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JAPAN - RUSSIA RELATIONS AFTER PUTIN

Masamori Sase

Will Dmitry Medvedev's presidency bring about any change to Japan-Russia relations? To answer this question, it is first of all necessary to understand what Russia's presidential transition from Putin to Medvedev means.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Firstly, the change of supreme-power holders upon the expiration of a presidential term is unprecedented, no such handover ever taking place in Czarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Throughout the 20th century, change in Russia's political leadership had always occurred with the execution, death, deportation or resignation of a power holder; in short, there had been hardly the idea of a legal term of power in Russia. This first-ever presidential change upon the completion of the set term should be taken as a sign of the maturing of Russian "civilization." Secondly, however, that the incumbent Vladimir Putin's designation of a successor virtually determined the outcome of the presidential election reveals the unique nature of today's Russian "civilization." Moreover, the incumbent did not retire; he assumed the prime ministership, a constitutionally inferior post to the presidency. This initiated a period of diarchy, something Russia has never experienced before. Thirdly, then, an argument would naturally follow as to whether this novel diarchy is sustainable and viable. Yet this is after all unknowable not only for Russians but also for the two leaders in question (although each of them undoubtedly has his own speculations and convictions). As the saying goes, "You won't know 'til you've done it."

Given the unknowable future of the Russian diarchy, how will Japan-Russia relations develop from here on? For the moment, Japan's Russia policy basically remains unchanged since the time of Putin's presidency, as revealed during the two summit meetings between Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and Medvedev (the first of which took place shortly before Medvedev's inauguration and the second during the recent G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit). The Japanese government has called for "ever closer political dialogue to advance Japan-Russia relations," while stressing that "it is necessary to resolve the only major outstanding political issue, the territorial issue, to remove the ill feelings of the Japanese people." There is an influential opinion within Japan questioning the priorities of the Japanese government's Russia policy over the past five and a half years, in which "political dialogue" has taken precedence over the "territorial issue." This author is of a similar opinion, but considers that it is highly unlikely that the Japanese government will change these priorities.


When people in Japan judge that the government is losing eagerness for resolving the territorial issue, however, the government will come under harsh criticism. Even if there is a change of government in the near future, this element will remain a constant of Japanese politics. The question is how the Russian side responds to that.

In the second half of Putin's term, a high-handed attitude of rejection reminiscent of the Cold War-era Soviet Union was conspicuous in Russia's remarks directed toward Japan on the territorial issue. President Putin himself adopted a stance that appeared to be taking into consideration only the 1956 Joint Declaration (which stipulates that the Soviet Union would hand over to Japan *two* of the four islands in dispute, Habomai and Shikotan, after the conclusion of a peace treaty) and ignoring the 1993 Tokyo Declaration (which provides for the conclusion of a peace treaty through the solution of the territorial issue concerning possession of all *four* islands). Behind the high-handedness lay Russia's burgeoning finances and economic strength due to the boom in oil and natural gas exports and the revival of a great-power mentality. Will President Medvedev continue Putin's line in addressing the territorial issue?

Judging from the two Fukuda-Medvedev summit meetings mentioned above and some quotations from Medvedev, the high-handed and coercive remarks of his predecessor's era have all but disappeared. Yet it is still too early to judge whether this is a change in rhetoric or in substance. Prime Minister Putin's visit to Japan scheduled for this fall will be important in this regard, for the new prime minister has shown an inclination to exercise diplomatic authority as well. We must not forget, however, that the following developments were already observed under the Putin administration.

Firstly, Russia is striving to utilize its rich resources to enhance its high technology and improve the efficiency of its economic management as a post-resources-exporting power. In light of this strategic goal, Japan is in fact a best partner. Secondly, Russia's East-oriented policy will continue (despite Medvedev's non-Asian, European airs) given that the country's deteriorating relations with the West -- exacerbated in the last three years of Putin's reign by NATO's eastward expansion, US plans to deploy missile defense systems in

former Soviet-bloc countries and Russia's understanding of democracy and human rights -- are unlikely to improve anytime soon. Thirdly, however, relations with China, the potential superpower in the East, are full of difficult problems even though they appear to be going smoothly on the surface. As the head of the Council on National Security Problem, which has maintained dialogues between Japanese and Russian experts for decades, this author has repeatedly heard worries of the Russians living near the Sino-Russian border about the eerie "osmotic pressure" of population on the Chinese side, and also about their conflicting feelings on exporting weapons to China (they want to sell weapons, but do not want to include state-of-the-art weaponry). Japan cannot be the object of such worries. In short, setting aside the territorial issue, Japan is a desirable partner for Russia in achieving both geopolitical and policy goals.

Therefore, even though the future of the Russian diarchy is unknowable, Japan has nothing to worry about. As long as the former and incumbent presidents of Russia acknowledge the necessity of the peace treaty in order to advance Japan-Russia relations, all Japan should do is bide its time while persistently reminding Russia of the need to resolve the territorial issue, the prerequisite for such a treaty, and of their past negotiations and achievements. The greatest danger for Japan is impatience arising from its national character. 

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