

Japan–Russia Rapprochement: Why Abe-Putin Summits Failed to Deliver

by Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group



Introduction

Since he returned to power for the second time in 2012, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been the main driving force behind Japan's attempts at rapprochement with Russia. Abe sought to achieve

what no post war Japanese Prime Minister had done – to restore the full integrity of Japanese territory by securing the return of the Northern Territories¹ to Japan.

Abe's Visit to Moscow in April 2013

Abe's visit to Moscow from April 28-30, 2013 was the starting point for the present phase of Japan-Russia relations. On March 1, 2012 four days before he was re-elected President of Russia, Vladimir Putin stated that he wanted to improve relations with Japan by strengthening economic ties and resolving the territorial issue on the basis of a "draw" or *hikiwake* - a term borrowed from the Judo vocabulary. Clearly, Putin was hinting at a solution to the territorial issue that was not a victory for either side but a compromise.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin greeting each other in Moscow during Abe's April 2013 visit. Source: The web page of the President of Russia.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17997>

Putin had made territorial concessions before. In 2010, he permitted the splitting of the disputed area in the Barents Sea between Russia

CONTENTS

- ❖ **Japan–Russia Rapprochement: Why Abe-Putin Summits Failed to Deliver**
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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh

Director General

and Norway, thus ending a dispute that had lingered on for four decades. A compromise on the Kurile Islands would, however, be more difficult because they were assigned to the Soviet Union after the Allied victory in World War II, alongside Kaliningrad.

Putin's words found a positive echo in Abe's thinking. Perhaps, both leaders were responding to geopolitical shifts engendered by China's rise. China was already posing a military threat to the Senkaku Islands in the South China Sea. From Japan's perspective, strengthening relations with surrounding countries, including Russia, had become a strategic objective. The prospect of exploring Russia's market for business opportunities and energy resources acted as a magnet for Japanese business. The over-supply in the world natural gas market also encouraged Russia to look at Japan as a promising source of demand, especially after Japan turned away from nuclear energy following the Fukushima disaster. Hydrocarbons currently constitute 70% of Russia's exports to Japan.

A number of documents were signed during the April 2013 Abe-Putin summit, including an agreement to establish a 2+2 mechanism of consultations between the Foreign and Defense Ministers of the two sides. A new platform was created by JBIC, the Russian External Economic Bank and the Russian Direct Investment Fund, to promote Japanese investment in Russia.

Finally, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that on the issue of the renewal of peace treaty negotiations it was agreed to "give our Foreign Ministries instructions to accelerate talks on designing a mutually acceptable resolution ..."²

Abe's New Approach to Japan-Russia Relations

During his May 2016 visit to Sochi, Abe announced a "new approach" towards negotiations with Russia. Instead of merely pressing its territorial claims, Japan would now focus on getting the best deal with Russia. This package of economic cooperation and a willingness to compromise over territory found a positive resonance with Putin. After meeting Putin in Sochi on May 6, 2016 Abe reaffirmed that the two leaders were seeking "a new approach, free of any past ideas."



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with visiting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Sochi, Russia, on May 6, 2016. (Kremlin Photo)

What prompted Abe's drive for better relations with Moscow?

The Northern Territories issue was of course the major driver behind Abe's diplomacy. But in pursuing his initiative, Abe severely impacted his ties with the Obama Administration. Putting it another way, a lame duck Obama Administration gave

Abe a window of opportunity to pursue his historic initiative with Moscow. And there was always the hope that the elections would throw up a Russia-friendly leader in the White House - which is what eventually happened. The main reason behind Abe's willingness to take the political risk of irking Washington was Russia's rapidly developing political, economic and military partnership with China – including the significant growth in Chinese state sector investment in the Russian Far East overlooking the Kurile Islands.

