

Articles

Genesis of the Russia-Japan Conundrum in Northeast Asian Security: The Anatomy of Mutual Distrust and the China Factor

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This paper examines the potential and limits of Russo-Japanese bilateral relations across the Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin periods, exploring the roots of the mutual distrust between the two countries, Gorbachev's "new thinking" with respect to Japan, how Yeltsin's policy differed from Gorbachev's, what Putin's policy priorities were with Abe, and the limits of Russo-Japanese relations. I also analyze important external elements in bilateral relations such as the China factor, predict how Russian relations with Japan will affect Russia's future role in Northeast Asia, and discuss policy implications for Republic of Korea as well. The main argument of this paper is that Japan and Russia will continue to remain as immiscible in the end even before economic relations fully heated. Kuril Island dispute along with inherent mistrust between the two sides will continue to obstruct bilateral relations for the indefinite period unless there is a shocking event such as Russia's decision to yield the four islands in contention to Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's position in North-east Asia has been relatively weak yet promising compared with that during the Russian Empire and the Soviet period because Russia did not have to face direct security confrontation and possessed economic incentive to enter this region with several energy cards, and gain access to the markets of the Asia-Pacific region. Russian Far East is the only parts of the country where the borders were not changed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There is no direct severe conflict of ideologies or a military clash between Moscow and Washington. China is an important economic and political partner, especially thanks to honeymoon relations between Putin and Xi. Russia does even have relatively good relations with both Koreas as a potential mediator in Korean internal affairs. In recent years, Kim Jong Un's closest ally was Putin, not Xi. Moscow relations with Ulaanbaatar is still steady. Most of all, relations with Japan are perhaps the best ever as the result of very close personal relations between Putin and Abe.

Japan traditionally has occupied an important place in Russian foreign policy decision making in Northeast Asia, second only to China. As the world's third most powerful economy and an attractive energy export market, Japan captured Soviet attention since 1960s in the midst of Sino-Russian rivalry and Sino-Japanese rivalry. In fact, it is undeniable that Moscow-Tokyo relations were set to be not favorable to each other because of both Japan- the United States military alliance and Kuril Issues. Despite political and military uncertainties of bilateral relations between

these two countries, even during and following the Cold War period, Japanese technology and investment always remained irresistible temptation for Russian leaders. Furthermore, Japan's on and off discomfort with the United States, in terms of trade negotiation, foreign policy toward the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, domestic political scandal such as Lockheed Martin, and reviving Japanese nationalism all presented new opportunities for Russian foreign policy makers somehow.

In this article, I explore the potential and limits of Russo-Japanese bilateral relations. At the article's core is an analysis of the development of relations between the two countries that primarily focuses on Russian diplomacy during the Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin periods, although I also briefly discuss the historical background of Russian relations with Japan during the Soviet period before the 1980s. I explore the roots of the mutual distrust between the two countries, the approach Gorbachev adopted toward Japan and how Yeltsin's policy differed from Gorbachev's, Putin's policy priorities with respect to Abe, and the outlook for Russo-Japanese relations and how Russian relations with Japan might affect Russia's future role in Northeast Asia. I also consider important external factor in bilateral relations such as the role of China. Finally, I highlight the significance of the relationship between the two countries and the policy implications for Northeast Asian security as well.

GENESIS OF MUTUAL DISTRUST

The stalemate of Russo-Japanese relations since the end of WWII is not, however, simply due to the discord over

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their territorial claims. Rather, it stems from the hostility between the two nations that originated in the mutual distrust that came with the fall of the Russian Romanov Empire. Russian-Japanese relations suffered from the legacy of three wars in the twentieth century alone, recurring territorial disputes, and major cultural disaffection to each other.

Russia's inherent hostility and resentment toward Japan traces back to the when struggle for dominance over the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria escalated during the late 19th century and early 20th century. And Russia's defeat in the 1904-5 war still remains a national trauma among Russian leaders and people. Nicholas II himself even called the Japanese "little yellow monkeys." Furthermore, Russians remember the Japanese siding with the White Army during the civil war and invading Vladivostok, where they defeated the Red Army.¹ Japanese invaded Manchuria and Mongolia during the 1930s, directly confronting with Soviet Army. Moreover, Japanese alliance with Germany and Italy left Soviet Union with immense pressure of dealing with simultaneous attack to both western and eastern front of Soviet territories during the World War II.

It is important to understand that Russian-Japanese relations were shaped by a cultural hatred, although the negative feelings were even much stronger on the Japanese side. For example, 1989 opinion surveys discovered that only 17.6 percent of Japanese perceived the Soviet Union as "sympathetic," while 47.4 percent as "antipathetic." In contrast, Soviet respondents were much more favorably apt toward Japan: 88 percent were "sympathetic, and only 2.4 percent "antipathetic" (International Affairs, 1989; Ziegler, 1993). To the Japanese, Russia has been a country that is imperialistic, unreliable, unpredictable, brusque, uncertain, not capable of cooperating throughout the century. Even before the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, Yukichi Fukuzawa, a Japanese diplomat, who visited Russia a few years after the first Russo-Japanese treaty of 1855, stated that Russia was a country in which Japan could not safely trust (Fukuzawa & Kiyooka, 1960). Even after then, Japan has kept to perceive the Soviets and Russians as perpetrators and spoilers. They also claim that the Soviet Union entered the WWII in the Pacific in its final days violating the non-aggression pact, and stole the last big piece of booty in Northeast Asia, namely, Kuril Islands and North Korea. Accordingly, Japanese still even believe that the defeat of World War II was mainly due to the Soviet entry, not due to the U.S. atomic bombs

