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No. 240

25 November 2016

NEGOTIATIONS WITH RUSSIA AS A PART OF JAPAN'S LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Tsuyoshi Sunohara

- Negotiations with Russia are part of Japan's long-term strategy vis-à-vis China.
- Progress in Japan-Russia relations will also help improve relations between the West and Russia.
- Easing tensions between Japan and Russia could be useful in forming an international order for the mid-21st century and beyond.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The summit meeting between Prime Minister Abe and Russian President Putin scheduled to be held this December in Japan's Yamaguchi Prefecture has been garnering world attention. The diplomatic style of inviting a head of state not to the capital city of Tokyo but rather to the host's home prefecture of Yamaguchi is reminiscent of the top-down format preferred by US presidents, and it demonstrates the extraordinary efforts being made by Prime Minister Abe.

Japan and Russia have been embroiled in a dispute over the return of the four northern islands of Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashiri, and Etorofu since the end of World War II. Japan has called for the return of all four islands as a package, but Russia has firmly rejected this idea. The two countries consequently have yet to conclude a peace treaty, a major reason that remnants of the Cold War structure remain in Asia.

The biggest issue in the upcoming summit meeting will be just how far Japan and Russia can present "constructive new approaches" (in the words of Prime Minister Abe) to the reversion or return of these four islands. Japan has thus far rejected the proposal of transferring two islands – Habomai and Shikotan – in accordance with the 1956 Japan-USSR Joint Declaration released during the Soviet era, but Japanese newspapers have reported that the Abe administration is now seeking to make a "strategic turnaround" in this posture.

While the specific ideas and approaches the two countries have in mind are not yet clear, President Putin, an avid judo fan, has repeatedly used the judo term *hikiwake* ("draw"). In this regard, a certain high-ranking Japanese government official has pointed out that, in territorial negotiations with Norway and China, the Putin administration finally arrived at the decision to divide all of the territory in question exactly in half.

In light of this, ideas such as (1) a two-stage approach of first returning Habomai and Shikotan and deferring the issue of returning Kunashiri and Etorofu, (2) a division by area of the four islands into equal halves for Japan and Russia, and (3) an approach based on an equal division by area under which three islands would be returned to Japan, with control being exercised by Japan over Kunashiri and by Russia over Etorofu, have emerged in Japan on numerous occasions.

The US as well as other Western countries such as the UK and France, are very distrustful of President Putin, who has adhered to a unilateral policy of coercion in the Crimean situation in Ukraine and in the Syrian situation in the Middle East. Japan is quite familiar with these circumstances, but the Obama administration in particular has repeatedly raised objections to Japan's invitation to President Putin. Behind this stance is said to lie a strong push to admonish Japan for its flexible stance toward Russia as an indirect way of countering Germany's vague attitude towards sanctions against Russia, and Obama's National Security Advisor and closest aide Susan Rice is said to leading the charge.

Concerns about such interference from Washington and its underlying motives were no doubt partly to blame for the substantial delay of the initial plans, with Prime Minister Abe finally rescheduling the "Putin invitation" for December 2016. Incidentally, the US presidential election has just been taken place, and a new US administration will assume office shortly thereafter. Prime Minister Abe may well have had in mind the possibility of presenting the new US administration with a new "breakthrough" in diplomatic relations with Russia if some kind of progress or agreement can be achieved in the December summit.

Prime Minister Abe has enthusiastically visited numerous countries as an advocate of "diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map," and the success or failure of his diplomatic efforts toward Russia cannot help but affect his own political fortunes. Should Prime Minister Abe be seen to have weakly negotiated and readily compromised on the Northern Territories by those right-wingers among the conservative core of the Liberal Democratic Party who are particularly sensitive about territorial issues, his career as a politician will come to an immediate end.

Why is Prime Minister Abe in such a hurry to negotiate with Russia despite these domestic and international circumstances? One clear answer is the rapid rise of China and the resultant need for strategic "preparedness" on Japan's part.

A certain high-ranking official in the Abe administration has made it clear that the true purpose of the upcoming Abe-Putin meeting is "to ensure Japan's

survival (in terms of security policy) and not simply to secure the return of some small islands.” Boldly translated, this can only mean that Japan would like to focus its defensive capabilities and other national resources solely on a strategy vis-à-vis China that is likely to be pursued for some time to come. It is no mystery, then, that the Abe administration would deem it essential to eliminate any concerns “from the north,” that is, to terminate the “state of war” that exists with Russia and open the way to the conclusion of a peace treaty.

Japan has historically always been forced in its security policy to adopt a ‘two-front strategy’ with its neighbors China and Russia as hypothetical enemies. Now in the 21st century, however, most Japanese policymakers would undoubtedly declare China to be the greater potential threat to Japan and the rest of the world. China and Japan are engaged in a tense war of nerves over the Senkaku Islands, and this is likely to be exacerbated by the present situation in the South China Sea. In addressing these changes in the security environment, it is vital – and of great strategic significance – that Japan improve relations with Russia to a certain degree.


The above reasons have convinced Japan to step up its diplomatic offensive with Russia. In other words, Japan’s diplomacy with Russia is part of its long-term strategy vis-à-vis China.

Despite the worsening circumstances in Ukraine and Syria, Prime Minister Abe as a leader in the Western camp paid an unofficial visit to the Russian resort of Sochi, where (according to a high-ranking Japanese government official) he had a face-to-face meeting with President Putin lasting more than half an hour, with no one else but interpreters present. During the plenary meeting, Prime Minister Abe impressed President Putin with an eight-point proposal that included support for infrastructure improvements designed to improve the Russian people’s quality of life. Given Russia’s reputed diplomatic style of “only negotiating with those deemed to have power” (in the words of a certain US diplomat), it could be said that, having solidified his overwhelming political base domestically, Prime Minister Abe’s choice to risk everything on one last throw of the dice was in a certain sense a natural outcome.

Russia is presently pursuing a pseudo-alliance with China to counter the US, but prevailing opinion regards these two countries with their long shared border to be inherently more potential enemies than allies. Particularly in the Russian Far East, where the population decline among White Russians (said to number six million at present) has become serious, China, with 100 million citizens residing along that shared border, is an unsettling presence for the Putin administration.

The Russian Far East is blessed with natural resources such as petroleum and natural gas, making it quite possible that China will at some future point use its aggressive claims, rhetoric and deeds regarding the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea as a springboard to launch a high-level battle of nerves against Russia. From this perspective, it is a matter of course for the Putin administration to seek out a strategic rapprochement with Japan, which has no ambitions whatsoever of territorial expansion, which possesses strong technological capabilities, and which boasts the world's third-largest economy.

Over the long run, improved Japan-Russia relations will drive a wedge between the two major powers Russia and China, two countries that the West would very much like to keep apart. Despite the need to form a new world order as the international leadership exercised by the US as the sole superpower begins to decline, it is conceivable that territorial talks between Japan and Russia would provide a catalyst for new developments that would revive stagnant relations between the West and Russia.

It thus might be no exaggeration to say that this exceptional summit meeting between Japan and Russia could very well turn into a historical event having a major impact on the international situation in and beyond the mid-21st century. 

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