

Japan-Russia Relations: Japan Struggles to Gain Attention

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Tokyo has spent the first three months of the new millennium just trying to figure out Vladimir Putin. The Japanese government has been sending strong signals to Russia and its new president, but the calls have remained unanswered. Moscow's inattention to Tokyo further complicates relational inequities, as Japan continues to be the only nation extending bilateral credits to Russia. However, low-level public and private contacts flourished this quarter in the form of cultural exchange, legal cooperation, and business loans. Complicating this relationship is an awareness that Chinese and U.S. actions will play a heavy hand in negotiating Japan-Russia ties. Nonetheless, Japanese leaders are hopeful -- if perhaps overoptimistic -- that a strong Russian leader will be willing and able to "move the relationship forward" (i.e. to make concessions to Japan).

Feeling Ignored in Tokyo

Japan's Russia experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) have spent the first three months of the new millennium just trying to figure out Vladimir Putin. This, of course, is no different from the policymakers of the leading countries in the West. The Japanese, however, are at a disadvantage. While Putin and his closest advisors have been sending clear signals to North America, Western Europe, and China that the new administration desires warm relations, Japan has been left off of the agenda. In fact, the Japanese government has been sending strong signals to Moscow, but the calls have remained unanswered. One of the first things Putin did upon assuming office was to place phone calls to Washington, Beijing, Paris, London, and Berlin. No phone call was made to Japan until January 28, although Obuchi did call Putin early in January. Apparently the latter phone call partly consisted of talk about martial arts. Old habits (remember former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto's kendo diplomacy) die hard.

If the Japanese think they are getting little attention in Moscow, they are right. Russian leaders have left Japan off of their agenda for now. In the numerous speeches, statements, and policy papers outlining Russia's new policies, Japan merits practically no mention. In Putin's open letter to the voters of Russia, published in several of Russia's leading dailies on February 25, the new president stressed the importance of economic priorities in the formulation of foreign policy. To Japanese policymakers, this might have sounded like a promising start. Economic relations and yen diplomacy are, after all, Japan's forté in foreign policy. Barely a week later Deputy Foreign Minister Ivan Ivanov gave an interview to the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on the importance of building a strong economic foundation for Russia's new diplomacy. Throughout the lengthy interview, however, Ivanov made not one reference to Japan. Ivanov mentioned the members of ASEAN and the nations of Latin America, but Japan was suspiciously excluded. That same week Sergey Karaganov, a former foreign policy advisor to Yevgeny Primakov and a man with his finger on the pulse of Russian foreign policy, published an article covering the same theme in the weekly *Moskovskie Novosti* and he also failed to mention Japan.

The Japanese are so anxious to get themselves placed on the Putin agenda that they have made entreaties for Putin to visit Japan at least twice this year -- once after his May 5 inauguration, and again at the G-8 Summit meeting, which will be held in Okinawa in late July. The Kremlin has thus far demurred. Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi had even offered to visit Russia before the July Summit if Putin cannot visit Japan, despite the fact that Obuchi visited Russia in November 1998 and diplomatic protocol dictates that the Russian head of state should visit Japan next. Obuchi was willing to overlook this. However, Putin's first trip abroad in Asia will likely be to China. Considering one of former President Boris Yeltsin's last trips abroad was to China, Japan is feeling left out and unrewarded. The Japanese government is still the only one extending bilateral credits to Russia, and although Russian policymakers readily admit this and express their gratitude, Japan feels there is no true reciprocation.

Russian politicians and diplomats still view Asian policy as an area to further strengthen ties with Beijing and New Delhi (not coincidentally Russia's two largest arms clients). Tokyo usually comes in third. One veteran Japanese correspondent in Moscow despairs, "our relations have sunk back down not to zero, or to the base, but even lower." According to one Japanese official in the Defense Agency, there are now two different schools of thought among Russia experts within the Japanese Foreign Ministry. The first advocates the current approach, maintaining pressure regarding a peace treaty and settlement of the Northern Territories dispute. The second argues that Japan needs to proceed along a new path and seek new policies. Hashimoto seemed to be an advocate of this second school of thought, but Yeltsin's strange statement at Krasnoyarsk (calling for a peace treaty by the year 2000) ironically derailed Hashimoto's new initiative. It gave false hope to many Japanese diplomats that a miracle deal could be worked within two to three years. In fact, any settlement will take decades, and Hashimoto was one of the first Japanese leaders to publicly say so. The divisions within the Japanese government were highlighted when Chief Cabinet Secretary Miki Aoki had to publicly repudiate statements made by Ambassador Minoru Tamba, in which Tamba indicated that a peace treaty was unlikely to be signed by the end of this year. It is time for Japan to reassess its Russia policy, but this will be hard to do until a clearer picture of how Vladimir Putin intends to rule Russia becomes available. We will all know better come May.