Mutual distrust is still prevalent even between the two sides. Russians typically argue that Japan was responsible for the deteriorated relations between the two, while criticizing Japan's political inflexibility. They condemn Japan's persistent claim over unresolved territorial issues and reluctance to conclude a treaty on good-neighborliness and cooperation. For example, Yeltsin rejected Japan's human-

itarian aid to Sakhalin earthquake victims because he suspected that Tokyo might take advantage of the situation to press harder for the return of the Kuril Islands.²

On the other hand, the Japanese criticized Russian policy as being arbitrary, untrustworthy, unpredictable, and imperialistic. In response to Yeltsin's abrupt cancellation of his trip to Japan in 1992, the Japanese criticized Russians harshly, claiming that "They are liars through and through. They haven't changed. That's the old Russian way- dirty."³ The title, "That's Why Russians Can't Be Trusted" was on the cover of a popular magazine during that period (Nimmo, 1994). Besides, Japanese suspected Russia of attempting to isolate Japan when Yeltsin visited three major Asian nations in the month after the failed Tokyo summit. Moreover, the Russian navy's throwing away of radioactive nuclear waste into East Sea just days after Yeltsin promised not to do it, and Russian coast guard attacks on Japanese fishermen made Japanese more hostile toward Russia even further. When asked if Japan and Russia should improve their relationship, only 28 percent of Japanese answered positively, whereas 57 percent of the Russian respondents said the same (Nimmo, 1994).

Moreover, it is intriguing to observe the mutual distrust between the two countries has been developed in quite superstitious ways. In unique Asian and Russian culture related to Shamanism, the fate of Russian leaders who visited Japan became an interesting subject while explaining the chronic hostile relations between the two countries. Gorbachev was not only kidnapped within four months of his return from Tokyo and removed from office within eight months of his Japan visit but also doomed to face the end of the Soviet Union ultimately. The other Russian leader, prince Nicholas who visited Japan had experienced the same destiny exactly 100 years earlier. When young Nicholas visited Otsu (near Kyoto) in 1891, a Japanese policeman who thought that Russia would invade Japan, stabbed him with a saber. He was not so seriously wounded and returned to Russia. Three years later he became Tsar Nicholas II. In 1917, the fate of his family and the Tsarist Russia as well as the hometown of Boris Yeltsin is quite well known (Nimmo, 1994). Any Russian leaders would be well-advised to consider the fate of two previous leaders who visited Japan. Perhaps, at least in Asian or Russian culture, the fate of the two countries is doomed to be incompatible and spoiled, which is very difficult for other western academia to accept.

DEVELOPMENT (FROM POST WORLD WAR II TO PRE-GORBACHEV)

Following WWII, Kremlin leaders continued to perceive Japan as a semi-sovereign nation. Japan had been completely defeated and disarmed, yet still represented a potential security threat to the Soviets, primarily due to US mili-

1 *New York Times*, June 4 1995.

2 *Izvestiya*, June 3, 1995; *Segodnya*, June 3, 1995.

3 *Mainichi Daily News*, September 19, 1992.

tary presence in Japanese territories.

Thus, Soviet foreign policy objectives toward Japan was to prevent Japan from being remilitarized like old days in late 19th century and Pacific War. For example, the Sino-Soviet agreement of 1950 and Soviet attempts to sign a peace treaty with Japan in 1955-56 were both aimed at neutralizing Japan and weakening the ties between Japan and the United States (Ziegler, 1993). Although Soviet policy toward Japan in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to focus primarily on economic cooperation, it had a very vivid political calculation, which was to check Mao's China.

From the beginning, Stalin attempted to control over territory lost in the Russo-Japanese war including Kuril islands, the Korean Peninsula and some parts of Manchuria. Indeed, he succeeded in fulfilling part of his goals. However, he was not able to achieve one important goal of withdrawing the U.S. troops in Japan due to the outcome of Korean War. Moreover, he was excluded from the San Francisco peace treaty, along with China. As a result, Stalin's policy toward Japan failed miserably and failed to threaten Japan in the end. Soviet-Japanese relations remained estranged (Ziegler, 1993).

After Stalin's death, Molotov was at first willing to normalize relations with Japan in September 1954. The Joint Declaration signed in October 1956 between the two countries clearly played incentives for enhancing diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. However, the territorial question obstructed further cooperation (Ziegler, 1993). Meanwhile, the Khrushchev's policy toward Japan consisted of both threat and promise (Sarkisov, 1994). Politically, Kremlin sought to accomplish a peace treaty that would force the Japanese to agree Soviet sovereignty over the Kurils. At the same time, the Soviets wanted to invite Japanese to develop Siberia and the Soviet Far East. It is important to note that although Soviet calculation seemingly aims at preventing Japan from rearming and inducing the U.S.-Japan friction, Khrushchev's main goal was to check Mao's China and prevent China-led anti Soviet campaign in the region.

The Brezhnev's policy toward Tokyo was distinguished from his predecessors' because the Soviet policy toward Japan was indifferent, arrogant, and rather inconsistent, as Ziegler pointed out (Ziegler, 1993). Japan was virtually ignored by Brezhnev due to its limited military capability constrained by both the U.S. military presence in Japan's soil and its domestic peace constitution. Accordingly, the Soviet stance to the dispute over the islands had become quite stronger than before or there was even no official mention of the Kurils in Soviet diplomacy toward Japan, in particular. However, when the Sino-Japan rapprochement suddenly broke out in 1972, Brezhnev utilized Kuril card strategically in order to check Sino-Japan relations while beginning to realize it could become a national security threat. Brezhnev was even willing to turn the two islands over to Japan. Since the Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka insisted that, however, all four islands belonged to Japan, Brezhnev changed his

mind (Sarkisov, 1994).

