

Japanese and Russian leaders meet to discuss economic and security concerns

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Russia on Saturday, on the sidelines of the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum. Economic and security concerns dominated the talks, underlined by the unpredictable outcome of the United States' approaches toward North Korea and continuing fraught geopolitical tensions.

Putin told a joint press conference the talks were “very constructive and business-like.” Both leaders spoke on the need to resolve the territorial dispute over the four southernmost Kuril Islands (which Japan refers to as the Northern Territories) and conclude a peace treaty to formally end World War II between the two countries. The Soviet Union occupied the islands during the war.

Abe and Putin hinted there could be a resolution to the issue at some point in the future. They agreed that a Japanese business delegation would go to the islands to work on joint economic projects, and former Japanese residents could return to the islands for the first time to visit relatives' graves.

Abe stated: “The Japanese and the Russians will be able to reap the fruits of the joint work on the islands. If we cooperate, we can achieve great results that bring mutual benefit.” The Japanese prime minister indicated in January the importance he is putting on Russia, saying it had “the most potential of any bilateral relationship.”

Despite the public pleasantries, tensions remain between Tokyo and Moscow. Japan is planning to deploy one of two Aegis Ashore missile batteries to cover the northern part of the country and almost certainly the disputed islands.

In response to this deployment, Moscow has held military exercises on the islands this year, involving thousands of troops. It has also converted a civilian airport on Iturup, one of the four disputed territories, into a base capable of hosting military aircraft for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As with all territorial disputes in Asia, the rival claims over the Kuril Islands are used to stoke nationalism and project domestic tensions outward, and in the case of Japan, to paint itself as a victim and provide another rationale for remilitarisation.

Furthermore, while Abe said he and Putin discussed the issues on the Korean Peninsula in detail, the two leaders did not speak at great length on North Korea, suggesting key differences exist.

Japan has called for continued pressure on North Korea, which has included threats of military action, but Russia has taken a different approach. Putin told the press conference that “every side in the process should exercise restraint, preventing any further confrontation.” This was a reference not only to North Korea, but to the United States and Japan.

Russia has largely sided with China in the dispute over the Korean Peninsula. Beijing has regularly called for the resumption of the six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear program, which would include Russia, allowing both to have their security concerns heard. Beijing has sharply criticised the deployment of a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea, ostensibly directed at the North, and the ballistic missile systems in Japan.

China and Russia, which both share a border with North Korea, correctly fear that these missile systems and accompanying radar systems are being used to spy on their territories and could be deployed against them if a larger war breaks out. Washington earlier this year said it was preparing for great power conflicts with both China and Russia.

The United States is concerned that Japan's relationship with Moscow will cut across Washington's rabid anti-Russia campaign. Last year, trade between Japan and Russia grew by approximately 25 percent, amounting to \$US18.3 billion. Japan, the world's largest importer of

liquefied natural gas (LNG), receives 10 percent of that total from Russia.

Tokyo still publicly states that the US is “the foundation of peace, prosperity and freedom not only in Japan but also across the Asia-Pacific region,” according to its 2018 Diplomatic Bluebook. Yet, Tokyo was caught off guard by Trump’s announcement of a summit with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and fears being left out of any negotiations.

In addition, the US tariffs on aluminum and steel, as well as Trump’s threatened tariffs on automobiles, brought a sharp rebuke from Abe on Wednesday. He told parliament: “From a security perspective, it’s very difficult to understand why this would be imposed on Japan, a military ally.”

While a sharp change in US-Japan relations is unlikely in the near future, these emerging cracks highlight the inter-imperialist rivalries between the two nations. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which has close connections to the US Defense Department, pointed out following the Abe-Putin summit that Tokyo fears Washington’s anti-Russia campaign is pushing Moscow toward a front with China, at the expense of Japan’s security interests.

While the CSIS called for the US and Japan “to stay joined at the hip” in their response to matters in East Asia, the Trump administration’s actions on trade and lack of communication on North Korea are contributing to a wedge between the two allies.

Ultimately, Japan hopes that it can win enough favour with Russia to prevent a growing Moscow-Beijing relationship, which would negatively affect Tokyo’s imperialist designs on the Asian mainland. The growing isolationist sentiment of the US is bringing tensions, once hidden behind the phony talk about “democratic values” or “human rights,” to the surface. Regardless of any potential deal with North Korea in coming weeks, these tensions will only sharpen.



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