

## Russian-Japanese Ties under 2000: The Issue of Territorial Dispute

When Russian President Vladimir Putin formed his government, he vowed to restore Russia to its past strength and glory. He has reinforced Russia's ties with China and North Korea as part of a strategy to thwart America's national missile defense initiative, and has become more actively involved in East Asia and the Korean Peninsula.

Russia is vigorously pursuing diplomatic efforts under the leadership of Putin and attempting to increase its influence on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia. When considering peace, security and international political development in the Asia Pacific region, where the four major powers of Japan, the United States, China and Russia confront each other, it is undesirable for ties between Japan and Russia to lag behind progress this country has made in its relations with other major nations.

For progress in Russian-Japanese bilateral relations, the big question is the future of the northern Kuril islands. Russia and Japan have different opinions on how the territorial dispute should be handled.

### 1. Soviet Strategy and Tactics Toward Japan

#### (1) The Importance of Japan:

- geopolitical significance,
- significant diplomatic position,
- importance of an economic standpoint.

Japan was of vital importance to the USSR in the Asia-Pacific region in both inputs(capital and technology) and outputs(markets). (See Kumura, Distant Neighbor vol.1, pp.84-87)

### 2. Russia's policy towards the Territorial issue

Russia has a basic strategy of postponing for the solution of the territorial dispute. The Southern Kuril Islands issue is very complicated and difficult. It cannot be resolved in one stroke. A step-by-step approach is required.

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to first create a good atmosphere between

Russia and Japan in which this difficult problem may be solved.

Russia's position appears to be that it will agree to return Habomai and Shikotan only if Japan abandons its claims to Kunashiri and Etorofu. Even so, it seems unlikely that Russia will easily cede the smaller islands.

## 2. Japan's policy towards the Territorial issue

The basic objectives of Japan's policy on Russia are to make the utmost efforts to resolve the Northern Territories issue, thereby (by that means) concluding a peace treaty and fully normalizing relations with Russia, and to provide appropriate assistance for the reform efforts of Russia in coordination with the international community.

The Japanese position demands the immediate return of all four islands. Japan has been consistent in its stand on the islands since the then-prime minister Shigeru Yoshida said during negotiations on the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty that the four islands are an integral part of Japan's sovereign territory that continue to be illegally occupied by Russia.

## 3. Moscow's Position on the territorial issue

Foreign Minister Yohei Kono told reporters "Having held discussions with Putin, we regard the declaration as a historical fact." Are there any gap in interpretations between Russia and Japan? Alexander Losyukov, Russia's vice foreign minister in charge of the Asia-Pacific region, said that Japan and Russia interpret the 1956 declaration differently.

Rather than stipulating the return of all four Kuril islands once a peace treaty is clinched, the 1956 declaration said Russia could retain control over two of the islets, he was quoted as saying. (Agence France Presse, December 1, 2000)

As long as the Russian government acknowledges Japan's sovereignty over the four islands, the Japanese side can be expected to be flexible as to the timing, modalities, and methods of actual reversion of the islands.

However, Japan cannot afford to make further concessions, especially an agreement whereby Russia is required to return only the Habomai islets and Shikotan, which constitute only 7 percent of the entire disputed land area. ...Some lessons of Sino-Russian border agreement... (See Kimura, *Distant Neighbor* vol.2, pp.258-263)

Russia's position was as follows:

(1) Russia considers that an agreement on border demarcation between Russia and Japan will become possible only in an atmosphere of comprehensive, friendly development of relations between these two countries;

(2) the decision on boundary demarcation with regard to the disputed islands should be made on the basis of "historical legacy and reality" and would require the endorsement of both the Japanese Diet and the Russian Parliament. (Kimura, *Distant Neighbor*, vol.2, p.222)

Putin added that he needed time to convince the Russian public of the need for talks. Only if Putin secured a second term as president, would he be able to negotiate returning "the Habomai islets and Shikotan island," he reportedly said, failing to mention the other two islands. But Mori refused to discuss the return of only Habomai and Shikotan, insisting that talks should cover all the islands.(Mainichi Shimbun, April 8, 2001)

"By returning the two islands(Shikotan and Habomai), we believe the (territorial) issue will be settled," the sources quoted Putin as saying in response to Mori's demand that all four islands be returned.(Yomiuri Shimbun, April 9, 2001)

Putin showed a positive stance on starting detailed negotiations with Japan toward the return of the two islands. Now that the Russian side has made one step toward the eventual return of the long-disputed islands, the Japanese government hopes to make further progress in the negotiations toward its ultimate goal of getting back all four islands, according to the sources.(Yomiuri Shimbun, April 9, 2001)

The Russian side thinks that the return of the two islands to Japan would probably put an end to the issue of the remaining two islands. Putin thus indicated that Russia will not agree to negotiations over the sovereignty of Kunashiri and Etorofu.

