

Demystifying Russo-Japanese Peace Treaty Talks Before the June 2019 G20 Osaka Summit

By Vitaly Kozyrev

In this time of strategic uncertainty as well as the return to sovereignty discourse in international politics, Russia and Japan have embarked on a complex negotiation process aimed at the signing of a post-World War Two (WWII) peace treaty and the settling of the longstanding dispute over the South Kuril Islands. Russian President Vladimir Putin's sudden proposal to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the September 2018 Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok to sign an unconditional peace treaty, followed by subsequent summits in Singapore, Buenos Aires, and Moscow, demonstrated the two leaders' resolves to move closer than ever to a final agreement. Abe asserts that the issue "will not be left for the next generation" to solve, and observers speculate that a breakthrough deal might be inked during Putin's upcoming trip to the G20 summit in Osaka in June 2019.

As this Putin-Abe political dialogue has intensified over recent months, rumors and concerns in both countries about the real content and subject of negotiations have arisen — so much so that Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono announced on March 18 that the details of these talks will be kept secret until an appropriate solution is found. The majority of the Japanese public disapproves of any deal being signed until the four disputed islands are returned. Opinion polls in Russia indicate that only 14% of the population believe that it is worth surrendering a few outposts at sea in order to improve relations with Japan. Despite the cooperative spirit and official statements of the Putin-Abe negotiations, the Kremlin has dispatched top officials to visit the Kurils and has continued to reinforce Russia's defense installations on the disputed islands. Finally, Moscow has recently set two major requirements for any peace treaty, both of which make resolution between Russia and Japan unrealistic. One includes Tokyo's recognition of Russia's de-jure sovereignty over the four South Kuril Islands, which Russia has controlled since WWII. The other condition seeks to secure guarantees by both Tokyo and Washington that the returned islands would be exempt from the 1960 U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which grants the United States the right to use some facilities and areas in Japan to deploy its armed forces on a permanent basis.

There have been many reports in the Russian media that the negotiations have stalled or that the Kremlin is deceiving Tokyo, using its talks with Japan to drive a wedge between Japan and the United States. Yet despite such bad press, two considerations suggest that a Russo-Japanese consensus on the status of the islands does not seem to be out of the question. First, the Kremlin might consider a potential revision of its Soviet-era "bastion strategy" which required Russia's

Vitaly Kozyrev, professor at Endicott College and research fellow at Russian National University, explains that "The majority of the Japanese public disapproves of any deal being signed until the four disputed islands are returned."

absolute control over the Kuril Islands, in exchange for any prospective U.S. troops withdrawal from Japan and a multilateral arrangement with all the regional powers (United States included) on international access to the Sea of Okhotsk along with Russia's unfettered access to the Pacific Ocean. Second, the Japanese leadership might consider satisfying Russia's requests to recognize "just-in-time" recognition of the "current sovereignty status" of Russia over the islands as a result of WWII. Such a move would help Moscow prevent any other attempts to revise the major international and legal agreements signed in the aftermath of that war, while reserving Tokyo's right to put the sovereignty issue under negotiations in the future. In his press conference at the East Asian Summit in Singapore in November 2018, Putin acknowledged that the 1956 joint declaration "neither mentions a basis for returning Habomai and Shikotan nor clarifies which country has sovereignty over the islands," thus making the issue a subject of further negotiations. Potential Japanese concessions might also be fueled by growing anti-China sentiment among the Japanese military and political establishment, which is seeking to establish a "normal relationship" or even develop strategic cooperation with Russia. Some Japanese strategists insist that Japan should immediately agree to Putin's offer of an unconditional peace treaty, form a military partnership with Russia against China, convince the United States to refrain from stationing troops on Hokkaido, and establish close economic relations with Moscow.

"There might just be some breakthroughs in Osaka this June. To assuage potential nationalistic backlash at home, both Japan and Russia need a win-win solution in the form of either shared or "deferred" sovereignty."

It is misleading, however, to regard potential Russo-Japanese peace treaty arrangements as targeted against China. Beijing would benefit from the reduction of U.S. troops stationed in Japan as a result of a potential Moscow-Tokyo deal. Analysts tend to ignore the fact that the Russian president made his unconditional peace treaty proposal to Prime Minister Abe in the presence of Chinese president Xi Jinping at the forum. In his speech in Vladivostok, the Chinese leader voiced his regional mini-lateral and subregional initiatives, which would benefit the six large economies of the Northeast Asian region and foster regional integration in the China-Japan-Korea format. It might seem paradoxical, but Russia's plans to improve ties with Japan should be examined in the context of Beijing's mega-project to enhance transregional connectivity in Eurasia. Close collaboration with China within the Belt and Road Initiative is instrumental for Russia to increase its strategic significance in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific. One should not rule out the possibility that, in coordination with Beijing, Moscow may consider making concessions to Tokyo in order to engage Japan and to change the great power geometry in the region based on economic integration. New gravitational forces in East Asia may instigate Washington's desire to partake in the regional integration process. This requires U.S. involvement in the new China-led production capacity networks in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia, followed by the revision of U.S. regional security arrangements and America's strategic shift toward predominantly soft power means, rather than just military balancing, to secure its long-term presence in the region.

For all of these reasons, there might just be some breakthroughs in Osaka this June. To assuage potential nationalistic backlash at home, both Japan and Russia need a win-win solution in the form of either shared or "deferred" sovereignty. Japan might pass a bill prohibiting the United States from building military facilities on the Kunashir and Iturup islands. Prime Minister Abe should apply his art of the possible to reconcile the interests of Japan, the United States, China, and Russia on the way toward forming a new Indo-Pacific regional order. As a result, America might win support for its future regional initiatives from China's current friend Russia, which would prefer to accommodate itself to Asia's new balance of power by diplomatic and economic rather than military means.

Vitaly Kozyrev is a professor at Endicott College and a research fellow at Russian National University Higher School of Economics. He can be contacted at vitaly.kozyrev@gmail.com.

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.