

Japan-Russia Relations: A Return to the Deep-Freeze?

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Like Russia, Japan now finds itself with a new leader at the helm. However, in spite of the new blood at the top, political relations appear to be as stagnant as they were at the beginning of the year. It appears more and more unlikely that a peace treaty will be signed by the end of the year. The leaders of the two countries are not expected to discuss in-depth bilateral relations at the upcoming G-8 summit in Okinawa. Policymakers in Japan are instead setting their sights on the expected late summer visit (late August or early September) of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tokyo. Until then, little progress can be expected in political relations. Contacts at the regional level will continue to be pushed by Tokyo, however. Now that one of the Sakhalin energy projects has come back on-line, energy and trade relations could see a resurgence. Nonetheless, the diplomatic platter of both nations will be full this summer, and it is unlikely that there will be the time and energy for either side to come up with creative diplomacy.

New leadership, but Little Progress

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori was quickly thrust into the spotlight with the sudden incapacitation and passing away of Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi this spring. Obuchi had previously planned a trip to Russia and Mori followed through with this idea. In fact, Mori's trip to St. Petersburg went off better than Obuchi's visit might have been expected to. Whereas Obuchi and Putin were at least superficially acquainted, Mori was able to pass off what was essentially a meaningless trip as a "get-acquainted" visit. During the two-day visit, Putin and Mori discussed topically such issues as Japanese financial credits for Russia, Japan's potential participation along with the United States in the development of a new anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system, and Putin's promised visit to Japan at the end of the summer (late August/early September). The Japanese side studiously avoided any detailed discussion of a peace treaty.

Before Mori's visit, it had come to be known by the Japanese and Russian public that Mori had direct ties to Russia through his father, a former mayor of a town on the Japanese west coast who had been imprisoned in Siberia after the Second World War. The elder Mori had developed close ties between his town and the town near Lake Baikal where he had been a prisoner. One of the elder Mori's dying wishes was to have a portion of his remains buried there. The younger

Mori has visited the area several times and maintains a warm relationship with local politicians there. The press in both countries grabbed onto this story and gave it much play.

Unfortunately, this fact and the fact that Mori and Putin agreed to call one another by their respective first names did little to patch up what is once again developing into a frosty relationship. A recent article in *Izvestia* pointed to a rift within the Japanese political community over Russia policy. According to the article, a number of Japanese diplomats and politicians are ready to “open the sky” on the Russians and freeze relations if no progress is made on the territorial issue by the end of the year.

Mori’s Tenuous Position in Japan

Already both new leaders have found the going tough at the top. Mori’s domestic approval ratings are abysmal, thanks in large part to his continued gaffes, including his comment about Japan’s stature as a “Divine Nation,” which suggested some nostalgia for Japan’s imperialistic past. The only thing that perhaps saved Mori and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from an outright defeat in the Diet elections on June 25 was the inability of any of the opposition parties to come up with an election issue worth turning the voters’ heads. (Editors’ note: For an assessment of that election, see *PacNet* 26 <http://www.csis.org/pacfor/pac0026.html>) If this lack of imagination and originality among the opposition is the only thing keeping Mori and the LDP in power, then the next few months will be rough sailing for the prime minister and his cabinet. With the Okinawa G-8 summit, the Korean Peninsula’s sudden peace movement, and the potential for trouble in the Taiwan Straits, Mori and his crew will have little time for creative diplomacy with Russia. Creative diplomacy is what the Japanese side desperately needs at this stage in order to avoid a further cooling of relations with Russia.

The Kremlin Power Struggle: Is Putin in Charge?

Much of the optimism in Tokyo earlier this year surrounding the accession to power of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin was predicated on the fact that Putin had extremely high approval ratings among the Russian public. Indeed, many Japanese policymakers felt that Putin was (to echo Bill Clinton) a man with whom Tokyo could do business. These views seemed to be vindicated after Putin’s overwhelming victory in the presidential election in late March. It has been pointed out that Putin had more broad support in Russia than either Gorbachev or Yelstin had. Putin was able to push through legislation that had been stalled for years in the Duma (the START II Treaty) and other signs were evident that he had somehow brought the formerly non-compliant legislature to heel (including the communists).

