



A New Step Forward to “Regions for Japan-Russia Cooperation” — results and challenges from the Japan-Russia summit.

Photo: Courtesy of Cabinet Public Relations Office of the Government of Japan

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Perhaps because hopes for negotiations between Japan and Russia were so high, there was great disappointment at the results. But when we study the talks in detail, there is evidence for a new stage in the Japan-Russia relationship. So, what is the outlook for these negotiations?

It was 15 December 2016. As snow fell on the Yamaguchi Prefecture town of Nagato, a summit was taking place between Prime Minister Abe and President Putin. The event had an unusual start when Putin arrived later than planned, but it was effectively the first official visit to Japan in a year for the Russian president. So, did this “Nagato Summit” succeed, or did it fail?

Most of the media reporting on the summit were critical, concluding that a lack of new progress on the territorial negotiations showed failure. To evaluate the summit fairly



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however, we must understand the nature of the Prime Minister's "approach based on new ideas."

Prime Minister Abe has held fifteen previous summits with President Putin (including during his first administration) and this was his sixteenth. At the summit, Abe has encountered a consistently tough stance towards the territorial issue from Putin. But in Putin's attitude we can glimpse a kind of distrust and anger. Since the administration of Mori Yoshiro, Japan has made proposals during the Japan-Russia negotiations that have then been withdrawn due to circumstances on the Japan side. Meanwhile, successive Prime Ministers have come and gone, and instead of negotiations continuing they have moved backwards.

We need to dispel Putin's mistrust and, even as each year the negotiation conditions under the security guarantee environment become more disadvantageous for Japan, we need to quickly and substantially restart the territorial negotiations. Meanwhile, with an eye on China and from the perspective of the geopolitical situation, we need to build a new relationship between Japan and Russia. Against this background, Abe has come up with a way to break through the stalled negotiations; namely, the "approach based on new ideas" that he proposed at Sochi in May 2016. This new approach is not paying lip service to future hopes; rather, it is a practical way to move the territorial negotiations forward. And it was at the recent Japan-Russia summit that the actual nature of this approach became fully apparent. Can Japan and Russia create a framework for joint economic activities in a form that does not harm either's position? That goes beyond the stage of preparing an environment for a peace treaty to actual negotiations for joining a peace treaty itself. Yet, this new approach does differ in method from traditional diplomatic negotiations to date, so we cannot deny the risks that come with it.

Towards a new approach involving a "region of Japan-Russia cooperation"

So, what were the concrete results achieved at this summit in Nagato? The focus of the summit was on negotiations towards a peace treaty, including on the Northern Territories issue. As a result of the talks, the two leaders announced a written statement of agreement covering joint economic activities on the four northern islands, and an expansion of free travel to the islands by former inhabitants. At a joint press conference, Abe said that "joint economic activities would be an important step towards signing a peace treaty." Putin also stressed the importance of signing a peace treaty, saying that, "this is not an attempt to prioritize economics and postpone a peace treaty. The important thing is the peace treaty."

Negotiations with Russia undertaken by past Japanese administrations have covered the sovereignty of the islands but tended to lack direction. From that perspective, this summit's agreement on joint economic activities and free travel to the islands by former inhabitants is a concrete result attributable to this new approach to concluding a peace treaty. In other words, it

is a first step towards solving the issue. Yet, a significant gap still remains between both sides regarding the all-important issue of sovereignty.

There were some phrases in the statement that bear study, such as: “the span of the joint economic activities is the four islands”; “specification of actual areas such as fishing, farming, tourism, and medicine”; “investigate concluding an international agreement regarding structure”; “will not infringe the positions of either Japan or Russian regarding the peace treaty issue”; and “sincere resolve on the part of both leaders regarding the joining of a peace treaty.”

But what is the essence of this “approach based on new ideas?” Peace treaty negotiations are about establishing the islands’ return; that is, deciding where to draw the national boundaries. Japanese governments’ consistent stance to date has been: firstly, that economic activities on the islands are completely irrelevant until the basic national boundaries have been established; and secondly, that citizens should refrain from visiting the four islands.

In past negotiations, Japan has stressed that the islands are part of its territory and that a national border should be drawn between the islands of Iturup and Urup. Meanwhile, Russia has maintained the position that, due to the Second World War, the islands are Russian territory. The positions of the two sides are in complete opposition and, for all the various twists and turns, the negotiations are stalled.

