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Putin Takes Hard Line on Japan Island Dispute Before Abe's Visit

By Bloomberg

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Sergei Lavrov and Taro Kono / Russian Foreign Ministry

As Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe heads for talks in Moscow this week in hopes of resolving a 70-year-old dispute over four small islands, President Vladimir Putin is showing him a deal won't be painless.

While Abe has pushed for progress in a dispute that has prevented the countries from formally ending their World War II hostilities, Russian rhetoric has turned strident ahead of what will be the 25th meeting between the two leaders Tuesday. A top Putin aide vowed not to surrender any territory and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered a pointed reminder of Japan's defeat in 1945.

"Japan is the only country in the world that cannot fully recognize the outcome of World War II," Lavrov told reporters Wednesday. He repeated a demand that Tokyo first acknowledge Russian sovereignty over the four disputed islands before any deal.

While the divide seems wide, the tougher Russian rhetoric could be a negotiating tactic ahead of the leaders' meeting, according to a Russian government official and a Japanese diplomat who asked not to be named, given the sensitivities of the discussions.

A Kyodo News report Monday, citing unidentified government officials, said Abe was ready to sign a peace treaty in return for two islands. The Mainichi newspaper said he was planning to visit Russia again in the coming months to press for a deal.

"This is a problem that's remained for more than 70 years since the war and it's certainly not easy," Abe told reporters before leaving for the airport. "I want to spend plenty of time talking frankly to President Putin in Moscow and make as much progress as possible in the peace treaty talks."

The Soviet Union, which declared war on Japan in the final week of World War II fighting, seized the islands off the northeastern coast of Hokkaido, expelling all 17,000 Japanese residents and holding the land ever since. The islands are known as the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kurils in Russia.

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Settling the dispute would help Japan improve ties with one of its largest suppliers of fossil fuels and help it counterbalance a rising China, which Putin has closely courted. Russia, for its part, is seeking an advocate in its struggle against international sanctions, and wants Japanese backing for Arctic energy projects, as well an eight-point plan for cooperation on everything from health care to productivity.

Last year, Abe and Putin agreed that negotiations should be based on a 1956 joint declaration that refers to the transfer of two of the four islands to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty. Abe entered 2019 describing the year as a potential turning point in the dispute, which his father, former Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe, had also endeavored to end.

Russia, however, responded to Abe's remarks by summoning Japan's ambassador, and Lavrov subsequently complained about "significant differences" after a Jan. 15 meeting with Japanese counterpart Taro Kono. Putin foreign policy aide, Yuri Ushakov, raised the heat further on Wednesday.

"This is our land," he said. "Nobody is going to give this land to anyone."

Japan's official position is that the islands -- home to rich fishing grounds -- are an inherent part of its territory and are under illegal occupation. Russia insists that it owns the isles, which have been inhabited by its own citizens for generations.

Few in Japan would be satisfied with two islands, while Russian public opinion is against giving away any territory. Any deal to hand over land presents risks for Putin, who has built political capital at home with his stand against the erosion of the Soviet empire and his move to annex the Crimean Peninsula.

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James Brown, an expert in Russo-Japanese ties at Temple University in Tokyo, said Abe's years of effort seem to have gained him little.

"Japan's position has softened, and yet it doesn't look like that softening of Japan's position, nor the eight-point economic cooperation plan, nor what will be 25 meetings has really taken Japan any closer to a deal at all," Brown said.

Abe has to walk a fine line in his dealings with Russia, a leading rival to Japan's only treaty ally, the U.S. For decades, Japan has relied on the so-called U.S. nuclear umbrella to protect it from threats, including Russia.

Security Tensions

Japan's Defense Ministry regularly publishes details of approaches to Japanese territory by Russian military planes and ships, including on Jan. 17. Last month, Japan protested Russia's building of barracks on the disputed islands.

The Abe government has sought to keep the issue in the public eye, even though most of the Japanese former residents of the islands have died. A Japanese public opinion poll published by the Sankei newspaper last month found that 65 percent of respondents had positive expectations for talks.

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declined to comment directly on the Russian officials' remarks Thursday. "We will continue to make tenacious efforts based on our policy of resolving the territorial issue and sealing a peace treaty," he told reporters.

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