organizing Days of Belarusian Culture, exhibitions, “Twin cities” programs, “Recrea-

tion and rehabilitation of children from Chernobyl areas”. A charitable tour of the musical and theatrical collective “Mandzyusiaka” took place in 1999 with the assistance of the above-mentioned organizations; in October 2011, an exhibition of Japanese culture, traditions and life “Planet Japan” was presented in Gomel; in March 2015, an exhibition “Secrets and fairy tales of Japan” was held in Gomel [15].

A number of joint projects, exchanges, cultural and humanitarian actions have been implemented during almost half-century cooperation between twin cities of Minsk and Sendai. Among the most important ones is the installation of “Friendship clock” and planting of cherry blossom seedlings in Sendai public garden in Minsk; fundraising for the victims of the consequences of the Chernobyl accident organized by the City of Sendai; the transfer of medical equipment and surgical instruments from Japanese partners to Minsk doctors and organization of internship for them in the Sendai clinics.

Despite the geographical distance between Belarus and Japan, the potential for cooperation between the two countries is inexhaustible. We have a mutual aspiration to expand economic, scientific, humanitarian and cultural contacts.

You can certainly say that the dialogue between Belarus and Japan is a dialogue of friends and partners. And there is no reason to doubt the fruitfulness of cooperation.

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