Japanese prime minister seeks improved relations with Russia

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17 September 2018

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last week attended the 4th Eastern Economic Forum, hosted by Russia in Vladivostok. Leaders and top officials from China, South Korea, and Mongolia also attended to discuss economic development and investment in the Russian Far East and the Asia-Pacific.

On September 10, Abe met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss plans for economic cooperation, particularly on the disputed Kuril Islands (known as the Northern Territories in Japan). They agreed to a road map in five previously-agreed fields—aquaculture, greenhouse farming, tourism, wind power and waste reduction. Few details were announced aside from plans to cultivate strawberries in greenhouses and sea urchins.

Other forms of cooperation include plans for business delegations from both countries to visit the disputed islands in October. The head of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, will visit Russia next month following the visit of General Valery Gerasimov, chief of staff of Russia's armed forces, to Japan last December. Tokyo also plans to relax visa restrictions for Russians to increase tourism.

Both countries have promoted economic cooperation on these islands as a means of resolving the decades-long territorial dispute, which has also prevented them signing a peace treaty to formally end World War II. Both Abe and Putin have expressed an interest in a treaty with Putin saying on September 10 he was "ready to explore solutions that both sides could accept." The dispute involves four islands off the coast of Hokkaido, which the former Soviet Union seized in August 1945 as the war was ending.

Last Wednesday, Putin in a seemingly surprise move during the forum's plenary session went one step further, saying, "Let's conclude a peace agreement by year's end without any preconditions." Tokyo responded cautiously by repeating its position that the territorial dispute should be resolved first.

However, last Friday, Abe suggested there was more going on behind the scenes: "I cannot talk about it because we are in the middle of negotiations... What I can say is that I believe a summit meeting in November or December will be an important one."

It is unlikely that Putin's comment was an off-the-cuff remark given the increased pressure Washington has placed on all the countries in the region. Putin may hope to seize upon Japan's growing frustration with the US and the Trump administration over trade to break through some of the isolation imposed on Russia by US and Western European sanctions.

Tokyo publicly plays to the US president's vanity, yet trade talks over the summer reportedly became contentious with Trump even referring to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during one fraught meeting.

Japan has already been impacted by the US trade war on China, in addition to US tariffs on Japanese steel and aluminum. Washington is also considering additional tariffs on Japanese vehicles while hinting at the possibility of more measures to come.

The *Wall Street Journal* 's James Freeman wrote on September 6 that during a phone call Trump stated his relationship with Tokyo was good but quoted the US president as saying, "Of course that will end as soon as I tell them how much they have to pay."

Within this context, Tokyo is trying to reposition itself within the Asia-Pacific region to offset Washington's protectionist measures as well as find new trade agreements to replace the Trans-Pacific Partnership, formerly backed by the US but abandoned when Trump came to office.

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During his speech last Wednesday, Abe portrayed Japan as a "dot connector," linking up different projects and enterprises throughout Eurasia in various fields. The Japanese premier stated: "Through Japan-Russia cooperation, here, Vladivostok, and locations all around Far East Russia will become gateways where human resources, goods, and capital come together."

Abe continued: "The Arctic Ocean to the Bering Sea, the North Pacific, and the Sea of Japan will together form a major, arterial sea road of peace and prosperity."

Russia in the past has been reluctant to realize such a passageway or return the disputed Kuril Islands given the close military partnership between Japan and the US and the strategic nature of the sea route. Putin expressed concern over any territorial transfers in June 2017 saying that "tomorrow some (US) bases or elements of missile defence will appear there. For us this is absolutely unacceptable."

In December 2016, Putin visited Japan and much was made about the potential for closer relations as well as a settlement on the territorial issue. However, with Trump coming to office and the uncertainty generated as a result, Moscow was under less pressure to make a deal.

In addition to talks with Putin, Abe met with South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, Mongolian President Khaltmaa Battulga, and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Significantly, both Abe and Xi emphasized that bilateral relations were "on the right track." The two discussed how Japan and China could work together on investment projects related to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

Abe is planning to visit China for a summit with Xi on October 23, where they will mark the 40th anniversary of the normalization of relations. They also intend to move forward on negotiations for a "fifth basic document," outlining relations between Tokyo and Beijing.

Japan's goal in reaching out to Moscow and Beijing has nothing to do with peace and prosperity as Abe has claimed. Washington's moves towards trade and military conflict with regional adversaries as well as allies is generating instability while pushing countries like China and Russia closer together economically and militarily.

Fearing such an alliance, as well as hoping to address its own flagging economy, Japan is inserting itself into the mix to ensure its own national interests are met, regardless of the impact on the US-Japan alliance.

The growing tensions in relations between Washington and Tokyo are ultimately not the result of the current US administration or mere aberrations that will subside after Trump leaves office. Rather they are the product of the drive by US imperialism to offset its historic decline and maintain global hegemony as the expense of any rival, including allies such as Japan.

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