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Russia's Latest Eastern Pivot ... to Japan

A softening of the Russo-Japanese island dispute signals Moscow's new diplomatic strategy

By Dmitry Streltsov

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Center of Security Policy

President Vladimir Putin will soon make an official visit to Japan — his first in the last 10 years. Observers are hopeful that the visit will produce a breakthrough in resolving the so-called Kuril question. That prospect took on added urgency following two high-level meetings between Russian and Japanese officials: the first in Sochi in May 2016, and the second in Vladivostok in September.

The dispute over the Kuril Islands is one of the consequences of World War II. Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, argues that it has rights to the islands based on the agreement reached at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Japan insists that the Soviet Union occupied the territory illegally. In 1956, Moscow and Tokyo signed a declaration in which the Soviet Union

agreed to hand over two of the four islands — Habomai and Shikotan. However, that promise went unfulfilled.

Geopolitical factors have prompted both countries to consider a compromise. Japan is concerned about China's growing military ambitions and what Tokyo views as inadequate security guarantees from the United States. For its part, Washington is in no hurry to get involved in resolving Japan's territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands.

Japan is concerned that Russia's deepening confrontation with the West has driven it to develop closer military and political ties with China, and Tokyo is making every effort to prevent the formation of a Russian-Chinese bloc based on anti-Japanese sentiment.

For its part, Russia is showing signs of disappointment with China. Beijing did not support Russia on Ukraine, but took a pointedly neutral position on the question. It has not recognized Crimea as Russian territory, and at the same time, has tried to use Russia's economic difficulties to its own advantage by, for example, pushing for price breaks on Russian gas. Moscow's current deference toward Tokyo is doubtless part of a policy of hedging risks and a desire to pursue a more balanced diplomatic strategy in Asia.

Domestic political considerations are driving Tokyo to intensify efforts to resolve this dispute with Moscow. It is a matter of personal ambition for Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe: he wants to go down in history as the person who helped return part of the Japanese territories lost during the war.

The ruling administration in Japan also wants to earn points with voters at a time when hopes are increasingly slim for new economic growth. A success on the Russian front would give a major boost to the Liberal Democratic Party during elections for the lower house that rumors suggest could take place as early as January 2017.

Time is also a factor: the few remaining Japanese who once lived on the disputed islands are gradually disappearing, and it will soon be impossible to argue that they should be returned to their homeland.

What's more, Russia will soon have controlled the islands longer than Japan, and that will also work against Tokyo. Public opinion in Japan is also changing: more than half of the population now favors reaching a compromise with Russia.

Russia, in turn, is energetically developing relations with Japan, using them as a bridge toward dialogue with the West. Resolving the Kuril dispute could help Moscow cope with a number of its own economic problems. Japanese financing of major Russian projects could help offset Moscow's growing reliance on Chinese capital and the effects of Western sanctions, and could infuse new life into the perpetually underdeveloped Siberian and Far East regions.

President Vladimir Putin's personal ambitions are also an important factor. It was under his rule that Russia resolved border issues with both China and Norway. Japan, apparently, is next.

Both Putin and Abe are, in the eyes of their own people, patriots who capably defend national

interests. That gives them more maneuvering room in negotiating a compromise. However, while Japanese public opinion demands that Abe find a quick solution, polls show that 71 percent of Russians oppose the 1956 Declaration obligating Russia to hand over the two smaller islands to Japan.

Will the two leaders manage to resolve the problem at their meeting in December? As Putin very unambiguously told a Bloomberg correspondent in September: "Russia does not bargain with territories." However, the two sides can and should move toward reaching a compromise.

At a meeting in Sochi, Abe proposed taking "a new approach, free from ideas of the past." He did not specify what that meant, but many in Russia understand "a new approach" to mean that Tokyo is willing to work with Moscow politically and economically — that is, to first establish closer economic relations and create an atmosphere of friendship and good neighborliness before returning to border demarcation issues.

Moscow sincerely supports Abe's "eight-point plan" because it avoids resorting to a primitive "assistance in exchange for territory" formula.

In any case, a scenario in which Japan immediately receives Habomai and Shikotan Islands, and later negotiates the fate of Iturup and Kunashir is clearly unacceptable to Moscow. Under no circumstances would Russia go beyond the terms spelled out in Article 9 of the 1956 Declaration.

However, if Prime Minister Abe's administration backs off on its claims to the two large islands – that Tokyo officially considers "the official territory of Japan" – leaders will have to explain their rationale to the people or face a strong domestic backlash.

Against this backdrop, a leak reported by the Nihon Keizai Shinbun newspaper on Oct. 17 is especially interesting. It suggests that Moscow and Tokyo are currently discussing the joint management of all four of the South Kuril Islands. Apparently, leaders are searching for an option that would sweeten the "bitter pill" Tokyo would have to swallow if it were to drop demands for "the return of all four islands."

In pushing the idea of joint management, Japan is probably looking to obtain special legal status for those territories. Although establishing a system by which the laws of both countries would apply to the islands would unquestionably mark a major step forward for Japan, any form of "joint control" could strike at the core of Russia's claim to sovereignty over the islands based on the results of World War II.

Preferably, leaders will resolve the dispute over the Kuril Islands quickly and decisively, leaving no room for half-measures that would only give rise to new disagreements later. The only way to achieve that is for Russia, as the successor to the Soviet Union, to fulfill its constitutional obligations under Article 9 of the 1956 Declaration. Russia should find it perfectly acceptable to retain sovereignty while creating a joint economic zone with special rules and even laws that make it easier for Japanese businesses to set up operations on those territories.

Dmitry Streltsov is an expert in Japanese studies and editor of the "Japan" almanac.

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