But subtle signs slowly began to appear that all was not as smooth as would appear on the surface. First, Putin faced opposition within his own cabinet to the appointment of a new Prosecutor General. Putin then put forward his proposal to divide the country into seven administrative districts, which were to be governed by Putin appointees, who would be given the power to remove recalcitrant governors. This move is an attempt to bring corrupt and tyrannical governors to heel. This could be seen as a positive sign to policymakers in Tokyo who have seen

Japan's position over the territorial issue consistently attacked by the strong governors of Russia's Far Eastern regions. But there are indications that this plan could backfire, further damaging both Putin's popularity and his power base. The so-called Gusinsky affair served to highlight divisions not only within the government, but within the presidential administration itself. Reportedly three groups are vying for control over Putin, who is increasingly seen by some in Moscow as a political neophyte. One group is the so-called "family" of oligarchs and political insiders who controlled Yeltsin in his last years, and who were instrumental in having plucked Putin out of obscurity. Another group is the "Petersburg Chekists," some of Putin's old KGB/FSB cronies. A third force is the so-called "liberal" (in Russia it is a relative term) reformers that Putin knew while he worked for the "reformist" mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak.

All of this suggests that Putin is still cutting his teeth and has nowhere near the authority that many had imagined he possessed just one month ago. Putin will undoubtedly firm up his command of the political and administrative issues, but this will take some time. In the meantime, when he travels to Tokyo late in the summer, he will probably be in no position to make a deal over the disputed Kurile Islands.

Meanwhile, in the foreign policy making realm, it looks as if former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov is making a political comeback. Once the largest opponent of Yeltsin and the Kremlin, Primakov and his political movement (Fatherland-All Russia) suffered a severe defeat in the parliamentary elections in December. It appeared that he was headed for a quiet pre-retirement term in the Duma. However, he recently accompanied Putin on his tour of Spain and Germany, and was asked by Putin to be Russia's special envoy to mediate a dispute with Moldavia. Primakov's political resuscitation could mean a new profile for him in the formulation of Putin's Asia policy. Keep in mind Primakov favors a balanced policy in East Asia, keeping equidistance between Beijing and Tokyo. It will be worth watching how Primakov's fortunes fare.

Northeast Asian strategic situation still in transition

The promising situation on the Korean Peninsula gives Russia a great opportunity to reengage itself politically in the region. President Putin will visit Pyongyang on his way to Okinawa, after a stop in Beijing. North Korea, always in search of partners, will hope to extract some sort of economic concessions from Russia (probably cheap oil) and at the same time restart the long-dormant political relationship that flourished during the Cold War. What might make this attractive to Russia is the chance to become politically active and to gain a role in the peace process on the Peninsula. Japanese leaders would probably prefer to see an active Russian role in the region to counter-balance China's growing role. Japan and Russia also share a desire to see the Peninsula four-party process (North and South Korea, U.S., China) develop into a six-party gathering with themselves included.

The potential U.S. deployment of a theatre missile defense (TMD) system in Northeast Asia could place a big strain on Japanese-Russian relations, particularly if constructed with Japanese

assistance. An article in April in the *Sankei Shimbun*, based on sources in the Russian military, warned that a unilateral decision by the U.S. to deploy such a system could lead to a Sino-Russian alliance and the development of a similar system by both countries. Japanese leaders must gauge how a deployment would affect not only relations with Beijing, but also with Moscow. And the atmosphere of détente on the Korean Peninsula does nothing to make the decision any easier for the Japanese. North Korea's former intransigence was a convenient reason to go ahead with the development. But now even some South Koreans are saying that such a system is no longer necessary.

It would be interesting to speculate whether a Putin-Primakov combination could push through a mega-deal with Japan over the islands (which would include large amounts of Japanese economic assistance to Russia), especially if Russia's relations with China deteriorate. But for the time being Putin's foreign policy priorities will rest first with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) members, then with the U.S. and Western Europe. In Asia most signs point to a strategy with less emphasis on China than the Yeltsin administration practiced. But Putin will be careful not to damage relations with Beijing. After all, China is not only Russia's "strategic partner," it is also a country which, by virtue of its appetite for advanced weapons systems, has become an important economic partner of Russia. For the foreseeable future, Japan will continue to occupy a position of lesser importance in Russia's Asia policy.

