

Peace Treaty Is Key to Japanese-Russian Ties

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Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan and President Dmitry Medvedev held their first one-on-one talks on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit in Muskoka, Canada, in late June. Kan told Medvedev that he would put an emphasis on relations with Russia, taking over similar efforts by his predecessor, Yukio Hatoyama. Both leaders agreed to seek progress on matters of mutual concern, most notably the unresolved dispute over the Northern Territories.

There is no question that Russia and Japan must work together as partners. With a landmass stretching from Europe to Asia, Russia requires partners both in the European Union and the Asia-Pacific region, which has experienced rapid economic growth in recent years. The Russian government has set development in Russia's Far East and in East Siberia as a priority, and it is striving to integrate with the economies of the Asia-Pacific region. The construction of the first liquefied natural gas plant in Sakhalin through cooperation with Japanese businesses, and the export of gas produced there to Japan and other countries last year symbolized cooperation toward this end. Medvedev mentioned gas cooperation at the G8

talks.

Moreover, the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit will be held in Vladivostok. Japan and Russia are working together to prepare for this event, with Japanese businesses helping build a bridge to the site of the summit on Russky Island and supplying the venue with electricity and heat.

In 2008, Russia and Japan accounted for about 2 percent and 4 percent of the other country's trade, respectively. Considering that Russia's economy is the world's ninth largest and Japan's is the second largest, it is clear that the current trade accounts between the two countries have a long way to go before they fill their potential. In other words, economic ties, including cooperation in the five areas of economic modernization proposed by Medvedev, can develop greatly in the future.

But the single issue blocking significant progress in relations is the dispute surrounding the Northern Territories that has prevented Moscow and Tokyo from reaching a formal peace treaty to end World War II. Moscow and Tokyo have agreed to proactively carry out treaty negotiations in good faith to finally resolve the issue during this generation. At their G8 meeting, Kan and Medvedev agreed to seek to resolve the dispute through high-level talks, including at the summit level. Kan said that settling the dispute has been the ardent wish of the Japanese people for the past 65 years, and that he wanted to seek a final settlement at a bilateral summit. Medvedev responded that the dispute was the single most difficult problem between the two countries, but that it was not unsolvable, and Japan and Russia should explore a constructive solution that would be mutually acceptable.

Negotiations are currently under way toward a final resolution on this issue, with positions differing between Japan and Russia in many areas, including on historical and legal viewpoints. The Japanese government believes that it is not productive to deliberately focus on differences regarding the territorial issue. Instead, it wishes to advance negotiations in a calm environment. We assume that the Russian government has a similar viewpoint.

To develop relations significantly, it is essential to conclude a peace treaty. To achieve this goal, understanding and cooperation between the citizens of Japan and Russia are required in addition to the efforts made by the governments of both countries. The Japanese government intends to take advantage of various opportunities to deepen mutual understanding between the citizens of both countries and to work to explain the importance of the steady development of Japanese-Russian relations.

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