Japan's False Hopes of Courting Russia

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A territorial dispute between Moscow and Tokyo illustrates the challenge that midsize powers face in an era of great power competition.

As the old Soviet joke goes, it is difficult to predict history in Russia. Against the backdrop of the Kremlin's longstanding efforts to promote a revisionist version of World War II **(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/23/russia-poland-are-playing-political-games-with-holocaust/)** , this past April the Russian Duma (parliament) passed a law to officially change **(http://duma.gov.ru/news/48281/)** the war's end date from September 2nd to the 3rd. The bill's authors cite **(https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5e95ae869a79473d8f8ad91f)** as the reason for the change the decree of the Supreme Soviet Presidium to declare September 3rd "the day of victory over Japan," as well as the fact that the Chinese and Japanese also celebrate the end of the war on this date. In Putin's Russia, World War II commemorations and narratives have emerged as a chief ideological pillar. Whatever the reasons for the decision to change the official end date for the war, it redirects Russia's domestic conversation towards Joseph Stalin and Soviet losses to Japan. All this cannot bode well for Tokyo, which had been pursuing good relations with Moscow.

75 years after the war, Russia and Japan have yet to sign a peace treaty due to a longstanding territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, also known as northern territories. Return of the islands had been historically important to Japanese leaders, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made resolution of this dispute among his chief foreign policy priorities. Indeed, only the coronavirus pandemic had prevented Abe from attending Russia's Victory Day Celebration (at the time scheduled for May 9), one of the most important annual events in Russia—festivities that Western leaders have shunned since Moscow's illegal Crimea annexation.

As great power competition increasingly defines foreign policy discourse, Japan's efforts to court Russia over the Kurils provide a cautionary tale. Japan's efforts were probably doomed from the start, as Tokyo appears to have had little leverage over Russia. (And as most longstanding observers of Russia know, it is leverage, and not concessions, that have any chance of budging the Kremlin—on anything.) Viewed more broadly, however, the back-and-forth

gives us a glimpse into the political realities emerging in the post-Cold War world—the dynamics and pressures that face medium-sized powers as they navigate an era of great power competition. Americans trying to understand how to build new alliances going forward ought to pay close attention.

The roots of Russia and Japan's territorial contention go deep. The two countries have clashed over control of these territories since Catherine the Great claimed sovereignty in 1786 on the basis that Russian explorers found the islands. Japanese maps and other historical records (https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d106) show that the Japanese had laid claim to them earlier. Still, the current, modern dispute originated with the end of World War II and the ambiguities of several post-war treaties. To this day, Russia holds onto the four islands (Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and an islet group Habomai) that divide the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean.

In short, Moscow considers the islands rightfully Russia's as a result of the post-war agreements, but from Tokyo's perspective, the seizure was a result of illegal Soviet aggression. It began in April 1945, when Stalin broke the non-aggression Pact with Japan based on the Yalta agreement in February that year, in exchange for his territorial claims in East Asia. However, the agreement provided no definition of the term "Kuril islands." The U.S. State Department also later wrote (https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/research/a00020r.html) to the Japanese government that it considered Yalta merely a statement of common purposes which had no legal effect on transference of territories. Stalin for his part seized the islands and expelled thousands of Japanese citizens from there—a Soviet "liberation." Under the 1951 San Francisco peace treaty, Japan ceded all rights to the islands to the USSR, but came no closer to clarifying a definition of what constitutes the Kuril Islands, while Moscow refused to sign the treaty to begin with. Even Kremlin-controlled TASS at one point acknowledged (https://tass.com/world/1041010) that the treaty "did not specify…which state these territories were to be transferred to."

In 1956, the USSR and Japan signed a peace declaration but could not reach an agreement on the four northern territories. As Japan allied with the United States, negotiations grew difficult in the context of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union was slowly coming to its end, Gorbachev sough (https://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/16/world/gorbachev-on-peace-mission-to-japan.html) t to turn over a new leaf and went on a peace mission to Tokyo. The Yeltsin government that took over after the Soviet collapse aimed to move away from the bloody Soviet legacy and wanted to conclude a peace treaty with Japan, which has emerged as a major economic power that could assist Russia. His government took steps to that end that were never finalized. Once Putin ascended to power the Kremlin shifted its overall posture, even as he talked about the need for a peace treaty with Japan, and by the mid-2000s Russian officials generally argued (http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_226_Gorenburg_Sept2012.pdf) that all four islands belong to Russia.

Shinzo Abe became prime minister in 2012, by which point Russian foreign policy posture had already grown more belligerent compared to the mid-2000s. Abe focused on diplomacy and provision of economic incentives (https://www.ft.com/content/1905fc24-c360-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354) to Russia with the aim to return all, or at least a portion of the islands, to Japan. Since 2013, Abe and Putin have met over two dozen times, typically one on one, with only an interpreter present. However, to date, Abe's efforts to court Putin have not borne fruit. Last November, Russian foreign affairs minister Sergei Lavrov encapsulated the issue from the Kremlin's perspective when he said that any future steps toward a peace treaty have to be made within the scope of the 1956 joint declaration, which he claimed (https://tass.com/politics/1092067) "clearly states that first Russia's territorial integrity and sovereignty over all our lands, including those territories, are recognized, thus recognizing the results of World War II, and then everything else will possibly be discussed." His comment highlights how much emphasis

the Kremlin puts on its interpretation of history and great power status, above all else.