The geopolitical window that Abe sought to take advantage of was also created by other developments – the G-7 was too preoccupied by other issues to object to Abe's efforts at a rapprochement with Russia. The UK was in the midst of an identity crisis over Brexit, France was facing a crisis from terrorism and the decline in domestic support for President Hollande, Germany was facing a domestic backlash to the refugee crisis and Italy its own financial difficulties.



G-7 Leaders meeting in the Hague in March 2014, having suspended Russia from the G-8. Photo: Kevin Lamarque/ Reuters

Abe had also visited Sochi in 2014, just before the Ukraine Crisis, for the Winter Olympics despite the de facto boycott of the games by western leaders. Japan joined its allies and partners in expelling Russia from the G-8, but refrained from strong condemnation of Russia and cultivated the impression that it was doing so owing to its alliance commitments with the US.

Abe returned to Sochi in May 2016 with an Eight Point Economic Cooperation Plan that was in accord with Russian development priorities – demographic issues, health, housing, environment and SMEs. Other areas listed included energy cooperation, raising productivity, economic diversification, high technology and humanitarian exchanges. Abe also set up a new position - Minister of Economic Cooperation with Russia.³

Putin's visit to Japan in December 2016

Russian President Vladimir Putin paid a much anticipated two-day official visit to Japan in mid-December, 2016. Prior to this visit, it increasingly became clear that it would be impossible to reach an agreement on the Peace Treaty and the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories. Even though a large number of economic deals were concluded during the visit, it failed to deliver on the issues that mattered most to Abe and his nationalist domestic constituency.



*President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe surrounded by aides during the former's December, 2016 visit to Japan.
Source: Presidential Press and Information Office of Russia.*

The optics of the visit were also unfavorable from the Japanese point of view. Prior to the visit, Putin rejected a Japanese legislator's gift of a male Akita dog to join the female dog he had received four years ago. Putin also kept Abe waiting and arrived in Japan two hours late. Later, Putin turned down Abe's invitation to enjoy local food and relax in the *onsen* after the talks.

This was Putin's 16th Summit meeting with Abe. Despite the many negatives, the visit had a number of positive outcomes.

First, the "two leaders expressed their sincere determination to solve the issue over the peace treaty.⁴" Putin also said that his intention was to base the negotiations on the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, which stated that the Habomai group of islets and the Shikotan island, the smaller two of the four disputed islands, would be handed over to Japan once the Peace Treaty was concluded.

Second, they agreed to start talks over joint economic activities on the four disputed Kurile Islands under a program that would allow former residents of the islands freedom to visit them without restrictions.

Third, Putin and Abe confirmed Abe's 'Eight Point Economic Cooperation Plan' and signed 80 agreements on economic projects worth \$2.5 bn. The agreements included the Arctic LNG-2 project between Russia's Novatek and Japan's Marubeni, Mitsubishi and Mitsui corporations. Other energy deals also involved Russia's Rosneft and Gazprom, and Tokyo Electric Power. The Russia Direct Investment Fund – a sovereign wealth fund - and JBIC agreed to establish a \$1 billion investment fund that would serve as an enabling platform to support joint investment projects in Russia.

Putin also made a strong call for bilateral security talks, suspended in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, including the resumption of the 2+2 Defense and Foreign Ministers' dialogue between the two countries.

Both leaders claimed common ground on security issues in Northeast Asia – including concerns on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. They also agreed on the necessity of formulating a joint response.

Finally, "both leaders sought to exploit the opportunity to extract domestic political benefits, as well as to send specific signals to foreign counterparts, regardless of the actual outcome of the visit⁵."

Abe fails to make tangible progress on the Northern Territories Issue

Despite the hype created by the Putin visit in December 2016, it was clear that there was no real progress on the return of the four Islands in the Kurile chain – Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and Habomai.

Abe had expected that the Eight Point Economic Cooperation Plan would deepen Japan-Russia cooperation and there would be progress at a minimum on the return of two islands- Habomai and Shikotan - but a month prior to his visit to Japan, Putin hardened his position. He made it clear that even if the two islands were returned to Japan, sovereignty would in perpetuity rest with Russia. Joint economic activity could go forward only under these conditions. Putin emphasized the necessity of building mutual trust to achieve even this modest objective.