Moreover, during the Brezhnev era, series of international events also hindered further enhancement of Soviet-Japanese relations. Again, the peace and friendship treaty signed in 1978 between Japan and China, with its anti-hegemony clause directed at the USSR; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the MIG-25 fighter incident in 1976; and trade sanctions enacted against the USSR after martial law was imposed in Poland, all obstructed developing bilateral relations (Gromyko, 1981). Most of all, Soviet-Japanese relations further deteriorated during the 1980s primarily because the U.S. containment policy toward the Soviets was at the peak under Reagan. Accordingly, the Reagan administration also urged Japanese to follow the U.S. economic sanctions toward Moscow and to issue anti-Soviet declarations on the territorial issue too (Demchenko, 1986). There was no enough space for Japan to dare to approach to Russia without the U.S. permission during the 1980s.

In short, up to the Gorbachev period, as Ellison noted, Soviet policy toward Japan was a series of failure: "failure to conclude a peace treaty; failure to block the Sino-Japanese 1978 treaty; failure to secure effective Japanese participation in Siberian development; and failure even to maintain the support of the Japanese Communist Party, failure to join Moscow in condemnation of Beijing. But the greatest failure and disappointment concerned the most important Soviet objective toward Japan: to divide the U.S.-Japanese alliance and to thwart Japanese rearmament" (Ellison, 1989). It is intriguing to point out that Soviet policy toward Japan during the Cold War somehow resembled today's China policy toward South Korea because China's main intention is to divide the U.S.-ROK security relationship and to increase pro-Chinese politicians inside Korean politics. It would be very interesting to see how effective Xi's policy will come out after following Stalin's old track.

GORBACHEV AND JAPAN

Gorbachev's new thinking created new possibilities for radical change in Soviet-Japanese relations, just as Soviet relations with other nations did. Gorbachev visited Japan for the first time ever since 1956. And his trip was significant because he made a statement listing the four islands by name and pledged to facilitate the process for signing a peace treaty.⁴

Gorbachev's main intention was to acquire Japanese advanced technology and capital investment to help modernize the Soviet economy. Just like his predecessors, Gorbachev also tried to weaken the ties between Japan and the U.S., and the Japanese military capabilities to challenge the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Japan's main reason of signing a peace treaty with Russia was to attain the Northern Territories, although economic benefit of accessing Siberia was also very attractive. Many oil options and low energy prices during the 1980s and 1990s, however, diminished Japanese particular incentives of developing mineral resources in Siberia, even though several joint ventures were imple-

4 *Nikkei Weekly*, November 4, 1996.

mented to explore coal reserves and oil and natural gas in the Sakhalin region (Nimmo, 1994).

Gorbachev's new thinking toward Japan was new but his actual performance did not depart from his predecessors' entirely. Gorbachev's diplomacy was quite new because he denounced the confrontational approach followed by Brezhnev and Gromyko, and attempted to produce a more reasonable image of the country as well. Moreover, Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader who recognized the importance of Japanese economic potential throughout the region in the 1980s. He initially believed that improving relations with Japan was the main key to enhance Soviet power and influence in Northeast Asia.⁵ However, his first historic visit to Japan in April 1991 faced such disappointment on the Kuril issue. The lack of favorable outcome demonstrated that Gorbachev's statement, although peace-making and encouraging, was nothing but lip service with no substantial difference from Moscow's previous position on this particular islands. Moreover, Japanese discovered that Gorbachev's security terms for promoting comprehensive regional security, arms control, and confidence building measures (CBMs) to be very ambiguous and one-sided (Boeicho, 1990).

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that unlike Brezhnev, he recognized the existence of the territorial question between the two countries.⁶ As Sarkisov noted, Gorbachev admitted that the only solution to this dispute would be the signing of a peace treaty. For the first time, he mentioned the names of all four islands, unlike his predecessor. Furthermore, he agreed on the non-visa exchange between the people of the four islands and Japan, and on the partial withdrawal of Soviet troops stationed on the islands (Sarkisov, 1994).

If then, why could Gorbachev not solve this problem for himself? Gorbachev argued that the main concern was a "domino theory," fearing that the concession to Japan would provoke similar problems with Germans, Finns, Poles, Romanians and others. There was also immense pressure on Gorbachev by right wing groups such as military, KGB, right-wing politicians. Indeed, Gorbachev feared a backlash of public opinion that he would trade Soviet territory for Japanese investment (Ziegler, 1993). During that time, many Soviet medias produced a sequence of articles defending Soviet claims to the islands. Another interesting analysis lay in Gorbachev's psychological factors. Just like China's Deng Xiaoping's handing strategy toward disputed island in East China Sea with Japan during the 1980s, Gorbachev did not want to make territorial concessions by himself and tried to leave the decision to the future generation of Russian politicians, as Sarkisov argued (Sarkisov, 1994).

In short, I am not so sure whether Gorbachev's disappointing performance with Japan over the Kuril islands was a complete failure. There is no doubt that Gorbachev

demonstrated a reevaluation and rejection of past policies with regard to Japan. Gorbachev and his reform minded policy makers recognized the necessity of compromise in dealing with Japan, although the legacy of Soviet-Japanese hostility, domestic pressures within both countries, and Japan's unwillingness to contemplate significant concessions were as so stubborn as Bolshevik constitution which finally led to the dissolution of the Soviet empire. The case of Gorbachev clearly illustrates that any future reform minded leader in Russia is highly unlikely to tackle with this contended territorial issue. What seems to be more pessimistic, no other Russian leader even dares to follow Gorbachev's diplomatic pattern toward Japan in the future, with some unpleasant superstition.