Contacts Continue to Flourish

To its credit, the Japanese leadership has not given up hope, and Tokyo continues to push for a full agenda with Moscow. Both high- and mid-level governmental contacts between Japan and Russia saw increasing activity during the first three months of the year. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov (widely considered to be the man Putin will tap as Russia's next Prime Minister) visited Japan in mid-January, along with the head of the Central Bank of Russia Viktor Gerashchenko. They promised to maintain the cordial relations seen between Tokyo and Moscow in the latter Yeltsin years. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was the next high-ranking official to visit Japan, arriving in mid-February. Though he was blunt in his assessment of the status of a peace treaty (he termed Japanese territorial expectations an "illusion"), Ivanov conveyed Putin's desire to oversee cordial relations. Though this may sound like diplomatic light talk and nothing more, Ivanov did make a bold argument for Japan and Russia to be more

deeply involved in negotiations on the Korean Peninsula. Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister Ryozo Kato visited Moscow in February to discuss bilateral ties.

What received even more notice in the press of both nations was the mid-February visit to Moscow and Vladivostok of the Chief of Staff of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces, Admiral Hosei Fujita. It was the first visit of a Japanese naval chief to Russia, and builds upon the increasing bilateral contacts between the two nations' military forces. The topics discussed by the two sides included holding joint Russian-Japanese naval exercises as part of an accident prevention program and the possibility of conducting search and rescue operations. During Fujita's visit to Vladivostok it was announced that Japan would extend \$120 million in financial assistance to help clean up nuclear waste in Russia's Pacific Fleet ports, and that it would allot another \$20 million for a scientific center in Moscow. These are part of the \$1.5 billion in credits promised by Prime Minister Obuchi during his November 1998 visit to Moscow. In fairness to Moscow, Putin did reciprocate somewhat by overseeing the ratification in the Duma of a Japanese-Russian agreement on the encouragement and protection of Japanese capital investments in Russia. Work on the agreement had been ongoing for two years. At the end of March, Russian First Deputy Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin announced that Russia expected to receive a \$100 million tranche from Japan of a coal sector adjustment loan from the World Bank.

Perhaps even more important, low-level public and private contacts flourished over the first three months of the year. Japan has begun disbursing so-called "Obuchi Grants" to young Russian and Japanese scholars, athletes, and artists in an effort to promote understanding at the grass-roots level. Among the first group to arrive in Japan from Russia were 19 practitioners of kendo. Also in Tokyo recently on similar grants were young officers from Russian Federation Border Guard units stationed in the Far East. A delegation of Russian law enforcement officers visited Tokyo and met with their Japanese colleagues to discuss ways in which the two nations could combat drug trafficking and illegal smuggling in the Far East. A delegation from the local Duma of Khabarovsk Territory visited Japan to study parliamentary procedures. Discussions centering on Russo-Japanese scientific and technical cooperation recently ended with an agreement to replace an existing accord signed a quarter of a century ago. On the business side, the Russian-Turkish-Italian Trans-Black Sea gas pipeline project known as "Blue Stream" received a loan guarantee for \$600 million from a consortium comprising Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Itochu under the guarantees of MITI and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation. Russian energy giant Gazprom received a \$20 million credit from Marubeni Corporation. Arguably, these are the types of contacts that need to be broadened in order for relations between the two nations to be more firmly grounded.

Quadrilateral Focus

Japanese and Russian policymakers still see their relationship in the context of Northeast Asian quadrilateral relations. One former high-ranking Russian diplomat and ambassador, Georgi Kunadze, speculates that Putin and his team feel that Yeltsin leaned too heavily toward China during the past year. In Putin's open letter to the voters, no mention was made of a multipolar international system, one of the pillars of Yeltsin and Primakov's foreign policy. Putin has made it clear that he will not oppose any one nation (read: the United States) simply for the sake of opposing. Russia, Putin writes, will make its stand when the interests of the nation are at stake.

Karaganov, in his piece, argues that Russia should not become tangled in the complex web of Sino-U.S. relations simply to oppose the United States. Meanwhile, China's strong words toward Taiwan and the apparent rejuvenation of Li Peng and the PLA have left the Japanese leadership somewhat nervous. An article in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* speculates that Japan's desire to improve relations with Russia is directly linked to China's growing assertiveness. The two countries may have a common agenda to advance relations and shore up their strategic positions.

