



Japan-Russia Relations: Weathering War, Elections, and Yeltsin's Resignation

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This fall marked the arrival in Moscow of Japan's new ambassador to Russia, former Deputy Foreign Minister Minoru Tamba. The fact that Tamba, one of the chief architects of former Premier Ryutaro Hashimoto's "Eurasian Diplomacy," was appointed ambassador to Moscow is a clear sign that Tokyo is still intent on achieving some sort of peace agreement by the end of the year 2000, the goal established by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Hashimoto at the November 1997 Krasnoyarsk summit. Though few believe that this goal is realistic, Tokyo appears intent on keeping the pressure on. The arrival of Hashimoto on an unofficial visit to Moscow in November further underscored Tokyo's desire to push relations ahead. Meanwhile, with a war on in Chechnya and the Duma elections in December, Russia's top leaders had more pressing matters on their mind than Japan. The sudden resignation of Boris Yeltsin over the New Year's holiday may put to rest all hope in Japan that a treaty can be signed during the upcoming year. One of the first announcements made by new President Vladimir Putin is that he will not allow a fragmentation of Russia under his rule. This does not bode well for the transfer of any territory to Japan.

Tokyo's New Man in Moscow

Tamba's arrival in Moscow was given fairly extensive coverage in the Russian press. Several of the larger dailies published interviews with him. Much was made of the fact that Tamba was born on Sakhalin Island, speaks good Russian, and has dedicated a large portion of his career at the Foreign Ministry covering Russia. Tamba's appointment is clearly a measure by Tokyo to push relations forward at all levels, and the Russians greeted this in a positive manner.

Upon his arrival, however, Tamba was forced to deal with a tense hostage situation in Kyrgyzstan, where four Japanese geologists were kidnapped in August by Tajik and Uzbek bandits in a remote valley along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. As Japan has no embassy in Kyrgyzstan, the staff at the embassy in Moscow was forced to handle this delicate issue. A good number of Japanese diplomats in Moscow were sent to monitor the situation and to help the Kyrgyz government with negotiations. The Russian government also cooperated with both the Japanese and the Kyrgyz governments during the negotiating process. Upon resolution of the crisis in late October, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi extended a personal note of thanks to Russian President Yeltsin and Premier Vladimir Putin. In the message addressed to President Boris Yeltsin, Obuchi reiterated his "readiness to step up interaction between Russia and Japan in their fight against international terrorism."

By the time this issue was successfully resolved Russia was knee-deep in the Chechnya morass. The Japanese government's reaction to the war was muted, compared to the other members of the G-7 group. In early November, amidst a rising clamor in the West to cut off aid to Russia, the Japanese Foreign Ministry announced that it considered Chechnya to be an internal Russian matter. Later, perhaps with the scrutiny of Western governments and its own press (which has been critical of Russia's actions in Chechnya) on its mind, Japan announced that it would extend \$1 million in humanitarian aid to Chechen refugees in the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been careful not to allow the war in Chechnya to upset the relationship with Moscow. Since the flurry of diplomatic activity in 1997-98, relations between the two nations have been stagnant, and Tokyo wants to reactivate them.

In fact, as Michel Camdessus, director of the IMF, began hinting that his organization would consider cutting off aid to Russia because of the campaign in Chechnya, the Japanese government announced in late November that the Japan Export-Import Bank would release \$375 million in credit to the Russian government. This credit is linked to a loan package of \$1.5 billion announced by the Japanese government in early 1998. Alexander Livshits, the Russian president's envoy to the G-8 Group, praised the Japanese government saying, "Japan is the only country which is keeping its credit line to Russia open and running, and we highly assess that." Interestingly the announcement made little impact in Moscow, where all attention was focused on the war and the Duma elections. Only one paper, *Izvestia*, had a lengthy article reporting the credit extension, and no mention was made on the nightly newscasts. Russia is in no position to spend any effort on furthering relations with Japan, especially when it might mean surrendering territory, which would be anathema in the midst of a "secessionist" war in the Caucasus. In spite of the Japanese government's cautious stance and its attempts to show support for the Russian government, it soon became apparent that Moscow had no plans to reward Tokyo.