So why did Putin harden his position in November 2016, a month before his visit to Japan? US President Obama had opposed Abe's invitation to Putin to visit Japan. The November, 2016 election of Donald Trump brought up new possibilities of a US-Russia rapprochement. However, it soon became clear that Trump's preferred Russia policy was going to be one of his administration's greatest weaknesses. Both Putin and Abe must have been reluctant to assume any major change in Sino-US relations. This factor, and the tightening of Sino-Russian relations in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, may have had a negative impact on Russia-Japan ties and in turn may have been responsible for Putin's walk back on the islands issue immediately prior to his December 2016 visit to Japan.



President Trump and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov get cosy in the Oval Office in May this year. American news media were barred from covering the meeting; photographs were taken by Tass (the Russian News Agency). Trump's efforts to reverse the decline in US-Russia ties have been defeated by rising Congressional opposition to Russia in the wake of widespread anger over alleged Russian interference in the US Presidential elections. Source: AFP/Russian Foreign Ministry.

What the Post War History of Japan-Russia ties tells us

The territorial issue between Russia and Japan has always been held hostage to considerations of strategic power-play, first by the Soviet Union and then Russia. As early as 1956, the Soviet Union hinted at the possibility of considering the return of the Habomai and Shikotan islands if Japan abandoned its alliance with the United States. In 1960, the Soviet Union warned Japan against signing the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security with the United States. After the treaty was concluded, the Soviet Union declared that the Habomai and Shikotan islands would not be handed back to Japan until Japan abrogated the

Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. In 1964, the Soviet Union offered to return the two islands unconditionally if the United States ended its military presence in Okinawa and the main island of Japan.

After 1975, the Soviet Union warned Japan that its Peace Treaty with China (signed in 1978) would harm bilateral relations. In 1976, Gromyko visited Japan and offered to return two islands in return for signing a bilateral Treaty of Goodwill and Cooperation.

The question, therefore, arises *why after 16 summits with Putin did Abe fail in his major foreign policy goal of securing the return of the Northern Territories to Japan?*

The answer is most likely to be found in previous Japanese attempts to use economic incentives to induce Moscow to return the islands captured from Japan after the war.

By 1990 the Soviet economy had gone into a tailspin. With Gorbachev's visit to Japan scheduled for April 1991, the feeling in Tokyo was that Gorbachev could be persuaded to relent and hand over the Kurile Islands in return for massive economic aid. The Gaimusho position had been to insist on the 'islands first' solution – the return of the disputed islands to precede any economic cooperation with Japan.

In March 1991⁶, the Secretary General of the ruling LDP in Japan, Ichiro Ozawa, established a back-channel and visited Moscow and proposed concessions by the Soviet Union on the islands issue, offering credits in return. The tradeoff was to be explicit from the beginning and Japanese aid was to be granted only if the Soviet Union agreed to give up all four islands



Ichiro Ozawa, the then Secretary General of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, photographed in 1991.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ozawa-Ichiro>

In many respects Germany was a model for Ozawa. In a deal agreed between Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Gorbachev, Germany had provided US \$ 50 billion worth of direct and indirect assistance to the Soviet Union and its successor states. In effect Germany had paid for the Soviet surrender of East Germany but *the tradeoff was never made explicit*. This helped project a narrative according to which the Soviet surrender of East Germany was the result of Gorbachev's *New Thinking* and not a *quid pro quo* for German aid.



President Mikhail Gorbachev and Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu seen together during the former's visit to Japan in April 1991
Source: Getty Images

Gorbachev rejected Ozawa's proposal. Gorbachev told Ozawa that he was

“not inclined to and could not conduct a discussion according to such a plan: you give us something and we will give you what you want. That is not a conversation I want to have with you...”⁷

Why did Gorbachev refuse?

