

Opinion – Shinzō Abe and Russo-Japanese Relations

Written by Daminov Ildar

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For more than 70 years have the contemporary Russo-Japanese relations been stalemated by the territorial dispute over the Kurile islands. The period starting from late 2012, however, has been marked by an unusually high level of Japanese diplomatic activity, which aims at finding new solutions to the dispute. As Japanese prime-minister, Shinzō Abe, came back from Vladivostok after yet another meeting with the Russian leadership, questions about the prospect of a political settlement arose once again. Will Tokyo adjust its negotiation approach? This article looks into how the most recent political developments in Japan and abroad stimulate Japan's leadership to push harder for a compromise. It also elaborates on why Moscow should also adopt a more flexible approach in dealing with Tokyo in the upcoming years.

Even though Abe receives a lot of criticism as one of the most right-wing prime-ministers Japan had since 1945, one cannot deny that he is, by all means, a unique Japanese politician. Unlike many of his predecessors, he managed to remain in power for almost 7 years, which allowed him to conduct consistent policies both domestically and internationally. His resolve to leave a serious political legacy and guarantee a place for himself in history textbooks will not be satisfied by merely receiving the title of the longest-serving prime-minister in Japan's history. His yearning for political achievements is what explains Abe's appetite for big-scale projects at home and abroad.

Ranging from the introduction of Abenomics to promotion of the constitutional revision project, from negotiating the free trade agreement with the EU to solving the abductee issues with Pyongyang, Abe launched one big initiative after another, thus, successfully establishing himself as a dominant figure on Japan's political scene. As the prime-minister tirelessly repeated, signing a peace treaty with Russia and solving the problem of Northern territories is also a key priority for his administration. Abe and Russian president Vladimir Putin have already held 27 personal meetings, an absolutely unprecedented record, considering the limited scope of their discussions. Why is the Japanese prime-minister so insistent on solving the territorial dispute? As Abe's political career is slowly reaching its nadir, he will become increasingly flexible in negotiations for four different reasons.

First of all, for all his efforts to become a grand reformer, Abe cannot boast much on the domestic front. Indeed, his party enjoys high approval ratings, but more due to the fact that the opposition is divided and unable to cooperate. Nevertheless, both of Abe's biggest ambitions domestically have not been fulfilled. Economically speaking, his reforms (so-called Abenomics) do not seem to have worked too well, as the Japanese sluggish growth rates fail to exceed even 2% a year. His plan to revise the country's pacifist constitution was doomed after the summer election to the House of Councilors. Even though the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its ally, Komeito, scored a victory, they failed to gain a qualified majority that Abe hoped for. Revising Article 9, which outlaws maintaining armed forces with war potential, is also unpopular in Japanese society according to the most recent social polls by *The Japan Times*.

The second factor, is that there are no evident successes on the international front either despite Abe's desperate attempts to strengthen Japan's role in world politics. Even though Abe's administration managed to negotiate a major trade deal with the EU, it has so far been its only visible achievement in the recent years. There are no perspectives for Japan's permanent membership in the UN Security Council. The same goes for the abductees issue and negotiations with Pyongyang, even though Abe claimed that he was ready for a summit with Kim Jong-un. Japan's bilateral relations with its other neighbors are also far from perfect. The South Korean-Japanese alliance suffered a

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major crisis due to a new round of trade and history disputes this year. With China being now classified as a security threat, it is more than logical for Japan to seek ways of counterbalancing its powerful neighbor. For that reason, strengthening ties with Russia, which is becoming dangerously close to Beijing, is a window of opportunity for Abe to ensure Japan's security.

The third factor is that Abe has a longstanding working personal relationship with president Putin, which not that many first world leaders enjoy. Abe has been courting Putin since the very first year of his premiership, meeting him on a very regular basis and often calling the Russian president by his first name. Japan under Abe's leadership did not join the Western sanctions introduced after the Ukrainian crisis, which Russia was grateful for. Abe has also encouraged Japanese investments in Russia and remains an active participant of the Russian Eastern Economic Forum that is held annually in Vladivostok. He is well aware of the fact that personal ties and connections are crucial in the framework of the Russian political system. With that in mind, a good relationship with Putin is very likely to serve Abe's long-term interest of solving the territorial dispute and unfreezing bilateral relations.

Finally, both Russia and Japan seem to be cautiously optimistic about opening up to various dispute resolution formats. To satisfy the needs of both nations, the framework can be a combination of various documents, including the peace treaty, islands transition and mutual cooperation agreements. A multi-stage transition mode with a possibility of a temporary Russo-Japanese administration over the islands seems to be the scenario for which both parties are opting. Separate clauses on concrete economic cooperation measures and military neutrality, which should pacify Russia and guarantee the absence of the American military bases on the islands, would be reasonable too. On the other hand, signing a peace treaty before solving the territorial dispute is also becoming an attractive option according to the social polls in both nations.

Although divided public opinion on the territorial dispute as well as Russian military concerns remain the key obstacles, discussions on the level of vice-foreign ministers show that Japan and Russia will structure their negotiations based on the 1956 Joint Declaration. This means that Abe is making a huge concession by agreeing to accept only the smallest islands of Shikotan and Habomai. As Japan softens its negotiating position, Russia should also demonstrate readiness for flexibility and diplomatic adjustments, especially, in order to support Abe's domestic stance. If Moscow remains unreasonably stubborn, it will lose a unique opportunity of establishing closer relations with a neighboring economic superpower that will counterbalance the growing Chinese influence in the Russian Far East and contribute to Russia's economic development.

Two years is not a lot of time. But if Abe manages to untie this knot until 2021, it will truly be a diplomatic breakthrough on a historic scale. In practical terms, full normalization of Russo-Japanese relations will boost the economic development of Northeast Asia, strengthen the regional security order and counterbalance China. The question whether Abe and Putin have enough political will to look beyond their short-term political interests, however, remains open.

About the author:

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