Putin, for his part, would consistently tantalize the Japanese. In December 2016, for example, he said (https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/12/16/pingpong/) in Tokyo, "[W]e need to stop this historic ping-pong, we must finally understand somehow that the fundamental interests of both Japan and Russia require a final, long-term settlement." But he was already hinting at the underlying obstacles when he added, "Bearing in mind the special nature of relations between Japan and the United States…how will these relations be built? We do not know. We want our Japanese colleagues and friends to take into account all these subtleties and all the concerns of the Russian side." Tellingly, ahead of his trip, Putin also said (https://www.memri.org/reports/ahead-his-official-trip-japan-putin-kuril-islands-dispute-we-have-no-territorial-problems) , "we have no territorial problems…only Japan believes it has territorial problems with Russia."

During a trip to Japan last year, I observed that the Japanese Foreign Affairs Ministry, which traditionally had been more skeptical of Russia, has been somewhat sidelined in favor of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). I also found that the expert community outside of the Japanese government tended to be more skeptical of the government's effort to work with Russia. Like any democracy, Japan is not a monolith, but the Japanese government chose to court the Kremlin. Yet Japan's approach has been entirely one-sided—it did not require anything of Moscow. It should come as little surprise, then, that the Kremlin refuses to budge on the issue of returning even a portion of the islands.

From a transactional perspective, Tokyo's position made sense. Russia is struggling economically, especially in the impoverished Far East. Japan is in a position to help Russia. But economic incentives alone don't work with a Kremlin that cares little for the well-being of its people, and looks for cash infusions only to support its cronies. Indeed, a return of territories would not fit with the great power image Putin cultivates—along with the revisionist version of history that he uses to help bolster this image.

More to the point, for Putin, American preeminence in global affairs is a primary foreign policy concern. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Japan's military cooperation and a broader political alliance with the United States threaten Moscow. It is in this spirit that Putin began boosting missile defense capabilities (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/12/30/national/politics-diplomacy/russia-eyes-missile-defense-buildup-disputed-isles-near-hokkaido/#.XjnaO25FzIV) on the disputed islands in December 2018. And last May, the Kremlin accused Tokyo's efforts to build land-based Aegis Ashore missile defense systems as a "potential threat to Russia," even as these systems are aimed at (https://apnews.com/f91768ae444c443abc1cbbae55e71592) North Korea and China. Earlier, Japan also joined (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-japan/japan-to-impose-sanctions-on-russia-for-crimea-move-idUSBREA2H02T20140318) the G7 countries in sanctioning (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-trade-russia/japan-says-no-deals-with-russia-that-undermine-sanctions-idUSKBN1410X9) Russia for its illegal seizure of Crimea, even if it kept its sanctions more limited (https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/06/world/asia/japan-keeps-door-to-russia-open-while-imposing-sanctions.html) than the Unites States. Putin for his part did not fail to express dissatisfaction (https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/10/19/national/politics-diplomacy/japanese-sanctions-undermining-confidence-putin-says/#.Xjm_BiNOnIV) with Japan's policy and no doubt this issue contributed to difficulties in coming closer to resolving the dispute over the islands.

Tokyo's efforts in part have also been driven by a conviction that China is a rising threat not only to Japan, but also to Russia. In this interpretation, Russia would therefore need Japan. Here too Japan is not unique. Paris (https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/14/macron-ours-does-russia-need-him-a68156) and Berlin have also been pursuing a rapprochement with Russia, in part out of hopes to peel Russia away from China (https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/14/macron-ours-does-russia-need-him-a68156) , based on a

belief that Moscow perceives the threat from China the same way. Yet Moscow is deepening cooperation with Beijing with no sign of a split in the near future.

As Russian analyst Vladimir Frolov **has written (https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/14/macron-ours-does-russia-need-him-a68156)** , "Russia's ruling elite see rapprochement with Europe as a greater threat to their ability to retain power than an unspoken and unequal alliance with China." This past July, Russia and China conducted their first ever joint air patrol, which **raised concerns (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-russia-aircraft/first-russian-chinese-air-patrol-in-asia-pacific-draws-shots-from-south-korea-idUSKCN1UI072)** not only in Washington, but also in Tokyo.

Regardless of where the Russia-China alliance is headed, the fact remains that Moscow, which sees itself as an indispensable great power, perceives Japan as a secondary actor in the international system. From the Kremlin's perspective, any Japanese attempt to split Russia from China is driven by the United States, and it will therefore reject any overtures.

How the United States might leverage its influence to play a constructive role in this dispute is beyond the scope of this article. But American policymakers trying to wrap their heads around geopolitical realities, especially in Asia, ought to look hard at the Kuril dispute to understand the pressures facing medium-sized allies in an increasingly transactional era.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published ***on the American Interest website (https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/24/japans-false-hopes-of-courting-russia/)*** . ❖

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