YELTSIN AND JAPAN

Progress

Yeltsin's relations with Japan is perhaps the most important period of overall Russian relations with Japan because it was roller coaster relations with both optimism and pessimism. Bilateral relations between Moscow and Tokyo during Yeltsin's term enables us to scrutinize the anatomy of the very complicated relations from both sides.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the perfect timing for the Russian Federation and Japan to improve bilateral relations. The traditional Soviet image of communist imperial expansionism was at least removed since the Soviet Union disappeared. The international system has also evolved in the trajectory for reconciliation between Moscow and Tokyo. And hence, the Russian foreign ministry sought better relations with Japan, which was seen as an important regional power and a potential source of aid and investment. Yeltsin, in a personal letter sent to Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, called Japan "a potential ally" and expressed a strong desire to strengthen Russo-Japanese ties (Sarkisov, 1994).⁷

As time went on, however, all kinds of optimism faded away simply following the old pattern of bilateral relations. During the Yeltsin's terms there was nothing achieved from both sides. And rather Russo-Japanese relations remained stalemated again.

In this sense, Yeltsin's relations with Japan could be characterized as the continuation of compromise and conflict. In Bouchkin's terms, "Russia and Japan resemble waltz partners dancing in circles around a point, unable to either part 'the good way' or find a way to resolve the problem" (Bouchkin, 1995). For example, Yeltsin's Russia continuously avoided answering the Kurils question. In contrast, Japan has tenaciously pushed this issue in dealing with Russia. Both Yeltsin's sudden call off the meeting with the Japanese Foreign Minister Watanabe in Moscow in late January 1992 and his abrupt decision not to visit Japan in Sep-

⁵ *Pravda*, July 29, 1986.

⁶ *Izvestiia*, 29 September 1988.

⁷ *Japan Times*, February 29, 1992; *Izvestiia*, September 29, 1988.

tember 1992 implied Moscow's reluctance to deal with this territorial issue (Nimmo, 1994). Yeltsin actually postponed his trip to Tokyo just four days before the scheduled trip (Sarkisov, 1994).

Despite no actual improvement on the sensitive territorial issue at all, both sides continued to expand their economic ties, albeit slowly. In November 1994, Moscow proposed Tokyo to reschedule \$1.6 billion in debts and support Russia's bid to join the APEC forum. Indeed, Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev and Japanese Foreign Minister Kono signed four agreements on economic cooperation.

Meanwhile, the earthquake that shook Sakhalin and the city of Neftegorsk on May 29, 1995 clouded Russian-Japanese relations further. Boris Yeltsin initially rejected Tokyo's offering of medical equipment and other humanitarian aid to Russia. This amplified Japanese discomfort, disbelief and dismay toward Russia. Moreover, Russia's dumping of liquid radioactive waste into East Sea in early 1995 as well as Kozyrev's denouncing the idea of Japan becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council all spoiled Tokyo's appetite for Moscow (Akaha, 1996).⁸

Perhaps, one of the most significant events in relations between the two countries under Yeltsin's term was the change of the Russian Foreign Minister, from the pro-Western Kozyrev to more Asian expert Primakov. Primakov visited Tokyo in November 1996 and discussed Kurils issues with Japanese. And people in Moscow also alluded possibility of negotiation over these four islands too. As Moltz stated, "Russia continued to offer olive branches by drawing down its troops on the disputed islands to a mere 3,500 men and pledging to go further" (Moltz, 1997). In short, Russia made some visible efforts to enhance relations with Japan. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that Moscow's friendly line was to develop Kurils jointly, yet its red line was that Japan should stop its territorial claim.

Meanwhile, Russia-Japan bilateral dispute over territorial waters and fishing rights near the Kurils and Sakhalin continued to be more problematic. For example, Russian border guards even fired on Japanese fishing boat which violated Russian maritime areas many times, and caused several Japanese death casualties.⁹ Furthermore, Tokyo's discomfort to a Russian-U.S. agreement that included Russia for G-8 clearly indicated that the rift between Moscow and Tokyo did not disappear despite temporarily improving relation.¹⁰

Analysis of major obstacles

Despite the initial optimism in the beginning of Yeltsin's terms, there were a number of obstacles to hinder rapprochement between the two countries from each side. On the Russian side, Yeltsin's attitudes and stance toward Japan was very inconsistent according to his political status. With his distinct popularity on the street especially after

the collapse of the coup in 1991, Yeltsin harshly criticized Gorbachev's Japan policy. When he visited Japan as a Supreme Soviet member, the leader of the reformist opposition to Gorbachev in January 1990, he actually proposed five stage plans for normalization of relations between two countries. These five procedures include "(1) Russia's acknowledgment of a territorial problem, (2) creating the zones of mutual economic cooperation, (3) gradual withdrawal of Soviet troops from the four disputed islands, (4) signing of a peace treaty, and (5) solution of the territorial problem (originally proposed for resolution by 'future generations,' but which Yeltsin now called for implementing in a more expeditious manner)" (Nimmo, 1994). However, as the head of the Russian Federation, he stressed upholding the integrity of Russian territory. It is important to understand that throughout his presidential term, his top priority in his foreign policy was securing state sovereignty and territorial integrity (Aron & Jensen, 1994). Yeltsin just could not give up these four island under any circumstances as a national leader. As Yeltsin's political role transformed, therefore so did the meaning of his five-stage plans. When Yeltsin initially designed this proposal, it was completely refreshing and provocative because it was totally different from the old Soviet practice. One year after, however, this formula was no different from Gorbachev's another mild version of handling these four islands (Hasegawa, 1993).

