



Japan-Russia Relations: **Moving Ahead on Military Ties, Diplomacy on Back Burner**

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Japan and Russia posted marked progress in the development of military ties in recent months, but the thorny question of concluding a peace treaty to officially end World War II hostilities remained on the back burner. Unprecedented naval cooperation developed this quarter, including a port visit to Japan by a Russian cruiser and an observation visit to the Russian naval facilities at Vladivostok by Japanese Defense Minister Hosei Norota. Meanwhile, the clock ticks toward the two sides' self-imposed deadline of 2000 to complete the peace treaty.

Military-to-Military Contacts

The 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War comes to mind when looking at a ground-breaking trip to Vladivostok by Japanese Defense Minister Hosei Norota in August. Norota's visit was the first-ever observation trip by a Japanese minister to the once-closed military port. In that long-ago conflict Japan came to prominence as a military power after a resounding victory over the Czar's navy enflamed the nation's aspirations to be a "first-rate" power.

Exactly a month after Norota's foray to Vladivostok, a Russian missile cruiser, the 6,700-ton Admiral Panteleyev, entered the military port of Yokosuka, Japan's fleet headquarters. It was the first visit by a Russian naval vessel into a Japanese military port.

Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sadaaki Numata elaborated on the strides in bilateral naval ties. "In the context of expanding our ties with Russia, especially on defense and security, it's natural for the focus to be on naval ties," Numata said, citing the Sea of Japan which separates the two countries. "Increasingly, the emphasis is on the shared interests between Japan and Russia in strategic terms," he added.

Peace Treaty Prospects Remain Dim

But the key stumbling block to signing a peace treaty – the issue of four Russian-held islands north of Hokkaido - still remains. Numata remarked, "It's still there. We keep trying, but it's going to take (Russian President Boris) Yeltsin to make the decision (on handing the islands

back).” To this end, the Japanese government has been pressing Russia to pin down a date for Yeltsin’s visit to Japan.

The territorial issue hangs in the air as the clock ticks toward the two sides’ self-imposed deadline of 2000 to complete a peace treaty. The subject was broached during a meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Auckland.

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Numata quoted Obuchi as telling Prime Minister Putin, “We will act to maintain the momentum of our evolving relationship so that President Yeltsin’s visit will prove productive towards reaching a peace treaty.” “We’re now in September,” Obuchi told Putin, “It’s time to pin down the date of Mr. Yeltsin’s visit.”

The Japanese leader stressed that it was very important that the Japanese and Russian leaders maintain frequent and close dialogue “so that we can enhance the network of multi-faceted and (multi-) layered dialogue and encourage exponential development of our relationship.”

Putin told the Japanese it was his intention to implement the agreements with Japan reached by President Yeltsin and Obuchi’s predecessor Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and Obuchi himself. Putin said Russia was faithfully implementing the agreements between Hashimoto and Yeltsin, and now that Obuchi was involved the context of those agreements has been expanded.

During talks between Japanese Foreign Minister Komura and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in New York on September 20, Ivanov explained that domestic circumstances in Russia precluded him from saying anything about the timing of the visit. He did not elaborate.

Numata noted that in June at the G-7 meeting in Cologne, Yeltsin told Obuchi it was his (Yeltsin’s) idea to come to an agreement on the demarcation of boundaries, which would decide the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories (Kuriles).

Economic Support Continues

Amid Russia’s ongoing economic woes, Japan is striving to stand out as one of the key countries that has decided to resume untied loans to its cash-strapped neighbor.

“Japan is just about the only country which has said it will continue to disburse its untied loans to Russia,” Numata said. This translates into \$1.1 billion of a total \$1.5 billion promised. “I think that is appreciated (by the Russians),” he added.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Frisenko’s visit to Japan between August 30-September 1 focused on the Japan ExIm Bank untied loan, energy cooperation in Russia’s Far East, support for Russia’s denuclearization efforts, Russia’s participation in APEC, and Russia’s aspirations to join the World Trade Organization. During Frisenko’s visit, the IMF and the Russian borrower signed an agreement on the \$1.1 billion outstanding portion of the untied loan.

Policy Implications for the U.S.

Developing ties between the navies of Japan and Russia is a factor which would have been unthinkable 10 years ago, and which could be seen as surprising given the lack of real progress on the major sticking point to a peace treaty, the dispute over the Northern Territories (Kuriles).

Where once this emotive territorial issue would have, among Japanese officials, overridden even practical concerns such as bilateral search-and-rescue contingency arrangements, more pragmatic heads appear to be prevailing in Tokyo. Moscow, meanwhile, is eager to move ahead in areas where progress can be made (i.e., economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and now even joint naval exercises).

The trend toward closer ties between the Japanese and Russian navies is a symptom of a changing Japanese policy mind-set, moving from a post-World War II model to a newer one less trammled by the past.

A newer generation of post-Cold War Japanese policy makers are examining the possibility of a multilateral approach to security – in a probably inevitable weaning of Japan from its dependence on the United States for its defense.

It would be a mistake to see a shift in the axis towards Moscow, but Washington should be aware that Japan will increasingly become more independent in its formulation of policy and will less reliably take its cue from the United States.

Chronology of Japan-Russia Relations July - September 1999

Aug 16, 1999: Japanese Defense Minister Hosei Norota visits Moscow for meetings with his Russian counterpart Sergeyev. Visits naval bases in Vladivostok for first-ever observation of the port's military facilities by a Japanese government official.

Aug 30 - Sept 1, 1999: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Fristenko visits Japan to take part in meetings of Japan-Russia intergovernmental committee on trade and economic affairs. This visit takes place just after new Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is installed. During the meetings Japanese side expressed intention to go forward with disbursement of pending portion of \$1.5 billion untied loan (corresponding to \$1.1 billion).

Sept 2, 1999: Japan and Russia formally exchange statements agreeing to visits to Northern Territories (Kuriles) by former residents and spouses. The first group of 44 Japanese visits Shibotsu island of the Habomai chain on September 11 and 12.

Sept 6, 1999: Japan and Russia hold new round of talks in Moscow at vice-ministerial level on peace treaty.

Sept 12, 1999: Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi meets Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin in Auckland during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting. Obuchi urged his Russian counterpart to help set a date for President Boris Yeltsin's trip to Japan.

Sept 16-20, 1999: Russian missile cruiser Admiral Panteleyev visits Japan in first-ever call to a Japanese military port by Russian vessel. The 6,700-ton ship enters Japanese fleet headquarters at Yokosuka on visit aimed at friendly exchanges and joint search-and-rescue exercises.

Sept 20, 1999: Japanese Foreign Minister Komura meets Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov in New York at the UN General Assembly.

Sept 23, 1999: Russian patrol boat detains Japanese fishing vessel, charging it with poaching squid in waters off Sakhalin Island. The crew has since been released. Such Russian seizures of Japanese fishing vessels for alleged poaching are frequent occurrences.