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Japan Protests After Kremlin Chief of Staff Visits Disputed Kuril Islands

By The Moscow Times

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Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga smiles during a news conference at Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's official residence in Tokyo, Japan.

Japan will lodge a protest with Russia after President Vladimir Putin's chief of staff visited a contested island chain, but there will be no change to Tokyo's policy to maintain dialogue with Moscow, Japan's top government spokesman said Wednesday.

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga made the comment after Sergei Ivanov visited one of the contested islands, called the Northern Territories in Japan and Southern Kurils in Russia, earlier Wednesday.

"A visit like this by a high-ranking person within the Russian government goes against Japan's stance regarding the Northern Territories," Suga told a news conference. "It hurts Japanese people's feelings and is extremely regrettable."

Soldiers from the former Soviet Union seized the islands at the end of World War II.
The territorial row has weighed on diplomatic relations ever since, precluding a formal peace treaty between the two countries.

However, Suga said the visit would not affect an agreement, reached in phone talks between Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Sunday, to maintain bilateral dialogue.

During that conversation, Abe proposed that Japan and Russia hold talks at international conferences such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Beijing in November, Suga said.

Ties have also been strained in recent months by sanctions imposed by Japan on Russia, such as visa restrictions and the freezing of assets, over the crisis in Ukraine, and Russian counter-measures.

Japan, which wants the eventual return of the disputed islands, needs to tread a fine line by trying to avoid hurting bilateral relations while also not wanting to appear more lenient towards Moscow than other G7 countries.

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