Secondly, Russia's domestic political pressure rapidly developed in a direction to hinder rapprochement with Japan. Hard-liners group such as the nationalists, communists and military groups kept pressure on Yeltsin. In particular, the region of the Russian Far East strongly opposed the idea of transferring the islands to Japan. Some conservative group of people even contended that if Yeltsin agreed to Japan's territorial requests, the area would declare its independence from Moscow (Nimmo, 1994). The Russian residents of the Kurils Islands themselves also harshly resisted against any negotiations with Japan regarding the return of the islands to Japan.¹¹

On the Japan side, inflexibility of Japanese attitudes toward island led to the failure of Russo-Japanese relations. This sounds very familiar in the Northeast Asia, as was in the case of today's Japan-South Korea relations as well as Japan-China relations. Japan was simply unable to get rid of the Kuril island syndrome. As Hasegawa states, "the Japanese became the prisoners of the Kuril Island syndrome, which made them unable to address the obvious question of what Japan's policy toward Russia should be in the new environment and what position the territorial question should occupy in this overall framework of Russo-Japanese relations" (Hasegawa, 1993). In fact, as everybody knows, "the Kurils were not vitally necessary for Japan. No Japanese citizens lived there, and they were not essential for Japan's economic needs" (Hasegawa, 1993). For Japanese, these four

8 *Segodnya*, March 7, 1995.

9 *Reuters*, 1996.

10 *Kyodo*, March 22, 1997; *Xinhua*, March 23, 1997

11 *Asahi shimbun*, September 16, 1991; *Svobodnyi Sakhalin*, September 18, 1991; *Reuters*, June 15, 1996.

islands were nothing but luxury extra diplomatic item or spare leverage to negotiate with Russia. Perhaps, however, they were more important bargaining chips in relations with other Asian neighbors who were facing the similar territorial disputes. I argue that the Kuril syndrome clearly stemmed from the combination of three elements such as the legacy of Japanese imperial mind, their misunderstanding as a war victim and their national characters as islanders. As once imperial citizens, for the Japanese losing a territory represented a national humiliation and trauma again. Traditionally, the Japanese showed their excessive attachments to the Islands located near their country throughout the history. In so doing, Japan has often encountered serious, in most cases, absurd territorial disputes over the islands with its neighboring states. It is undeniable that in Japan, the Kuril issue has constituted almost the entire portion of Japan's Russian policy. Indeed, as Hasegawa argued, "the Northern Territories syndrome was a mental block that paralyze Japan's ability to see and comprehend rationally its own interests, which go beyond a fixation on the Northern Territories" (Hasegawa, 1993). For example, Japanese government misinterpreted that the new Russian government which looked very close to western democratic style at first would pursue more easy approach towards Kuril Islands. This Japanese miscalculation illustrates how the Northern Territories syndrome clouded Japanese judgement.

Moreover, the nature of Japanese domestic politics was quite incompatible with resolving territorial dispute with Russia. The territorial issue and the Japanese political party politics were interwoven with each other in such a complicated way. To become an influential party or ruling party in the cabinet, Japanese politicians had to change their positions on the territorial dispute occasionally, according to what their opposition parties' claim toward this issue. For instance, the Miyazawa government had been able to assert a strong enough leadership to conclude a peace treaty with Russia. However, his policy was rapidly challenged and harshly criticized by the Takeshita faction, his opposition party. Miyazawa was not prepared to risk his own political life to achieve rapprochement with Russia, which was low among his priorities (Hasegawa, 1993).

In short, there is no denying that the changes that took place in Japan's policy toward the Soviet Union and Russia were nothing but superficial adjustments. As a result, the Japanese priority among its policy toward Russia throughout several decades, which was overwhelmingly a territorial claim, turned out nothing but an instrument to prevent rapprochement with the Soviet Union or Russia, at least to the eyes of Russian policy makers.

PUTIN AND JAPAN

Meanwhile, perhaps, Putin and Japan relations are by far the most improved ever since Gorbachev period. There are three explanations for this. The first one is the friendly

leader to leader relations. Putin and Xi personal relations has unusually consolidated in the midst of the intense US-China rivalry, the U.S. Shale gas revolution as well as the U.S. sanctions toward Russia. On the flip side, it is also important to note that if there is any change of leadership on the either side of Russia and China, honeymoon relations cannot be guaranteed just like old Sino-Russian rift days during the Cold War period. Second, the dynamic external environment in Northeast Asia was favorably nurtured to enhance Russo- Japanese relations. Japan, for example, has now virtually worst relations with Republic of Korea and China. In this sense, another rupturing relation with Russia will leave Japan with too much burden on Japan's diplomacy in the region. And the third one has to do with current Yamal LNG development in Arctic region.

From the beginning, Abe administration perceived Russia as a potential important partner for security interest and counterbalancing China, North Korea and South Korea in Northeast Asia, given that Abe's relations with other Asian states were worst ever after World War II. Therefore, despite some conflict over UN led sanctions toward Russia following Ukrainian crisis and Crimean issues, Abe continued to make rapprochement with Putin to deter other neighbor Asian countries.

It is important to understand that Abe's calculation also stemmed from Japanese tenacious interests over Sakhalin projects, East Siberian oil and gas fields, and most of all, Yamal LNG in Nordic Sea. Sakhalin mineral resource has been Japan's priority since 1960s. And yet Japan's interests toward Eastern Siberian gas fields and Nordic Pole dramatically increased during Abe administration because there was a spot for Japan to contribute to the development of Novatek LNG project amid complexities of geo politics. In other words, Putin needed Japan's finance and technology to become potentially number one LNG producing nation. In this sense, Japan has been quite successful in investing in Yamal gas fields despite the US led sanctions toward Novatek and its leadership who led the Yamal LNG projects. There are two speculations on this issue. One is as most Russians counter-argue, US sanctions has not affected the Yamal LNG project at all under any circumstance because these projects are solely in Russian on shore territories. Second, both US sanctions against Yamal project under Trump administration and repercussion or penalties following the violation of the sanctions are neither tough nor rigid enough for Japanese investors to give up this golden opportunity totally.

Moreover, Putin and Abe held several summit to discuss resolving Kuril issues. In November 2013, Abe held its first ever diplomatic talks with Russia in Moscow for the first time ever since 1973.¹² In September 2017, Abe and Putin met at Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok to discuss several joint economic activities including aquaculture, greenhouse farming, tourism, wind power and waste reduction in Kurils.¹³ In 2018, Abe also followed up Putin's proposal to sign a peace treaty without preconditions.¹⁴ Abe

¹² *The Japan Daily Press*, November 4, 2013.

