

Japan-Russia Relations: Tokyo's Balancing Act

Dr. Yoko Hirose, Keio University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On September 9, Stimson hosted Dr. Yoko Hirose (Associate Professor, Keio University). She discussed the challenges for Japan as it tries to balance the imperative to stand together with the Western Europe against Russia's aggressive behavior against Ukraine while still possessing a strong desire to pursue the improvement in Japan-Russia relations with the hope that Tokyo may be able to resolve longstanding Northern Territories issue while Vladimir Putin is in office.

Hirose described Japan's desire to recover all the Northern Territories – the islands Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan, and Habomai – from Russia. The resolution of this territorial issue is the precondition for Japan to conclude a friendship treaty with Russia. Yet Russia's official stance is that there is no territorial dispute, and moreover Russia has long regarded Japan not as a sovereign state, but a puppet of the US. In turn, Japan faces the dilemma of having to choose between the US and Russia. Prime Minister Abe has been trying to develop a personal relationship with President Putin, in hopes that mutual confidence-building can become a premise for the resolution of the territorial dispute. Between December 2012 and February 2014, the two met five times, but this stopped with the Ukraine crisis.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the US and EU activated sanctions, and these sanctions have gradually increased. Japan does not want to do the same, because of its interest in good relations with Russia (and lack of interest in Ukraine). While Japan cannot avoid activating sanctions as a G7 member and US ally, it has implemented much milder sanctions against Japan. On March 18, Japan suspended the consultation for the relaxation of visa regulations, and froze negotiations for a new investment agreement, a space cooperation agreement, and an agreement for the prevention of dangerous military activities. Russia responded with appreciation that Japan acted as a sovereign state rather than US puppet. President Barack Obama then visited Japan from April 23 – 25, and asked that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe take a stronger position towards Russia. So on April 29, following confusion in Eastern Ukraine, Japan temporarily suspended the issuing of visas to 23 individuals considered to have contributed to violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Japan also postponed Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida's scheduled visit to Russia. Russia criticized Japan's actions, accusing it of being forced to follow the US.

On May 24, Putin stated that 1) Russia is ready to talk about all four islands, 2) while resolution does not exist now, it is possible with negotiations, 3) the final resolution should not harm either country's interests but rather be a draw, and 4) Japan's sanctions show its unwillingness to negotiate. On August 5, following the shutdown of the Malaysia Airlines aircraft, Japan froze the assets of individuals/groups supporting the separation of Crimea and prohibited imports from Crimea. Japan also froze funds for new projects in Russia, in line with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's policy. Though Russia reciprocated EU and US additional sanctions, Russia did not do so with Japan, as a

manifestation of goodwill. On August 22, Russia made some retaliatory measures, creating a list of Japanese citizens banned from entering Russia, but on August 31, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia would accept Japan's invitation for Putin to visit. However, Japan has not yet responded, in consideration of the US.

Japan faces a substantial dilemma in trying to carry out independent and balanced diplomacy between the US and Russia. Now that Russia has shifted its diplomatic priority to Asia from Europe, Russia-China relations have been strengthening. However, Russia does not fully trust China and is seeking other partners – so Japan has a greater chance to improve relations with Russia. Unfortunately, the Ukraine crisis and relations with the US make this difficult.

To a question on the depth of Japanese investment in Siberia, and the effect of the crisis on the investment, Hirose responded that though Japanese companies had invested a huge amount in Siberia, many of that cooperation has been suspended. However, energy cooperation is not likely to be affected, because with its nuclear plants suspended, Japan needs Russian energy resources. Though the EU and US have activated sanctions in the energy field, Japan is unlikely to follow suit.

One respondent stated that Japan is not likely to get back all four islands; at most it will be two. As such, the gain/cost dynamic for Japan is questionable, especially when it is asking for global support on the Senkaku issue, yet it is reluctant to help in the Ukraine issue. Japan may be weakening its position with its allies for very little in return. Another respondent asked what is driving the issue for the Abe government – a desire for the return of the islands, the energy issue, or something else? Hirose responded that it is a personal reason: Abe has a distinct interest, especially because of his grandfather's legacy, in resolving the Northern Territories and the North Korean abductions. However, the Northern Territories are important beyond that, because of former residents and resources (especially fishing grounds). Many former residents have aged and some have died, so now is a critical period. A swift resolution is in the interest of Japan, given the amount of money it is currently investing in Russia.