We can see this new approach as a change in thinking, one that stems from the difficulty of visualizing resolution as long as both sides focus first on the location of the border. To put it another way, it is discussing the issue from a different perspective to the drawing of national boundaries. In essence, this is not the former legal and historical debate, but a reasoning that aims to discuss how the islands’ future might look. It is based on over seventy years of being unable to escape arguments over principles and unable to enter into concrete discussions.

Let’s explain the practical details. The first step in this new approach is for Japan and Russia to jointly recognize their will, going forwards, to make the islands “regions for Japan-Russia cooperation.” This is to start discussions on issues such as: “working out details on how the islands will look after national boundaries have been established”; “How can Japan and Russia enable economic activity based on a win-win relationship?”; “Will Japanese citizens, including former islanders, be able to freely travel to and from the islands?”; and “Will the four islands themselves be able to cooperate and interact?”

Inevitably, the national boundary will be drawn somewhere and a peace treaty signed. That is why there is an effort now to build a picture of the islands’ future after that happens, and this agreement is the first step towards that. Although joint economic activities were discussed during previous leaders’ summits, they were always conceived as a temporary system until the national boundary is established. In other words, the agreement from this summit is the start of a step by step setting up of a framework for Russia-Japan cooperation after the border’s establishment, and the creation of rules to steadily enable that. Or to put it another way, the point is to create a permanent system that will still be valid after the border has been drawn.

That is why, when Abe proposed this idea at the Vladivostok summit, he clearly questioned Abe's real intentions on this point.

The significance of “joint economic activities in the four islands”

If it is true that a permanent system is being considered, then there is considerable significance in the summit addressing joint economic activities covering the four islands. The Japanese government is still calling for the return of the four islands. Nevertheless, we see a situation arising in which, during future negotiations both Japan and Russia need to depart from their principle-based stances on the return of the island and make a compromise. And even assuming a compromise, a framework needs to be constructed through which both sides receive guarantees from the other. The agreement from this summit marks the starting point for this process.

It states that, “We will consider a proper legal base, with the aim of eventually signing an international agreement.” In other words, it is foreseeable that one day the agreement on joint economic activities might, depending on the situation, take the form of a treaty. Or to put it yet another way, an intermediate agreement of a different form is being considered.

Moving forward with practical discussions on the future of the islands is an idealistic approach. There are many issues to address before that future is realized. There is no getting around the sovereignty issue that has put the two sides at loggerheads to date. As part of that, and regarding the “Japanese and Russia stances on the peace treaty issue,” Russia's consistent stance has been that the Russians on the islands are engaged in activities under Russian law, and that it would be inconceivable for future rules governing their activities to be anything other than Russian law.

At the September 2016 summit in Vladivostok, Abe proposed the drawing up of new rules for Japan and Russia that would “specify the nature of the joint economic activities,” to avoid infringement of either side's legal stance. Japan Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Akiba Takeo and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov conducted negotiations from the day before the summit (14 December) right up to its start, and in the end continued making amendments to the agreement during the summit itself. As a result, they managed to get as far as including the specific phrase: “to create a framework that will not infringe either side's position.”

It is typical of the Russian negotiating style to emphasize its principle-based position before talks. But it also seems that Putin considers a certain amount of compromise with Abe necessary to build a new era of Japan Russian relations. It has also been pointed out that Russia is putting forward huge amounts of money and pushing ahead with making the four islands Russian, but there is a limit to this too. Actual standards of life on the islands are considerably inferior to the Russian mainland, and still more so compared to Hokkaido. From Putin's perspective, he has

not yet shifted his principle-based position on the issue of the islands' sovereignty. He may have calculated that by drawing cooperation from Japan and enabling development of the islands he can influence Russian national sentiment to back negotiations. The phrase "not infringe each side's stance," however, is nothing more than a guideline for negotiations between Japan and Russia. The creation of a legal base for joint economic activities, even as sovereignty remains undecided, means the signing of an international agreement on economic activities. From here on, we can expect even more difficult negotiations up to the point when a concrete agreement is reached.

Understanding the feelings of former islanders

The next important issue is the aging of the former islanders. The islanders have a strong desire to return, and Prime Minister Abe made how to fulfill that wish the most important issue at the recent summit. At present, there are many restrictions on former islanders who wish to return to visit graves and for other reasons. During the negotiations, the sides agreed to start talks on relaxing restrictions so that islanders can travel to and from more freely. This is a first step towards solving the humanitarian issue of enabling the former islanders to achieve their wish to freely return to the four islands.