¹³ "Abe and Putin Likely to Sign Off on Economic Projects on Disputed Isles," September 6, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/>

was even going to attend Russia's Victory Day Celebration in 2020 but could not make it due to COVID-19. Russia and Japan discussed to deal with a formal World War Two peace treaty at the minister level (Borshchevskaya, 2020). Nonetheless, Abe's sudden resignation in September and Corona virus may delay close negotiation between two nations compared with previous time.

CHINA FACTOR

The Russo-Japanese relations has more implications that goes beyond bilateral relations in the region. China became a very important country in the dynamics of Russo-Japanese relations during both the Cold War period and the post war era. In traditional sense, Chinese leaders tend to perceive Russo-Japanese relations as tremendously affecting China's direct national interests. They have feared Russo-Japanese rapprochement for decades, almost right until President Xi came to power in Beijing. The relationship between Xi and Putin is perhaps described the best ever in bilateral leader to leader relations history. Accordingly, nothing seems to interfere in this unusually long lasting honeymoon relations at this moment. Nonetheless, for the past several decades, as Glaser noted, "China has approached relations between its two most important neighbors from a balance of power perspective, seeking to exploit contradictions between them to prevent collusion on the one hand and to engage the support of one power (Japan) against China's major enemy (the Soviet Union) on the other" (Glaser, 1993). It is still quite uncertain whether China's views toward Russo-Japanese relations have really transformed significantly, compared with the past. It is important to understand that Chinese have continued to encourage Japanese to take a hard line against Russians during both rapprochement period and rift time of Sino-Russian relations in the past. Even until now, most Chinese diplomats express their concern toward Russia, stating that they have low degree of confidence on Russia learning from Cold War experience in the late 50s and early 60s (Glaser, 1993). Chinese aims were to maintain the pressure on the Soviets to meet their demands as well as to prevent a Soviet-Japanese rapprochement (Hasegawa, 1993). More specifically, Chairman Mao had to enhance relation with Japan badly at the expense of Soviet Union during the 1960s and the 1970s in order to carry out Cultural Revolution successfully while eliminating pro-Soviet Mao's rivals such as Deng and Liu within China. Accordingly, China had to support Japanese claim over Kuril Islands during that time. This is why in the 1970s, Soviets provided Japan with a very delicious carrot such as invitation of Japanese participation in developing Siberia in order to counter-attack China, and to obstruct enhancing bilateral relations between Beijing and Tokyo. In particular, Moscow actually raised two important issues to

Tokyo during that time: 1) there is a possibility to negotiate Northern Territories with Japan; 2) strong demand not to participate in Chinese coalition of anti-Soviet campaign. As a result, Sino-Japan relations could not move forward during that time due to Soviet engagement with Japan, although domestically Tanaka political scandal played a crucial role to decelerate bilateral relations.

Meanwhile, China's engagement in the Kurils during the 1960s made Russians more worrisome far more than that of the United States or the United Nations. By siding with Japan in 1964 to favor Japan, China was viewed as not only a betrayer but a threat to Russia. It is important to understand a Sino-Japanese connection was more amplified by racial and cultural affinity plus antagonism toward Russians, which is quite prevalent among other Asian countries including North Korea until now. Throughout history, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans all share similar feelings and perception toward Russia, that is, a dangerous, unreliable, spoiled nation image. In particular, when Beijing and Moscow tension escalated at the peak, Beijing's support for Japan's claims over Kurils clearly demonstrated that Beijing-Tokyo collaboration was aimed directly against Moscow (Sladkovskii, 1971).¹⁵ It is important to note that this sort of similar pattern is highly likely to reappear in the region, whenever Sino-Russian relations ruptures in the future.

In general, China's stance on Russo-Japanese relations is very complicated. During the 1980s, Beijing had two calculations. First, China did not want Japan to compromise with Russia over Kuril issues. Simultaneously, as Glaser argued, China also did not want Russo-Japanese rapprochement to outpace normalization of Sino-Russian ties (Glaser, 1993). Furthermore, Chinese emphasized that Japanese anti-Soviet defense efforts had been enough and should not be further extended at that time. There was a tremendous concern for Chinese leaders that a continued built up of Japanese armed forces aiming at the Soviet Union could eventually pose a direct threat to China (Hasegawa, 1993). Consequently, Chinese ambiguous and dubious stance on Russo-Japanese relations is ended up with nothing but maintaining status quo strategy, as is in the same old Chinese tactics in the region. China also utilizes the old same strategy toward North Korea's nuclear proliferation issue as well as reunification of Korea.

On the other hand, it will be interesting to observe what new policy on the Kurils issue China will pursue, as bi-lateral relations between Russia and China improved significantly in the last two years. There is a speculation that Japan might fear the recent development of bi-lateral relations between China and Russia. This shows why Abe unusually wanted to improve his relations with Putin over Xi by visiting Moscow in person immediately after he became

[09/06/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-putin-likely-sign-off-economic-cooperation-disputed-isles/#.Wguc9Vu0PIU](https://www.wguc9vu0piu.com/09/06/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-putin-likely-sign-off-economic-cooperation-disputed-isles/#.Wguc9Vu0PIU), accessed on October 24, 2020.

14 "Japan Rejects Putin's Offer to Abe of Peace Treaty by Year -End, Bloomberg, September 12, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-12/putin-invites-japan-s-abe-to-sign-peace-treaty-by-year-end>, accessed on October 22, 2020.

15 Ivkov, "Zamir i Bezopastnost," *Pravda*, December 18, 1972; *Asahi shimbun*, June 12, 1972.

the prime minister.