First, it is likely that it was the sheer audacity of the proposal – the notion the Soviet Union could be bribed to part with its territory. Second, key information on the deal under discussion was leaked to the media. On Sunday, March 24, 1991 the *Yumiri Shimbun* had revealed the amount of assistance offered to the Soviet Union for the return of the disputed islands: US \$ 26 billion including US 4 billion in emergency assistance. Third, Yeltsin visited Kunashiri and insisted that Russia could not part with the Kurile islands. By projecting himself as the protector of Russia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Yeltsin reduced Gorbachev's flexibility in the negotiations. Fourth, the Russian general staff was reportedly opposed to the territorial deal. The two large islands – Itorofu and Kunashiri – are of enormous strategic importance for Russia. They protect the Russian dominated Sea of Okhotsk, where many of the Russian submarines are kept ready for action. Also, the islands are at a location where hot and cold currents meet and the water does not freeze in winters, allowing the Soviet Far East Fleet year-round access to the Pacific Ocean.

Ozawa's proposal had the underlying logic of persuading the Soviet Union to part with territory in exchange for economic inducements – an idea that must have been deeply repugnant to the nationalist sentiments of the Soviet leadership. And there had to be strenuous denials, that there was indeed, such a deal under discussion, once the details were leaked in the media. Indeed, if Gorbachev refused Ozawa's offer at a time when the Soviet Union was threatening to implode, a relatively better off and stable Russia under Putin is very unlikely to fall for the bait.



Yeltsin confronting Gorbachev in 1991. Source: <http://klejonka.info/2017bimage-boris-yeltsin-1991.awp>

What then is Russia's imperative to resolve the Kurile Islands issue?

Russia has no pressing need to resolve the Kurile Islands issue. Putin's Russia is better off economically than the Soviet Union in 1991 – and therefore much less likely to fall for economic inducements. Putin may be a strong leader with nationalist credentials, but that does not make him a better candidate for making territorial concessions. In Putin's own words, "I will not offend anyone if I say I love Russia more [than Japan]." In addition, the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia favors Russia, which has developed closer ties with China, in contrast to tensions in Sino-Japanese relations.

Why then has Putin readily engaged so intensively with Abe? The answer perhaps is that while Russia seeks strategic ties with China to counter the United States, Putin also wants to pull Japan out of the US orbit, while Japan under Abe wants to stay on the right side of Russia in the case of any eventuality that involves hostilities with China. Despite the growing closeness of Sino-Russian ties, Moscow views the growing military power of China with concern and seeks strategic ties with other major countries in East Asia. Closer ties with Japan could, therefore, give Russia strategic space and leverage over China.

Selling the Benefits of a Potential Japan-Russia Agreement

How would a potential Japan-Russia agreement on the Northern Territories be perceived internationally?

President Trump is personally inclined to develop a better working relationship with Russia, but the Republican controlled US Congress and the Democratic Party are not. A series of missteps by Trump himself and his senior aides have unleashed a series of investigations and ramped up sanctions that have significantly reduced the policymaking space for his administration as far as Russia is concerned.

The Trump administration may see some merit in allowing Japan to improve its relationship with Russia and help balance a growing Russia-China nexus. The United States may not veto a possible Russia-Japan territorial deal, but it may insist that the Japanese maintain economic sanctions on Russia. But western sanctions on Russia are steadily becoming harsher, and could become harsher still in the future as a result of developments in Europe or the Middle East. As a result, the economic package offered by Japan to Russia could shrink to the point that Putin may lose all interest in making a deal.