One respondent disagreed on the Russia-China dynamic, stating that Russia has little to gain from Japan, and much from China – it will not prioritize Japan over China. Questioned why Russia would not trust China, Hirose explained that though Russia and China share interests for a multi-polar world no longer led solely by the US, they cannot be partners on regional issues – particularly Central Asia. However, this dynamic also plays a role in their relationship within BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Recently, Russia has been strategically developing the Northern Territories area for military use, fearing a Chinese fleet in the region. One participant responded that even if there are limits, China and Russia are still moving closer, and they do share common geopolitical needs. Moreover, both have territorial disputes with Japan – should not Japan be strategizing to improve relations with both countries? Hirose confirmed that Japan is worried about such an alliance, especially since both countries also maintain a similar perspective towards history. However, this is also the case with South Korea. For Abe, Putin has been the most reliable leader in East Asia to develop ties with, because it has been impossible to reach China and South Korea. Yet now even relations with Putin have become difficult, so Japan is in a difficult diplomatic position. One Russian audience member emphasized the perception of Russia-China relations as incredibly important: Russia needs China's assistance in infrastructure

development in Central and Eastern Russia, and the SCO is perceived as an important counterbalance to NATO. For Russia, the current status quo with Japan is good, because energy and trade relations are good – Putin does not see a need to review the situation.

One participant noted similarities to Japan-Soviet relations in the 80s, questioning whether anyone can actually believe Putin, when this seems to be a repeated story. Hirose agreed that it is doubtful that Putin is ready to return even two islands, and there is no possibility that Putin will return all four. However, because territorial disputes are controversial in any country, many in Japan it will only be possible with a strong Russian leader, which Putin is – so many believe now is a crucial time. As noted though, there have been many times where the recovery of two islands could have been possible, but didn't happen because of US pressure in the Cold War era and Japanese MOFA pressure more recently. One respondent cautioned that with Russia's increasing nationalism, Japan may be seeking a phantom, a deal that will not happen, at the risk of alienating its allies and friendships with the US and Europe. Hirose agreed – the strong leader is there, but so is nationalism, so people disagree on whether now is or is not the chance for resolution.

Regarding defense or defense industry cooperation between Japan and Russia, Hirose responded that though Japan has tried to increase military cooperation with some joint activity in the Japan Sea, etc., it has stopped because of the crisis. Tatsumi added that there is no defense cooperation at the industrial level, only unit-level joint exercises, confidence building, and mutual port calls.

On whether a two-island compromise (a break with the principle of territorial integrity) may have consequences for other island disputes such as Senkaku, Hirose responded that the situation is different – first because Japan has control over Senkaku but Russia has control over Northern Territories, but also because of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. In the treaty, Japan gave up the Tsushima islands, and while Russia says the four islands are part of Tsushima, Japan says otherwise – except that Etorofu and Kunashiri were referred to as Southern Tsushima at the time, so there is some controversy about what islands must be returned.

One comment raised Ambassador Togo's idea about the Japan-Russia relationship being about civilizations: Abe desires to break away from the post-war Japan identity (separate from Western civilization, while maintaining a strong US alliance), and Putin wants to establish a strong and independent national identity. This is also a way for Japan and Russia to separate themselves from China.

One audience member questioned if Japan has been a good alliance team player for the US in the way the US has been for Japan, noting Obama's efforts to clarify the Senkaku as being covered by the defense treaty and have Abe and President Park meet at the Hague. Abe says US alliance is priority, yet his Russia and North Korea policy is clearly not aligned with the US. Hirose responded that the US partnership is Japan's most important relationship, but there are also some difficulties, such as the US military bases in Okinawa and the need for constitutional revisions. The US covers the Senkaku, but not the Northern Territories. So Japan is trying to balance its diplomatic needs – but the US remains its most important partner. Tatsumi added that this is political calculation – Abe is being a team-player for the alliance in the defense area. Tatsumi responded that the question is fair, as to whether Japan is being

enough of a team player to the US and Europe in the face of this pressure from Russia. Unfortunately, there is not enough balance in the thinking. On what the US can do to resolve the Northern Territories dispute, Hirose said political support would be enough – many Japanese people believe that the US is unsupportive of even a two-island return. Further on the role of the US-Japan alliance, one audience member asked whether US military support to Japan through the alliance goes against its own interests with regards to Russia, given Japan's willingness to engage with Russia. Tatsumi responded that alliance commitment goes both ways, so of course Japan has obligations in the alliance, and it would be incredibly controversial if Japan were to actively engage with the Russian military. But the already superficial Japan-Russia mil-mil defense cooperation has ceased since the crisis, and so the US is not harmed by its relationship with Japan. James Kendall added that prior to the Crimea situation, the US was supportive of Japan's relationship with Russia – the crisis creates a strategic problem for the US as well, as the Japan-Russia relationship was important to slow the pace of China-Russia relations. The US has to make a strategic calculation between Eastern Europe or the Asia-Pacific, and the current decision is to lean towards the former, but there is still concern about the Russia-China dynamic and interest in positive Japan-Russia relations. Kendall also noted that US military support to Japan is a strategic bargain for the US. On Japan's increasing assertiveness, this process began in the 70s, as Japan has grown increasingly aware that it needs to expand its own capabilities because of declining US presence and power in the Pacific, and those activities have been paid for by the Japanese taxpayer.

Hirose concluded that for Japan, the US alliance remains its most important diplomatic focus, and Japan is positively committed to cooperating with the US in uphold democratic values, not just towards Russia and China, but also towards other serious issues happening in the world today.