Chronology of Japan-Russia Relations April-June 2000

Apr. 2, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi collapses and soon falls into a coma; within a few days LDP leaders announce that Yoshiro Mori has been appointed Prime Minister.

Apr. 4, 2000: Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin meets with the special envoy of Prime Minister Obuchi, Muneo Suzuki. They discuss the upcoming visit of the Japanese Prime Minister at the end of April. After hearing of Obuchi's deteriorating condition, Suzuki hustles back to Tokyo.

Apr. 5, 2000: Russian gas giant Gazprom is offered a \$600 million loan guarantee by Japanese export credit agency JBIC-MITI to build a pipeline to Turkey.

Apr. 13, 2000: An international consortium, created by Russian, American, and Japanese companies for the development of oil and gas fields, announces that it will resume exploratory drilling off Sakhalin Island with a view to starting commercial production by the end of next year.

Apr. 19, 2000: A delegation of the Japanese parliament members' Association for Friendship with Russia visits Moscow and discusses cooperation in the fields of investments, energy, transport, nuclear power engineering, and space research.

Apr. 21, 2000: Russia's coast guard fires on a Japanese fishing boat within Japan's northern waters and brings the boat back into Russian territorial seas.

Apr. 21, 2000: Japan's former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in Moscow to meet with retired President Boris Yeltsin. Hashimoto, the foreign policy advisor to the Japanese Prime Minister, reportedly also feels out the Russian side on the upcoming informal visit of Prime Minister Mori to St. Petersburg.

Apr. 25, 2000: The Russian coast guard patrol vessel “*Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk*” visits the Japanese port of Yokohama, the first visit of a Russian border guard vessel in the promotion of contacts between the two border services.

Apr. 26, 2000: Russian Atomic Minister Yevgeny Adamov visits Tokyo to take part in the 33rd conference of the Atomic Industrial Forum. Adamov meets officials from the Japanese Foreign Ministry, the Ministry for Foreign Trade and Industry, and heads of the leading trade houses, Itochu, Sumitomo and Marubeni.

Apr. 28-30, 2000: Japanese Prime Minister Mori meets with Russian President Putin in St. Petersburg. Putin agrees to visit Japan in August/September. The two also discuss Japanese credits to Russia and the question of the possible deployment of an ABM system in Northeast Asia.

May 11, 2000: A delegation of the Japan Association for the Promotion of the Economic Development of Sakhalin Region to discuss matters concerning participation in oil and gas projects and the construction of a pipeline from Sakhalin to Hokkaido.

May, 12 2000: The head of the Russian Orthodox Christian Church visits Japan. This is the first-ever visit by a Russian head of church. While in Japan Patriarch Alexei announces that a peace treaty between the two nations should be signed.

May 18, 2000: Experts at a Russian-Japanese Center for High Technologies meeting in Moscow agree on three projects for implementing Russian technologies in Japan. The technologies relate to prevention of tunnel accidents, earthquake prediction, and human protection against harmful radiation.

May 26, 2000: The Japanese Daitoku Maru-7 vessel, which was fired upon and detained while poaching in the exclusive Russian economic zone near South Kuriles on April 21, is taken from the island of Shikotan to Sakhalin where a local court will decide its destiny. Such incidents have become so regular that they hardly garner attention.

Jun. 7, 2000: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Khristenko visits Tokyo to take part in a mourning ceremony for Obuchi. He meets with Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono to discuss the two upcoming visits to Japan (Okinawa and Tokyo) of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Jun. 20, 2000: Two Japanese fishing trawlers -- Daitoku Maru-11 and Seiju Maru-21-- which were under arrest in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, are released under a guarantee of paying fines of 21 million rubles (about \$660, 000) and 14 million rubles (about \$500,000), respectively.

Jun. 22, 2000: Ryozo Kato, Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of political problems, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov meet in preparation of the forthcoming visits of President Vladimir Putin to Japan.

Jun. 22, 2000: Russia asks for Japanese “realism and patience” regarding disputed territories, signaling further backsliding from the Yeltsin/Hashimoto pledge to settle issue and sign a peace treaty by 2000.