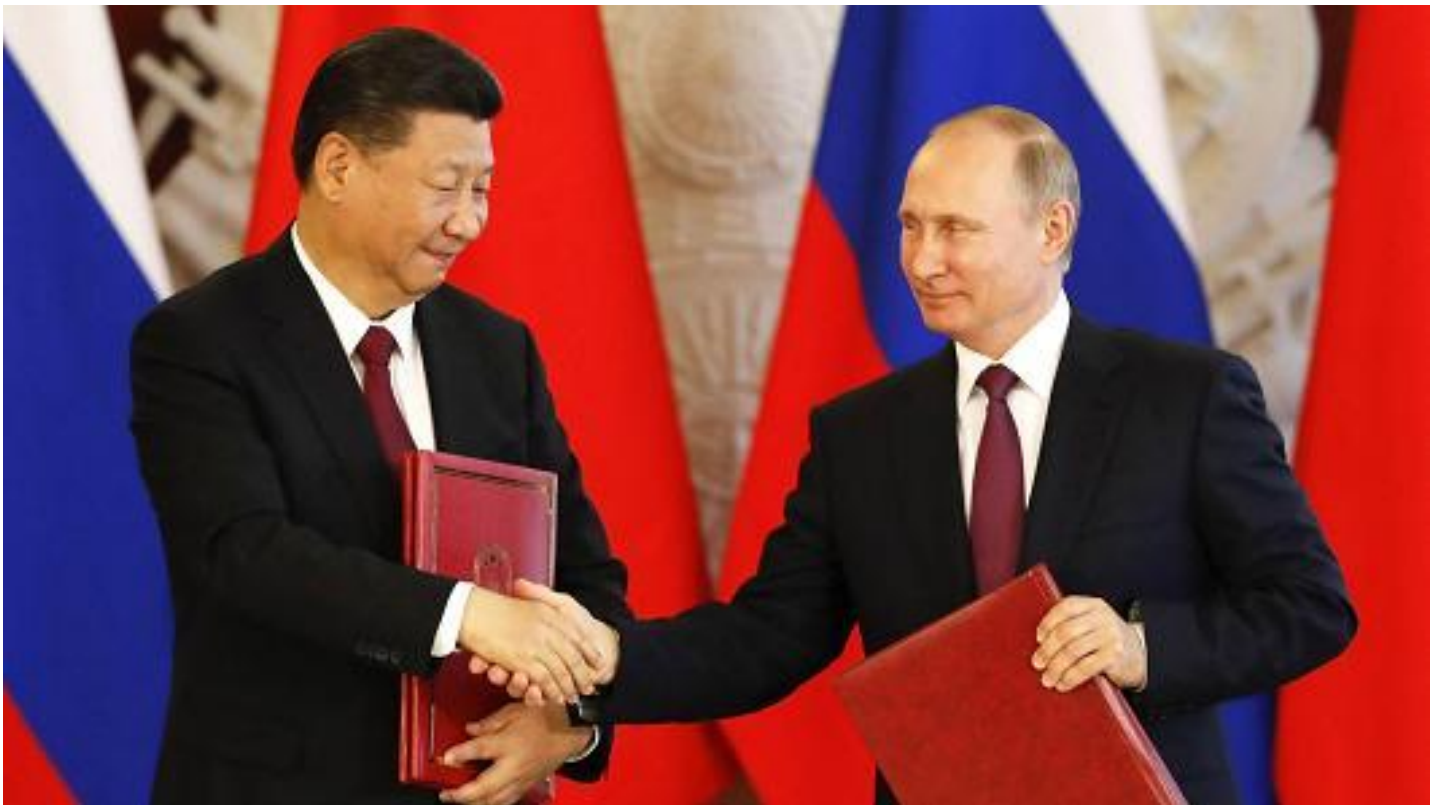
Putin's job of reassuring China might be easier than Abe's task of managing alliance pressure from the US. He could explain that resolving issues along Russia's long borders is part of Russia's long-term strategy. The resolution of the Northern Territories

issue would improve security in Northeast Asia; Russia is making no strategic concessions to Japan while securing Japan's participation in the Russian project to develop Siberia and the Far East. Despite its political difficulties with Japan, China has in fact been doing the same thing with Japan for decades.