In the run up to the summit on December 12, the former islanders met with Abe at the Prime Minister's Official Residence. As well as entrusting the Prime Minister with a letter addressed to Putin, as former islanders they gave him a written request for concrete measures to enable free visits to the island. The letter to Putin was written in Russian and expressed their longing for their former island homes. It also mentioned that Japanese and Russians would definitely be able to live together on the islands, that they entrust the two leaders with agreeing a peace treaty, and their strong desire for the four northern territories to be islands of friendship between Japan and Russia. The written request from the former islanders to Abe was titled "A request for concrete measures to enable free visits to the islands and for the revitalization of our home villages." The letter included concrete items such as restart of regular ferries to the islands, maintenance of graveyards, and maintenance of roads and landing places.

During his one-on-one discussions with Putin, Abe devoted considerable time to explaining these issues. Meanwhile, Putin carefully read the letter from the former islanders that he was given by Abe. Abe also showed Putin photos that he had received from the former islanders, and which showed the time when Japanese and Russians lived on the island together. Putin listened intently to Abe's words with an expression of surprise on his face.

While a general direction for addressing these issues was worked out at the summit, so that the former islanders can actually freely travel back and forth the foreign ministries of the two sides must create a concrete framework based on the guidelines agreed at the summit. Abe wishes to create this framework as soon as possible, and has asked that Japan's diplomats make

it their priority to push the negotiations forwards. He hopes to produce results at the next summit.

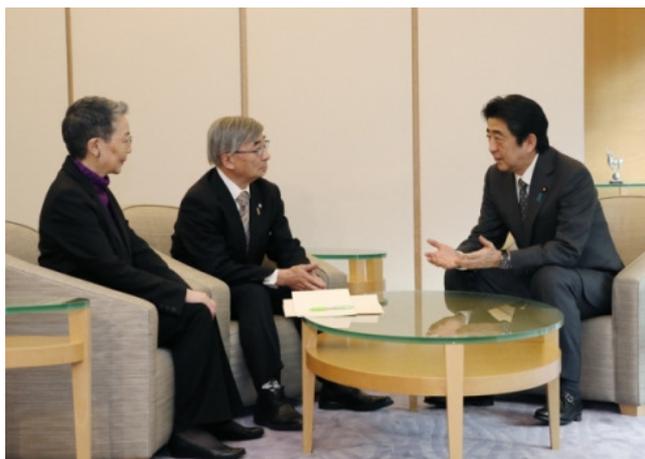
Meanwhile, Putin has acknowledged that the request of the former islanders is a humanitarian issue. Although many things will need to be done about maintenance of infrastructure such as ports and roads, agreement on the framework might be reached relatively quickly. Without a doubt, free travel by the former islanders would not only be the first step to Japan-Russia coexistence on the island, but also a solid step towards signing a peace treaty.

Will the drawing of national boundaries actually happen?

At the end of the day, these negotiations about the imagined future of the islands will end up in discussions over where the border will be drawn, and whether a peace treaty is signed or not. On this point, Japan and Russian expectations still differ. While the Japanese government wants to find points of agreement as soon as possible, from the Russian perspective there is no need to hurry towards a solution of the islands' sovereignty issue since they already have effective control. At the October summit in Valdai, Putin asserted that it would be harmful to set a time limit on the signing of a peace treaty.

Although the recent statement didn't go as far as specifying that the issue would be solved by the current leaders themselves, the summit did produce the phrase "declaration of our sincere determination to solve the peace treaty issue." During the closing stages of the one-to-one discussions, the leaders called in Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Akiba Takeo and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov to confirm the statement. Perhaps this was a sign of the two leaders' determination to reach a solution and, in other words, even a de facto setting of a time limit right at the last moment.

Over the coming year, Abe will hurry to give solid shape to the points of agreement from this summit. This year, Abe has an agreed regular visit to Vladivostok already planned, then in April there is a high chance that Putin will come to Japan. The creation of rules on joint economic activities is itself directly linked to negotiations on a peace treaty. Although Abe's strong will has powered negotiations with Putin so far, the Prime Minister's will and a relationship of trust won't be enough to complete the creation of a complicated system. These negotiations are not just unprecedented for Japan and Russia, but for the whole world. It is hoped that a team for



December 22, 2016, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo held a meeting with former islanders of the Northern Territories at the Prime Minister's Office.

negotiating with Russia (including non-government specialists) will be quickly assembled, that these tough negotiations with Russia are seen through, and that this time a peace treaty is actually signed.

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