United States efforts to co-develop a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system with Japan pose a potential irritant in Japanese-Russian relations. Russian statements criticizing BMD initiatives have begun to include Japan. Whereas China has criticized Japan from the beginning for expressing interest in the co-development of a BMD system, only recently has the Russian Foreign Ministry targeted its criticism toward Tokyo. Perhaps with such statements in mind, the *Sankei Shimbun*, in an editorial marking Northern Territories Day (February 7), warned of the growth of nationalism in Russian policy toward Japan. In a later editorial, the *Sankei* asked Obuchi to reconsider blindly running off to Russia before understanding what exactly Putin has in mind. Putin is certainly a question mark, particularly when it comes to Asian policy. However, some Japanese observers have expressed hope Putin will have enough power to be able to make concessions to Japan.

Putin has already moved to reign in the power of local governors. Regional leaders such as Primorye Governor Yevgeny Nazdratenko and Sakhalin Governor Igor Farkhutdinov have consistently spoken out against concessions to Japan. If Putin brings them into line, at least one obstacle would be removed. Many Japanese experts are hopeful that a strong leader in Moscow can push forward the agenda. As one Japanese observer remarked, "Only Nixon could have gone to China." Nevertheless, however much Putin may want to resolve this issue, he will find the obstacles too numerous and the issues too delicate to resolve swiftly. Similar hope was expressed in Tokyo after both Gorbachev and Yeltsin came to power. Even these two forceful leaders were ultimately unable to make any progress in this decades-long stalemate.

Chronology of Japan-Russia Relations January-March 2000

Jan. 1, 2000: Boris Yeltsin names Vladimir Putin acting President of Russia after his resignation.

Jan. 21, 2000: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and head of the Central Bank of Russia Viktor Gerashchenko visit Tokyo to discuss Russia's participation in the July G-8 Summit in Okinawa.

Jan. 28, 2000: Acting Russian President Vladimir Putin confers on the telephone with Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi.

Jan. 31, 2000: Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto discuss Japanese-Russian relations on the telephone; they vow to remain active in pushing for normalization.

Feb. 1, 2000: Khabarovsk Territory Governor Viktor Ishayev visits Niigata in Western Japan, where he seeks Japanese investors' participation in a project to install a gas supply system in his region.

Feb. 2, 2000: Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister Ryozo Kato visits Moscow to hold discussions with his Russian colleagues Grigory Karasin and Georgi Mamedov.

Feb. 7, 2000: Tenth Annual Northern Territories Day in Japan.

Feb. 9, 2000: Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov arrives in Tokyo for an official visit, following his visit to Pyongyang. He meets with his Japanese counterpart Yohei Kono and with Prime Minister Obuchi.

Feb. 11, 2000: The Japanese government announces grant of \$120 million to clean up Russia's nuclear waste in Far Eastern ports, and \$20 million for scientific center in Moscow.

Feb. 13, 2000: The Chief of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces Admiral Hosei Fujita arrives in Moscow for a four-day visit to the capital and Vladivostok.

Feb. 17, 2000: In an interview with the Kyodo Tsushin news agency, Japanese Ambassador to Russia Minoru Tamba states the two countries are unlikely to sign a peace treaty by the end of the year.

Feb. 23, 2000: Marubeni Corporation hands over \$20 million in credit to Russian energy giant Gazprom.

Feb. 24, 2000: An official Russian Foreign Ministry statement criticizes the United States and Japan for their plan to establish a regional ballistic missile defense system in the Asia-Pacific.

Feb. 28, 2000: Russian Economics Minister Andrei Shapovalyants arrives in Tokyo for talks with Japanese leaders on Russian-Japanese economic cooperation.

Mar. 1, 2000: The Russian Duma ratifies Russo-Japanese agreement protecting investment.

Mar. 2, 2000: A new agreement on Russo-Japanese scientific and technical cooperation is signed in Tokyo.

Mar. 3, 2000: Nineteen Russian kendo practitioners arrive in Japan at the invitation of the Japanese-Russian Center for Youth Exchanges, also known as the Yeltsin-Obuchi Center.

Mar. 16, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi expresses his willingness to visit Russia before the G-8 summit in July to meet with acting Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Mar. 16, 2000: Russian-Turkish-Italian gas consortium Blue Stream receives loan guarantees of \$600 million from a consortium comprising Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Itochu under the guarantees of MITI and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation.

Mar. 19, 2000: Fifteen Russian borderguards, serving in the Pacific Border District, arrive in Japan at the invitation of the Yeltsin-Obuchi Center.

Mar. 21, 2000: A five member delegation of the Legislative Duma of Khabarovsk Territory, led by Deputy Speaker Zoya Sofrina, arrives in Japan for a week-long visit at the invitation of the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

Mar. 21, 2000: Russian and Japanese law enforcement officers meet in Tokyo for a two-day conference on prevention of arms, drug, and marine products smuggling.

Mar. 26, 2000: Vladimir Putin elected as the second President of the Russian Federation.

Mar. 27, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi calls Putin to congratulate him on his victory.