

New Friends: Russia and Japan Are Finding Common Ground

Despite territorial disputes and an unresolved peace treaty, more unites Russia and Japan than divides.

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March 20, 2017



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, second left, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, left, pose with Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, second right, and Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada for photographers during the two-plus-two meeting in Tokyo, March 20, 2017. **David Mareuil / AP / Pool**

Contact between Russia and Japan has seen an unprecedented surge this month.

The deputy foreign ministers of both countries met in Tokyo on March 18. The foreign and defense ministers of both countries held a 2+2 format meeting there on March 20, and Russian Economic Development Minister Maxim Oreshkin — acting as special envoy of the Russian President — will visit Japan near the end of the month. Finally, Japanese Prime

Minister Shinzo Abe plans to visit Russia in April.

Why all the talks? Most are follow-up meetings based on a host of agreements that senior Russian and Japanese officials reached during meetings in December 2016.

The deputy foreign ministers primarily discussed joint economic activity on the Kuril Islands. In February, Japan established the Council for Joint Economic Activity in the Southern Kurils headed by Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, and the country has decided to pursue cooperation with Russia on deep-sea fishing, fish processing, tourism, environmental protection, and healthcare.

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Japan is putting emphasis on a proposal for the joint cultivation of scallops and sea urchins in the Southern Kurils. It also plans to start tourist cruises for Japanese citizens departing from Hokkaido Island in the Southern Kurils, along with the construction of numerous hotels and tourism related infrastructure there. Japan also plans to launch charter flights between Nemuro on Hokkaido Island and the South Kuril Islands of Kunashir and Iturup in order to facilitate visa-free exchanges.

Japanese officials have also proposed the idea of Japanese doctors conducting remote exams of South Kuril residents via the Internet.

A great deal of attention is focused on the 2+2 format meeting, where foreign and defense ministers of each country meet. The foreign ministers reached the decision to hold it during a separate meeting in Bonn last month. The two countries held their first such 2+2 meeting Nov. 2, 2013, but that format was suspended over the following three years in response to the Ukrainian crisis.

International policies and security are expected to dominate the agenda at this meeting. One of the most pressing issues is Northeast Asia, primarily the problem of North Korea's nuclear program and reaching a settlement on the Korean peninsula.

Pyongyang's recent missile launches and nuclear weapons tests pose a serious military security challenge for Japan. Tokyo reported that one of those missiles landed in the sea in the Japanese economic zone only 200 kilometers from its territory. Russia is especially unhappy with North Korea's flagrant violation of UN Security Council resolutions condemning nuclear testing.

The ministers are also expected to discuss the deployment of anti-missile systems in Japan and South Korea. The security aspect of this issue has caused the greatest friction in Russia's dialogue with Japan. Russia is categorically opposed to Washington's policy of deploying anti-missile defenses on the territory of its East Asian allies.

In Russia's view — because the Pentagon, and not the international community, oversees these missile defense systems — their deployment to South Korea and Japan destabilizes the military and strategic relationships in the region.

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If it becomes necessary, the U.S. can reorient its THAAD systems from a purely defensive posture to an offensive one and target not only North Korea but also neighboring countries. Moscow, therefore, views these missile defense systems as potentially targeting Russia. At the same time, Tokyo views Russian-Chinese military cooperation as contrary to its interests, and that cooperation will inevitably increase after the U.S. deploys its THAAD system in South Korea.

Tokyo also finds it irritating that Russia has stepped up its military presence and infrastructure in the Southern Kurils. However, Moscow prefers not to include the question on the agenda of the “2+2” meeting, arguing that the decision to build up military facilities on its own territory is an internal affair.

Despite these differences over military and defense issues, more unites Russia and Japan than drives them apart in the present international situation. And the more subjects the two countries discuss, the deeper their mutual trust.

That, in turn, creates the conditions necessary to resolve the greatest challenge facing the two countries – namely, the need to conclude a formal peace treaty. Russia and Japan also stand to benefit significantly from economic cooperation, so their relations will undoubtedly continue to strengthen this year.

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