

Putin to Visit Japan, Ties With Tokyo Warming

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 09, 2014

The  Moscow Times

President Vladimir Putin agreed Saturday to visit Japan in the fall, fuelling hopes of progress on a territorial dispute dating back to World War II that is hampering trade.

At talks during the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe greeted each other warmly and hailed the speed at which relations between their countries were improving — in contrast to Tokyo's strained ties with Beijing.

Agreement is not close in the dispute over the ownership of four Pacific islands, but the two leaders have held five summits in the last 13 months and agreed in Moscow last April to revive talks on a treaty which would unblock trade and business ties.

"Since I visited Russia, the pace has been very fast. We want to keep up the pace," said Abe at a news conference, during which he announced Putin's visit to Japan but set no exact date.

"Agreeing a peace treaty is the most difficult challenge, a historic mission," he said. "We should not leave this to the next generation."

The islands, northeast of Hokkaido, are known as the Southern Kuriles in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan.

The Soviet Union seized them after it declared war on Japan in August 1945, forcing 17,000 Japanese to flee days before Japan surrendered.

Abe, who will also see Putin at a summit of the Group of Eight industrial powers in Sochi in June, came to the Winter Olympics in a show of support for Putin.

Several other world leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, did not attend the Games' opening ceremony after international criticism of Putin's record on gay rights.

Putin responded to Abe's gesture by making clear he was committed to strengthening ties with Tokyo, praising an improvement in trade, although Moscow has said a major breakthrough will depend on concluding a formal peace treaty on the islands.

"We have seen a good environment created that could help resolve the most difficult problem in bilateral relations," Putin said before talks began.

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