A dialogue between Russia and Japan on Korean peninsula issues could also lead to better understanding and mutual trust. The threat from North Korea emanates not only from its nuclear weapons and missiles but also from its reclusive and unpredictable leader. Managing the situation and preventing an outbreak of hostilities is in the interest of both countries. This dialogue could be extended to cover other security issues like terrorism. Russia is concerned about Al Qaeda, Daesh and local and regional groups in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Afghanistan is another area that could be an appropriate topic of policy discussion. The normalization of relations between Russia and Japan can, overall, contribute to a more stable equilibrium in Northeast Asia, where at present China and its ally North Korea call all the shots and keep the US-Japan alliance at bay.

China as a factor in Japan's Efforts to Normalize Ties with Russia

A number of major factors may have contributed to the logic of recent Japanese efforts to normalize relations with Russia and resolve the Northern Territories issue. First, is the geo-economic surmise that Russia would not like to be dependent on only one large hydrocarbon consumer in Asia. Second, it is more than likely that the Russians view the growing military power and assertiveness of China with some concern and seek strategic ties with other powers in the Far East to balance China, even though these concerns are not openly articulated.



Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping during a signing ceremony following the talks at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia July 4, 2017. Source: Sergei Karpukhin | Reuters

After the Ukraine crisis, Sino-Russian relations grew closer - and from Japan's perspective this must have been an undesirable development. Russia's economic interest to diversify energy markets away from Europe and to supply energy resources and arms to China, as well as the imperative of strategic coordination with China against the United States, have contributed to a Sino-Russian entente. But China's rapid economic development and rising influence has made it difficult for Russia to sustain a relationship with China on the basis of equality. The competition and struggle for leadership between Russia and China is particularly evident in the SCO and BRICS⁸.

In Sino-Russian relations, military cooperation has played a leading role. After the end of the cold war, Russia hesitated to supply defense technology to China due to fears that China would reverse engineer the products and sell them cheaply to

other countries. Russia entered into joint production arrangements with India, while selling defense equipment to China. Russia supplied a downgraded version of the Sukhoi SU-30 fighter to China while supplying India with an upgraded one. China later obtained from Ukraine the same Soviet era defense technology that Russia refused to sell to China. From this, one can deduce the lack of trust Russia has in its military cooperation with China.



A China-Russia joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea

Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-naval-fleet-russia-hold-joint-military-exercises-baltic-sea-after-trump-visit-poland-germany/28565674.html>

Japan was especially alarmed at the Sino-Russian Joint Naval Exercises in May-June 2014 to the northwest of the Senkaku Islands, the exercises in August, 2015 near the borders of North Korea and the exercises in the South China Sea in September, 2015. (The latest edition of these exercises was held in northern European waters in July, 2017.)

After the break up of the Soviet Union, for quite some time Russia was not active in North Korea, perhaps because there were more important and sensitive security issues on its plate. However, from 2008 onwards Russia has focused on its economic relations with North Korea through projects involving port development and railway rehabilitation⁹. Russia has continued to develop an independent approach to North Korea and in this way Moscow has distanced itself from Chinese policy on the issue, even though both countries have been criticized in the west for not upholding sanctions on the North.

The election of Donald Trump as US President could have been a game changer if he had succeeded in rescuing US-Russia relations from their downward slide. Neither Japan nor Russia would have assumed any major change in US-Russia relations in light of these developments in US politics. A complicating factor has been the fallout of US-Russia tensions on the Northern Territories issue - the deployment of anti-ship missiles in the Kurile Islands was the direct result of a decision taken by Putin in March, 2016 in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. The 2+2 Talks between Russia and Japan were viewed in Japan as a useful device to signal possible Russia-Japan military ties to China. The Ukraine crisis effectively constrained this potential.

