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Japan Prime Minister Might Attend Sochi Opening Show

By The Moscow Times

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TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may attend the opening ceremony for the Sochi Winter Olympics, but China has ruled out any formal meeting with President Xi Jinping whose attendance at the Games has already been confirmed.

Japan's ties with China have recently deteriorated due to a series of disputes, including Abe's visit to a shrine seen as a symbol of Japanese militarism — a visit that also infuriated South Korea, which like China, also suffered from Japan's wartime aggression.

Xi will visit Russia from Feb. 6 to 8 to attend the opening ceremony, China said on Monday, in an apparent show of support for President Vladimir Putin, who has staked his political future on the success of the Games.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said last week that plans were being made for an Abe trip to Sochi to attend the opening ceremony, but that nothing had been finalised.

The Olympics run from Feb. 7 to 23.

Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping, speaking in Beijing on Tuesday, said that Xi had no plans to meet any Japanese leader in Sochi.

Ties have been strained over a dispute involving a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea and Abe's visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, where war criminals are honoured along with war dead. The visit prompted concern from key Tokyo ally, the U.S.

"If there is a situation [where there is an encounter between the two], the Chinese leader will sternly explain China's position," Cheng said.

Abe has made ties with Russia a priority of his tenure despite a long-standing dispute over several islands seized by Russia in the waning days of World War II that has prevented the two nations from signing a peace treaty.

Foreign ministers of the two nations met in Tokyo last November and agreed to hold a vice ministerial-level meeting early this year to work towards the resolution of the island dispute and the signing of a peace treaty.

The opening ceremony will coincide with Northern Territories Day in Japan when Tokyo habitually calls for the return of the islands. Abe will attend a commemorative event before leaving for Russia, Japanese media have reported.

U.S. President Barack Obama and German President Joachim Gauck have both said they will not visit Russia for the Games. Other officials, such as Finland's Sports Minister Paavo Arhinmaki, have cited Russia's human rights record as a reason for their boycott of the opening ceremony.

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