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Why Russia and Japan Can't Solve the Kuril Islands Dispute

A win-win solution to the territorial deadlock is currently out of the question.

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Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin **Kremlin.ru**

On Jan. 22, talks between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin were held in Moscow. The talks were held as part of an agreement reached at last year's G20 summit in Singapore, where the two leaders decided to accelerate negotiations on a peace treaty based on the 1956 joint declaration between Japan and the Soviet Union.

Before the talks, there appeared to be a tangible shift in Japan's position towards the territorial dispute, which many interpreted as a willingness to compromise. Through Prime Minister Abe, Tokyo had effectively agreed that the return of the two largest islands, Kunashiri and Etorofu, was an "unrealistic demand" as per the provisions of the declaration.

This gave reason to believe that the Japanese Prime Minister's trip to Moscow would lead to bilateral approval of a solution to the territorial dispute, which could lead to the signing of a peace treaty.

However, doubts about the possibility of real progress arose after a meeting between the countries' foreign affairs ministers, which took place a week before the January 22 summit and highlighted the ongoing disagreements between the two sides. Lavrov said then that Tokyo needed to recognize the outcome of World War II — that is, Japan had to recognize Russian sovereignty over the Kurils — as a preliminary condition for the possible transfer of the two smaller islands, Habomai and Shikotan. Tokyo, however, maintained the position that the territories were "illegally occupied" by the Soviet Union and therefore should be returned to Japan, their legal owner.

In other words, meeting Russia's demands would render Japan's claims to the islands meaningless. And even Japan's potential consent to the provisions of the 1956 declaration — the return of the two smallest islands — would by no means indicate that Japan accepted the legitimacy of Russia's sovereignty over the four Kuril islands.

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As expected, Tuesday's negotiations in Moscow couldn't solve this basic contradiction. In speeches delivered at the final press conference, the leaders of both countries spoke in broad terms. Putin noted the importance of preserving mutual "interests" in discussions about the peace treaty and the necessity for continuing "painstaking work on creating conditions for a mutually acceptable solution." Even less concrete was Abe, who said, without any details, that the problems associated with the peace treaty were addressed in personal discussions.

It would seem that at this stage — with no clear solution in sight — both parties are mostly interested in showing the public their determination to continue a dialogue, while postponing an actual decision for later.

In response to the territorial dispute at hand, Russia points to the experience of solving border issues with China. Back in 1999, Russia first signed a basic agreement on bilateral relations with China, which created a positive atmosphere, and only after, at a much later stage, negotiated border questions. Clearly, in the case of Japan, the "Chinese model" won't work: Tokyo doesn't plan to sign a peace treaty that doesn't simultaneously address a solution to the territorial disputes.

The main issue here, however, is not one of different approaches to preparing and signing a peace treaty, but a deeper, more existential question. For Japan, a solution in which Russia returns any territory at all is an important milestone in overcoming its insecurity of a "losing power" that must constantly apologize for its past sins. For Russia, whose national identity is based on being the absolute winner of World War II , any territorial concession to Japan, even in accordance with international law, would be seen as a "capitulation" that undermines the legitimacy of Russia's status as a great power.

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It’s ambitious to expect that both sides will come to a definitive compromise and put an end to the territorial dispute while the question of border lines is tied to a peace treaty declaring the outcome of the war. The solution will inevitably be an uneven one, with one of the sides being labeled as the winner. A more realistic alternative would be an “untethering” of the island debate from the peace treaty and reclassifying the island debate strictly as a problem of border delimitation. In fact, Russia and Japan decided on this approach over twenty years ago, agreeing to create a commission on border delimitation.

However, in today’s political climate, in which the peace treaty is seen as key to successful bilateral relations, it’s hard to expect that the dispute over the Kurils will cease being a heated topic for both sides. It’s also equally hard to expect that a solution will be found by “speeding up” dialogues regarding the peace treaty, even when there is good personal chemistry between the two leaders.

At the same time, Russia and Japan share too many mutual interests to allow the contradictions of the territorial dispute to ruin the many positive sides of their relationship. The general trajectory of international political development in Eastern Asian, which is marked by a geopolitical shift in the balance of power towards China and the weakening of U.S.' global position, naturally propels Japan and Russia towards closer relations.

While simultaneously continuing to maintain agreeable relations in the political, economic, cultural and other spheres, the two countries will undoubtedly continue to hold talks on the signing of the peace treaty despite the lack of progress hitherto.

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