Ironically, the visit of former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to Moscow in mid-November garnered more attention in the Moscow press than the credit extension package. Ostensibly, Hashimoto was in Moscow to attend an annual Kendo competition that bears his name. However, the visit was widely seen as an attempt by Tokyo to probe the Russian leadership on the status of the territorial issue, and to firm up the dates for a pending Yeltsin visit to Japan. Following the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs line, Hashimoto stressed that the Chechen issue is mainly Russia's internal matter and expressed his understanding of the difficulties that this problem has created for the president of Russia. The Russian Duma rewarded Hashimoto's goodwill visit by drafting a statement declaring that territorial concessions to Japan are impermissible and, "reminds the president of his constitutional duty to take steps to protect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation." The resolution also said, "Any treaty implying the loss or restriction of the sovereignty of the Russian Federation over the South Kurile islands has no prospects of being ratified by the State Duma." Six days later, President Yeltsin announced that he would not visit Japan in 1999, as he had promised earlier in the year. The Japanese government, used to Yeltsin's whims (this is his third cancellation of a trip to Japan), took solace in the announcement made two weeks later by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov that Yeltsin would visit Japan at the end of March 2000. However, with Yeltsin's resignation and the upcoming election, any visit by a Russian president is unlikely to happen this year.

Tokyo's high profile campaign and good faith efforts to restart the positive momentum that characterized Japanese-Russian relations in 1997-98 fell on deaf ears in Moscow, where a

war and a vicious election campaign occupied the attention of the entire Russian nation. Yeltsin's resignation means that both halves of the team that produced the positive atmospherics during 1997-98 are gone. Tokyo is unlikely to find a sympathetic partner in acting President Vladimir Putin, who has vowed to crush any attempt to break up Russia.

Russia's Busy Autumn

More even than the Duma election, Russia's war in Chechnya has dominated the political agenda in Russia. Unlike the first Chechen campaign, this one has been widely supported around the country. Many Russians feel a direct connection to this war (because of the terrorist attacks which shook Russia in early September 1999), unlike the situation in 1994-96.

The Duma campaign was intimately linked to the war in Chechnya. As Russian forces pushed closer to Grozny the ratings of Prime Minister Putin and the Unity Block (Edinstvo), which he supports, rocketed skyward. Edinstvo's remarkable showing (more than 20 percent of the vote) in the December 19 Duma elections is seen as a popular referendum in support of the war. As the election campaign and the war in Chechnya heated up, so too did anti-American rhetoric. Since the war in Kosovo last spring Russians feel as if their country has been slighted and ignored time and again by the West. Many around the country are looking for a strong-willed man to restore national pride. Putin is their man.

Some Japanese have privately expressed their desire to see a strong government in Moscow, one with whom they can deal. Informed observers in Japan reason that stability promises economic recovery. Furthermore, they believe a strong government will be easier to deal with over territorial issues. At this point neither analysis can be proven or refuted. However, a nationalistic backlash in Russia threatens to undermine any progress that has been made in Japanese-Russian relations over the past decade. Japan is still seen by the average Russian as an American lackey. When Russian leaders think of East Asia today, they see it less and less in terms of trade and economic potential, than in terms of an arena where they can play the China card to combat what they see as "hegemonist" tendencies by the United States.

Anyone making the assumption that political order means economic stability must also remember that Russia is deeply tied into the global economy. They must remember the Asian contagion that swept Russia in the summer of 1998. Russia needs continued aid and investment. An overly nationalist government in Moscow is likely to lose the financial support of the West, especially if political frictions between Russia and the West continue as they are today. Most U.S. presidential candidates are now calling for the cessation of financial aid to Moscow if it continues to prosecute the war in Chechnya. All indications at the end of this quarter point to continued Chechen resistance. This hardly bodes well for the Russian economy. Not only does the war threaten financial aid, but also the Russian government can ill afford to finance a long and costly war in the Caucasus.