In short, Chinese predict that Russo-Japanese relations will not improve significantly in the immediate future. Nonetheless, they still fear that a dramatic enhancement between Russia and Japan could harm Beijing's interests in the end, while isolating Beijing and losing its only and the last strategic partner in the world. In Glaser's terms, "especially if Tokyo and Moscow achieved a rapprochement suddenly, this will allow Beijing little time to reposition itself" (Glaser, 1993). It is highly likely that in that case, China is going to court to both South and North Korea. During the 1990s Chinese believed that the signing of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia could drastically change the security structure of Northeast Asia causing confusion of balance of power relations and alliance issues (Qimao, 1991). This is more convinced by the fact that Russia is participating in neither U.S. led Indo Pacific Strategy nor China's Belt and Road Initiatives. Even though Japan is very actively participating in the U.S. led Indo Pacific Strategy at the moment, there is no doubt that Japan and Russian rapprochement will eventually have a detrimental effect on China, not the U.S.

During the Cold War period, Chinese concerned that Russo-Japanese rapprochement could create fierce competition between China and Russia for Japanese investment and technology. Now, two decades after, China worries that normalization of Russo-Japanese relations significantly might disturb Russo-Chinese energy transaction and can eventually create fierce national competition between Beijing and Tokyo for Russian mineral resources. Chinese worst nightmare is that Japan exclusively takes over Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas project and Altai gas pipeline project in western Siberia over China.

IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSO-JAPANESE STALEMATE

The relations between Russia and Japan clearly illustrate one of the international relations theories that politics and economics are inseparable. It may appear that the inherent Russo-Japanese stalemate turned out to be better explained by Japan's so-called "non-separation of economics and politics" (*seikei fukabun*) approach than Russia's "separation of economics and politics" one. It is interesting to point out that many Asians have experienced such difficulties to understand the logic of Russian foreign policy throughout decades. Estranged diplomatic relations between the two countries stemming from historical animosities, partly, changing international environment, and the territorial dispute have prevented an active economic relationship.

Russia, while dealing with Japan, just like many other Asian countries, has sought to separate the controversial territorial issue from the subject of economic cooperation. Russian Foreign Minister Primakov in 1997 stated that the territorial issue should no longer disturb the development

of bilateral relations between the two countries.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Japan tended to fix its linkage of economic assistance to Russia and progress on the northern territorial issue permanently. Japan's (*seikei fukabun*) approach has been the core principle of its policy toward the Soviet Union and Russia (Carlile, 1994), just like Japan's linkage of kidnapped people issues and the policy toward North Korea. Japanese political leaders such as the former Foreign Minister Togo constantly maintains that there could be no lasting improvement in bilateral ties until the territorial dispute had been resolved.¹⁷ At the Munich summit in July 1992, for example, Japan stated that it would withdraw its objection to G7 aid to Russia in exchange for inserting a few articles on the Kuril in the summit communique (Carlile, 1994). As long as Japan is preoccupied with its territorial claim, it is highly unlikely that the further development of economic cooperation will happen in the near future. On the other hand, Russians emphasize that Kuril is not a territorial issue at all but a war compensatory one.

Moreover, the relations between Russia and Japan touches upon another important political theory that foreign policy is the continuation of domestic politics. The disastrous relations between the two countries in 1992 were even aggravated by the Russian domestic situation and the stubborn Japanese stance on the territorial question. Russian domestic politics since the August 1991 coup quickly developed in such a way that they eventually left little room for Yeltsin to take a position that would satisfy Japan's demands.

The Kuril issue has been genetically connected with the agenda of Russia's nation-building. Russia, as the successor state of the USSR, has begun the painful process of defining the nature of its nationhood, identifying its national interests, and determining its foreign policy orientation. In this respect, Russians often raise the fundamental diplomatic question: what should be the nature of the Russian state- a great power, or an isolationist inward-looking small state? The territorial issue unquestionably occupied the essence of this question. With the immense pressure from hardline conservatives or nationalists and even general public, Yeltsin desperately had to demonstrate a more unyielding and radical attitudes toward Japan over Kurils, unlike Gorbachev yielded significantly to other Asian states' political demands.

On the Japan side, the Northern Territories syndrome deeply stemmed from the Japanese perception of their past and their unforgettable memory of the last stage of the WWII. Moreover, Japan is incredibly occupied with interests of all islands in Pacific Ocean area perhaps due to its geopolitical origin as an island country. Japanese ownership of islands in Pacific Ocean whether they are large or small non-habitant rocks composed, represents a national pride for Japanese people and a very lucrative political tool for politicians. In domestic arena, the following perception was developed among Japanese public. As long as the Northern

¹⁶ BBC, January 10, 1997.

¹⁷ Reuters, January 22, 1997.

Territories remain occupied by Russia, in Rozman's terms, "Japan will not overcome the postwar humiliation and recover full-fledged independence" (Rozman, 1992). Indeed, Japanese leaders also have clearly reflected Japanese public opinions toward these islands on their foreign policy toward Russia and will continue to do so. It is equally interesting to point out that Japan has been more often obsessed with every piece of islands in Asia Pacific Ocean region due to its claim over massive underwater mineral resources in recent years, while colliding with its neighboring countries. In particular, there is no denying that Japanese obsession with Kuril islands is deeply related to Japanese trauma stemmed from the loss of World War II. Japan hopes to alleviate its image from war crime defeated state to a regional great power with the help of its strategic partner, the US. At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind that Japan's outcome in the course of negotiation with Russia will have significant impact on Japan's stance over other territorial claim against Korea and China on the sea water. Therefore, Japan cannot ever surrender over any type of negotiation with Russia over these controversial islands.

PROSPECTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It is highly likely that the relationship between Japan and Russia will continue to remain complicated into the foreseeable future, even if the potential of their economic relations is always enormous. Their economic potential has never been substantially implemented throughout history. Rapprochement between Putin and Abe was significant move, perhaps the best relationship ever in the history of diplomacy between two countries, as discussed previously. Nonetheless, even two leaders could not move forward over this island dispute. Most of all, Tokyo and Moscow have different perspectives toward the Kuril Islands issue. Russian diplomats, for example, seemed to be convinced that the Kuril question could be gradually eased through collaboration and mutual understanding, as was the case in the territorial disputes between Russia and China in the 1960s; the extensive economic ties of the past few years have solved out the ownership of thousands of islands between the longest border.¹⁸ On the other hand, no matter how Russia struggles over this issue, Japan would most likely settle for confirmation of the 1956 Japan- Russia joint declaration that referred to the return of two of the northern islands to Japan.¹⁹ Moreover, the Russian oil spill in Japanese waters in early January 1997 and Moscow's abrupt postponement of a meeting of a joint Russo- Japanese trade commission clearly indicated that the two countries continued to struggle with each other.²⁰

Furthermore, in reality, the international environment will not be set up in favor of the Russian-Japanese rapprochement. The U.S. and Europe are unlikely to take any positive steps toward solving the territorial dispute, fearing that it would undermine their positions in both countries.

The stance of China and South Korea will remain negative in general because both countries do not gain from the eventual Russo-Japanese rapprochement.

Again, the inherent problem in Russo- Japanese relations, the mutual mistrust between Tokyo and Moscow, will continue to haunt in every conflict between the two. The mistrust accumulated by both sides for more than a century can only be enhanced gradually with dramatic solution or event. Otherwise, it is difficult to expect bright future because mistrust is genetically related to national pride on both sides. Neither of these two countries will take a chance first to abandon this territorial issue in exchange for even grand scale tempting energy card in eastern Siberia or Yamal area for another century. It is highly likely that Japan and Russia will continue to remain as immiscible in the end even when heated just like oil and water do not mix.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed Russo- Japanese bilateral relations from the multitude angles. This paper discovered that Russian- Japanese relations has not clearly escaped from phantom menace of Kuril disputes. And this momentum is highly likely to persist for the indefinite period unless Russia totally yields four northern islands to Japan eventually. Moreover, this bilateral relation demonstrates complexities of Moscow-Tokyo relations are deeply rooted in balance of power relations among Russia, China and Japan. This pattern of diplomatic game will also highly likely to continue in the region for another few decades. Also the low level of confidence between Tokyo and Moscow is deeply embedded in the historical clash between the two countries tracing back to Russo- Japanese War. Many Russians still believe that Japan is also somewhat responsible for the fall of Romanov dynasty and the emergence of failed Bolshevik regime. Accordingly, from the strict security standpoint, Russian typical perception of Japan is very much close to a potential security threat rather than an ally.

In the long run, what is the implication of Russo-Japanese relations for the rest of Northeast Asian states overall? The Russo-Japanese stalemate does not directly threaten Northeast Asian security these days. These two countries already know of each other very too well learning from the past experience. They are quite aware that direct military confrontation over any issues including Kuril will create nothing productive for both sides. Ironically, meanwhile, China and South Korea may somehow benefit from the stalemate of Russo-Japanese relations in terms of both politically and economically. It seems likely that Russia does not want to yield the Kuril Islands to Japan at the expense of Japanese economic assistance because Russia still has several options in Northeast Asia. We have observed this clearly despite Abe's strategically friendly move toward Putin in recent years. Russia still could appeal to China or South Korea for economic assistance and the development

18 *Kommersant- Daily*, November 19, 1996, no 196, p. 4.

19 *Daily Yomiuri*, August 7, 1996; *Reuters*, January 22, 1997.

20 *Itar Tass*, April 1, 1997.

of the Russian Far East. For example, the South Koreans were pleased that Seoul was the first Asian capital Yeltsin visited in November 1992, rather than treating the Seoul visit as an extra to his Tokyo visit. China was also thrilled that Yeltsin visited Beijing before Tokyo (Hasegawa, 1993).

However, neither Seoul nor Beijing is in a position to seek to spoil Russo-Japanese rapprochement. If the Russo-Japanese stalemate creates an extra bonus for China and South Korea, it is also true that Russo-Japanese rapprochement will be beneficial in the long run since it will be conducive to forging regional economic cooperation as well as to enhancing stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

Indeed, Yeltsin's Russia in many respects was less important to Japan and South Korea than was Gorbachev's USSR. Now, Putin's Russia is rather different story because of massive mineral resources in eastern Siberia and Arctic region. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Japanese policy makers are more concerned about China than about Russia. South Korean leaders no longer see Moscow as a leverage for influence over North Korea, even though Putin is trying to gain Russia's influence over North Korea with both legal and illegal energy transaction. Nonetheless, North Korean leaders still seem to put more weight on improving relations with Washington than with Moscow. It is undeniable that policy makers in Pyongyang also share the similar negative

feelings with other Asians about Russia. Russia may be less influential than before but it is now perceived as a potential source of instability, proliferation and pollution which other states cannot ignore. In other words, Moscow will continue to be an actor on the Northeast Asian political-strategic front, especially maneuvering its neighbors with lucrative energy cards. At the same time, in order for Russia to become a key player both politically and economically for the foreseeable future, rather than being simply an unpredictable perpetrator, Russia must improve its bug bear image with its neighboring countries including Japan. The reality is that, however, even with Russia's lucrative natural resources, Japan and Russia cannot overcome the phantom menace of Kuril Islands. And the reason is that the confidence building process between two countries continued to fail because two countries could not escape from their bitter past memories since Russo-Japanese War in 1904 despite relatively enhanced relationship between Putin and Abe. And it is even more intriguing to point out that China factor as well as other external factors in Northeast Asia are not in the same the trajectory of favoring bilateral relations between Moscow and Tokyo either.

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