Putin also said that if he were elected to a second term as president, he could give the green light to negotiations on the return of Habomai and Shikotan, suggesting that Russia needs ample time to launch negotiations.(Yomiuri Shimbun, April 9, 2001)

The Russian president's decision was apparently made based on the following factors: Solving the territorial dispute is indispensable for improving the bilateral

relations with Japan, which is economically powerful.

The Russian government may be able to form a national consensus on the return to Japan of the two islands over a long period. (Yomiuri Shimbun, April 10, 2001)

#### 4. Tokyo's Position on the territorial issue

The Japanese government had long demanded that Russia return the Northern Territories. Indeed, Tokyo's position had been that it would not extend full economic assistance to Russia until diplomatic relations between the two nations are fully normalized through resolution of the territorial dispute.

Speaking in generalities, there are three possible approaches for Japan to take with regard to its Northern Territories dispute with Russia.

1) The first approach is conditioned by the belief that Russia will not yield in any territorial dispute except under strong negative economic or political pressure. The conclusion of this assumption is that politics and economics cannot be separated.

2) The second approach takes the opposite stance. Its supporters argue that by gradually improving economic, cultural, and other ties with Russia, Japan will pave the way for a breakthrough in the territorial deadlock.

3) The third approach, endorsed by the Liberal Democratic Party(LDP) when it was in power, could be called a "balanced expansion" strategy, a hybrid of the aforementioned two positions. It does not insist that progress on economic cooperation be delayed until steps have been taken toward resolving the territorial dispute. In stead, it suggests that progress in both fields be pushed forward simultaneously, in a careful balancing act. (Kimura, Distant Neighbor, vol.2, pp.161-162)

At the Kawana Summit in April 1998, Japan offered to recognize Russian administration of the disputed islands for a fixed period of time as a condition for a settlement. But in November of that year, Russia proposed at the Moscow Summit that a territorial settlement not be linked to the efforts to sign a peace treaty.

But in Japanese side any peace treaty between Japan and Russia will have to be based on a settlement of the territorial dispute and the establishment of national borders. A peace treaty in the absence of a territorial settlement would be meaningless to Japan.(Mainichi Shimbun, August 9, 2000)

Foreign minister Makiko Tanaka said Japan should continue seeking the return of all four disputed islands off Hokkaido in bilateral territorial talks with Russia. Former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed in March the validity of a 1956 pact that stipulates the return of the Habomai group of islets and Shikotan after a peace treaty is concluded.

While some Japanese politicians and Foreign Ministry officials advocate the return of the two islands first, Tanaka said Japan should continue to push for the return of all four islands.(The Japan Times, April 27, 2001)

Koizumi's proposal:

Japan and Russia have entered a new phase in their dispute over four Russian-held islands off Hokkaido. During talks in October 21, 2001 at a Shanghai hotel held after the weekend's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation form summit, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi presented Russian President Vladimir Putin with a proposal to help resolve the long-standing territorial dispute by conducting two separate negotiations.

One set of discussions would focus on establishing how soon Russia should return Shikotan Island and the Habomai group of islets after the signing of a peace treaty, while other discussions would aim to settle territorial claims to Kunashiri and Etorofu islands. Putin responded favorably to Koizumi's proposal.(Yomiuri Shimbun, October 23, 2001)

It is important to note, however, that holding "parallel" negotiations should not be an invitation to end the dispute through the return of only Habomai and Shikotan.

So the Japanese government should take a cautious and resolute approach toward the talks.

##### 5. The gap of the both side's position

Japan and Russia remain apart, with Japan seeing the 1956 pact as a basis for moving the negotiations on to the remaining Kunashiri and Etorofu islands, while Russia wanting to put an end to the territorial dispute by the return of only the Habomai islets and Shikotan. The four disputed territories were seized by the Soviet troops at the end of the World War II. (The Japan Times, April 28, 2001)

The Russian side, however, maintains that there are no reference to Kunashiri

and Etorufu in the declaration, and that Russia believes that if the Habomais and Shikotan are returned, then there will be no other outstanding issues.

The 1993 Tokyo declaration signed by then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa lists the names of all the disputed islands and affirms that a sovereignty issue still exists between the two countries.(The Japan Times, May 14, 2001)

## 6. Settling the territorial dispute

Firstly, the territorial negotiations must be based on long-term strategies. Gradualism represents a realistic approach.

Secondly, they will make progress in the territorial disputes in a way that benefits both countries.

Thirdly, they must persist in efforts to build mutual trust.

Fourthly, they should adopt a more constructive attitude to the territorial problem and show readiness for mutual concessions.

Finally, patience in diplomatic negotiations is still valid today in the process of negotiation between Japan and Russia for resolving the territorial dispute.