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Putin's Arms Buildup Puts Abe on Defensive in Islands Dispute

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(Bloomberg) — Russia is accelerating a military buildup on islands claimed by Japan, threatening to blow a hole in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to lure President Vladimir Putin into settling the dispute.

The government in Tokyo lodged a formal protest after 2,000 Russian troops held military exercises last week on the four islands, called the Southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan. A few days before, Russia paved the way for its first military airbase in the area.

Russia's twin strikes came as diplomats from both countries met Feb. 6 to discuss joint economic development of the territories. Abe the next day marked Japan's annual "Northern Territories Day" with a pledge that he and Putin would resolve the "abnormal" lack of a peace treaty after World War II.

Failure to end the dispute over the islands seized by Soviet troops at the end of the war would

deal a severe blow to Abe, who's poured time and energy into seeking a breakthrough since coming to power in 2012. For the Kremlin, cooler ties with Tokyo may put at risk promised Japanese investment and undermine Russian efforts to peel away a key U.S. ally. While determined to stay close to the U.S., Abe's eager to strike a deal with Russia partly to counterbalance China's growing economic and military power in the region.

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'Unrealistic Ideas'

"The Japanese side has unrealistic ideas about the possible time frame for all this," said Fyodor Lukyanov, head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a research group that advises the Kremlin. Russia's expanding its military presence "to damp expectations," he said.

The two leaders have met 20 times, including at a hot springs resort in Abe's hometown of Nagato in 2016. He's due to visit Putin's hometown in May to address the annual St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

The premier's also under fire at home. "It's good to have warm relations at the top level, but just because you are friends doesn't mean they will give the islands back," said Yasuhide Nakayama, chairman of the foreign affairs committee in Japan's lower house of parliament and a member of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party. Russia's military exercises sent "the worst possible message," he said.

Russia sent a clear signal that it's in no rush. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov cautioned in a state television interview on Sunday that Russia and Japan need to build up their relations before reaching a territorial agreement, a process he said took more than 40 years with China.

"The Japanese side is in a hurry," and there'll be "enormous disappointment" if there's no progress, said James Brown, an expert in Russo-Japanese relations at Temple University in Tokyo.

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Break Deadlock

Abe sought to break the deadlock in 2016 by proposing a joint plan to develop the windswept territories, which lie 15 miles (25 kilometers) from Japan's Hokkaido Island. He offered help in fish farming, greenhouse farming, tourism, wind power and waste recycling. While Russia welcomes the idea, the initiative has barely advanced because of a disagreement over whether the ventures would operate under Russian law.

That's a critical condition for Tokyo, because any dilution of Russian sovereignty could allow it to accept an offer first made by Moscow in 1956 to return the two smaller islands, said Brown.

"If they can get a foothold back onto the islands, even with these small projects, then it means

Japanese businesses are there, Japanese citizens can work there," he said. "They can package that as a stepping-stone toward the return of all the islands."

Russia, for its part, has secured promises of major Japanese energy investments, including in offshore developments and LNG projects in Sakhalin and the Arctic, offering Putin the chance to ease pressure on his economy from U.S. and European sanctions over the conflict in Ukraine.

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Military Footprint

But he's shown no willingness for compromise on the islands, convinced that Abe has a greater need for a pact because of Japan's growing concern over China.

Meanwhile, tensions have grown since Russia in 2016 expanded its military footprint on the Kurils, deploying anti-ship missile batteries, upgrading an artillery division and floating plans for a naval port for large warships. Most recently, it approved warplanes' use of a newly-opened airport.

Putin cast doubts on progress over the peace treaty in November as Russia reacted angrily to Japan's decision to buy another U.S. anti-missile defense system to counter the threat from North Korea. Japan insists the system doesn't threaten Russia.

Russia's military escalation "is a response to U.S. actions because we have no other enemies in this region," said Alexander Lukin, an Asia expert at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. "There's also a psychological moment — Russia wants to demonstrate that it's our territory and we aren't prepared to surrender it to anyone."

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