Two factors appear to be at work in shaping Japanese perceptions of Sino-Russian ties. First, that Russia is wary of ties with China and second, the hope that Japan can improve its geopolitical position by leveraging Russia's desire not to become China's junior partner in Asia. These expectations have yet to play out in a manner that delivers tangible gains to Japan.

Conclusion

Despite his persistent focus on resolving the issues of the Peace Treaty and the Northern Territories through a policy of compromise and economic inducements, Prime Minister Abe has failed to make concrete progress in his parleys with Putin. History has not been on Abe's side. The record of similar approaches in the past was indeed one of dismal failure.

While engaging with each other, Abe and Putin are both driven by the imperative of nationalism; and on the Russian side, there are serious national security considerations as well. These factors have thwarted any possibility of a breakthrough.

Both leaders were also propelled forward towards their dialogue by geopolitical factors: Putin sought to improve relations with Japan after the isolation of Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis; Abe took the calculated risk of offending the lame duck Obama administration and an inward looking Europe beset with internal problems to pursue his agenda of a historical peace deal and territorial settlement with Russia.

In the end, neither leader had the courage or incentive to take the final leap of faith, that might have had the potential of changing the geopolitical balance in Northeast Asia. And now, perhaps, Abe is too politically weakened by scandals at home, to be able to pick up the pieces and make one last attempt at securing a peace deal and a resolution of the Northern Territories issue with Russia.

What about the future?

The unexpected can always happen. If the Trump administration eventually succeeds in overcoming Congressional opposition – which presently appears impossible – and manages to improve relations with Russia, it could indeed open a whole new range of possibilities and opportunities. The US could exploit Russian vulnerabilities and reservations towards a rising and assertive China and drive a wedge into the budding Russia-China entente. Russia may well seek to buttress its strategic position in Asia by securing a resolution of the territorial and peace treaty issues with Japan. Indeed, Russia *could* succeed in doing unto China what China did to the Soviet Union in 1971. It would be a win-win outcome for Russia and Japan, because Japan too would significantly strengthen its geopolitical position in Northeast Asia as a result. For the present, that scenario remains a distant dream till such time as the US pulls the curtain on treating Russia as a permanent antagonist and China as a presumptive “constructive stakeholder”, both being anachronistic assumptions 25 years after the end of the cold war.

References:

- ¹ Northern Territories is the name given by Japan to four islands in Kurile chain – Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and Habomai. The islands were annexed by the Soviet Union after the Second World War and have been claimed by Japan ever since.
- ² Press and answers to journalists' questions following Russian-Japanese talks
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/18000>
- ³ <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/shinzo-abe-going-all-in-on-improving-japan-russia-ties/>
- ⁴ Joint Press Statement issued after the Abe-Putin Talks.
- ⁵ <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/how-putin-outplayed-abe-in-japan/> "How Putin Outplayed Abe in Japan" by Liubomir K. Topaloff . The Diplomat December 23, 2016.
- ⁶ <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/how-the-kuril-islands-are-testing-shinzo-abes-statesmanship/> "How the Kuril Islands Are Testing Shinzo Abe's Statesmanship" by Sergey Radchenko, The Diplomat, December 22, 2016.
- ⁷ "Gorbachev Ozawa and the Failed Back-Channel Negotiations of 1989-90".- Sergie Radchenko, Lisbeth Tarlow. Journal of Cold War Studies, Volume 15, Number 2, Spring 2013.
- ⁸ "For Russia and China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) — which is holding its annual summit Aug. 28-29 in Tajikistan — serves different purposes. The SCO focus for Russia is outward, as a security alliance that might someday counter NATO, while China views the SCO as a security guarantor in Central Asia. As the summit concludes in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe, Russia is in no position to push its vision of the SCO on China." — Stratfor World View August 2008
- ⁹ In 2008, Russia obtained the right to develop a wharf in Rajin Port and use the port for 49 years. It also undertook to repair a 54-kilometer railroad linking Khasan and Rajin crossing the DPRK-Russia border.



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