The make-up of the new Duma, along with the accession of Putin as president, means that Tokyo is unlikely to find new friends in high places in Moscow. Though many Western newspapers paint Putin and Edinstvo as "centrists," they are by no means amenable to any territorial agreement with Japan whilst prosecuting the war in Chechnya.

The Big Picture

On the diplomatic front, the Japanese government has remained quiet about Russia's much publicized overtures toward China, but one cannot help but think they are following this issue closely. Japan was seen to be Russia's link to the prosperous economies of East Asia in the early 1990s. Today, when Russians think of East Asia in the 21st century, they think of China. To simply dismiss the idea of a fundamental deepening of relations between China and Russia would be foolish. If the right conditions exist, there is no reason why Moscow and Beijing cannot become close allies. Two of the thorns in the later-Cold War era relationship between China and the Soviet Union (territory and ideology) have been removed (at least for now). Potential problems still exist (China's role in Central Asia, and the demographic issues in the Russian Far East), but strategic issues are driving Moscow and Beijing closer together. Tokyo recognizes this, and is no doubt concerned. Japan's diplomatic agenda has begun showing subtle signs of independence from the United States, and will continue to do so. However, Tokyo is unlikely to improve relations with Moscow at the expense of its relations with Washington.

If relations between the U.S. and Russia continue to deteriorate, Japan and the territorial issue could once again become hostage to a new cold war in the 21st century. Tokyo is hoping that the anti-American rhetoric in Russia will die down after the Duma elections at the earliest, or after the presidential election in March at the latest. Another matter that could poison relations between Tokyo and Moscow is the Theater Missile Defense issue. Japan appears willing to help the United States develop and deploy such a system in the Asia-Pacific region. While this is not seen as a direct threat to Russian national security as such, any joint development will help the United States to attain its goal of a national missile defense system. This strikes at the heart of Russia's one remaining viable means of maintaining its status as a power -- its inter-continental nuclear capability. Stay tuned to see how this issue affects relations between Moscow and Tokyo.

Japan's new man in Moscow, Minoru Tamba, maintains an optimistic outlook on the future of Japanese-Russian relations. However, he no doubt realizes that relations have taken a step backward since 1997-98, and even a man as talented as himself will be hard pressed to further the Krasnoyarsk agenda this year.

Chronology of Japan-Russian Relations October - December 1999

Oct 12: Minoru Tamba arrives in Moscow as the new Japanese ambassador.

Oct 25: Japanese hostages in Kyrgyzstan released.

Oct 27: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin comes out for Peace Treaty with Japan. No Victory-Over-Japan Day to be celebrated announces the Russian Duma.

Oct 30: Popular Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov announces that he opposes any territorial concessions to Japan.

Nov 2: Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announces that Chechnya is an internal matter for Russia.

Nov 15-17: Ex-Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto visits Moscow.

Nov 17: Russian Duma says no to Japanese territorial concessions.

Nov 23: Yeltsin announces that he will not visit Japan in 1999 as promised.

Nov 24: Japan releases \$375 million aid tranche.

Nov 24: Russo-Japanese Fishing Wars; Captain of Japanese fishing vessel charged with poaching in Russian Far East.

Nov 27: Kremlin announces that Yeltsin will visit Japan in March/April of 2000.

Dec 6-8: Meeting of Deputy Foreign Ministers.

Dec 7: Kremlin announces that Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov will visit Tokyo in late January.

Dec 10: Japanese MOFA announces that it will provide \$1 million in aid to Chechen refugees.

Dec 16-17: Yohei Kono and Igor Ivanov meet in Berlin at summit of G-8 foreign ministers.

Dec 31: Yeltsin resigns.