



Dialogue: Abe Commences Double Postwar Settlement at Russo-Japanese Summit Talks

Putin Says That National Borders Can Move

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

Key Points of the Joint Press Conference held on December 16, 2016

The two leaders agreed to commence negotiations for a special system for carrying out joint economic activities on the four Russian-held Northern Islands.

The two leaders expressed their shared willingness to conclude a peace treaty and recognized joint economic activities as a step toward its conclusion.

Abe expressed the view that the road to the conclusion of a peace treaty covering the Northern Territories issue remains long and difficult.

Why the Islands Were Not Discussed

Yamauchi: I think many media reported that as usual, no progress was observed on the Northern Territories issue immediately after Russian President Vladimir Putin had talks with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

Sato: To state my conclusion first, I think that the latest Russo-Japanese summit produced significant results for both countries.

Yamauchi: I agree with you completely. The joint statement, which declared the expansion of free travel by former islanders and the start of negotiations for joint economic activities on the four islands, had an extremely important meaning as well.

Sato: It was important that the joint statement said that such joint economic activities “will be advanced under the shared understanding that they will not harm the positions of Russia and Japan regarding the issue of the peace treaty.” Plainly speaking, the stance adopted by the Abe administration at the moment is to change the situation based on the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration of 1956, which said that the defunct Soviet Union would return the two islands of Habomai and Shikotan following the conclusion of a bilateral peace treaty. From a Japanese point of view, those words in the joint statement mean that hooks are set on the two islands. The hooks are finally attached. Japan is now in a position of seeing whether it can pull the strings attached to those hooks.

Yamauchi: No word such as territory, retrocession or transfer appeared in the joint statement whatsoever. This means that the Northern Territories issue was kept out of the loop once again. I must say that such criticism is too superficial. I believe that the important thing is to correctly read the meaning of the exclusion of such words or the intention behind their exclusion. With careful listening, we can grasp the positive intentions toward the resolution of this issue in the statements made by the two leaders at their summit talks.

Sato: That’s right. Abe did not mention the Tokyo Declaration in 1993 at all. The Declaration that Russia and Japan will “conclude a peace treaty by resolving issues related to the possession of the four islands” had been repeated in past negotiations over the Northern Territories until everyone became sick of it. Why did Abe avoid mentioning the Declaration that Japan had always referred to in the past? Such change has meaning in the world of diplomacy. It means that Japan effectively declared its departure from the position of placing the Tokyo Declaration above everything else.

Yamauchi: To state the same thing from another angle, Russia and Japan cannot open the way to solving this problem with the classical approach of head-on battles over the possession of the islands between themselves. By extension, they cannot move Russo-Japanese relations forward with such an approach.

In short, in my view, both Putin and Abe took steps to enter this field on this occasion, understanding the need to incorporate this issue into a greater strategic viewpoint and broader thinking.

Sato: I agree. Russo-Japanese diplomacy moved to a higher stage. My impression is that the diplomacy moved past the stage of simple assertions and entered the level of complex games.

Yamauchi: Things may be different for scholars and critics, but politicians and diplomats must produce actual results of some kind. They must use leverage specifically for that purpose. Joint economic activities are precisely the leverage that Japan used on Russia. I sensed the eagerness of Abe to concretize in earnest what he calls a new approach to the Northern Territories issue; in other words, an approach not bound by ideas from the past.

A Letter from a Former Islander Moved Putin

Sato: The significance of the latest round of Russo-Japanese negotiations is difficult to grasp because the negotiations are a game of love in which both parties confess what is on their minds without saying, “I love you.” For example, Japan announced economic cooperation amounting to 300 billion yen. The scale compares to about 10 billion yen in humanitarian assistance that Japan extended in the past in connection with the Northern Territories. But the private sector is largely responsible for this cooperation. To state it clearly, there is only a slim possibility that the cooperation will become a pie in the sky. Putin must have understood that the cooperation would materialize if and when progress is achieved in the territorial issue.

In the meantime, Putin said that the creation of full relations is necessary for restoring confidence. He did not run away from the territorial issue. I do not think that Japan should have any feelings of mistrust regarding that point.

Yamauchi: Both Putin and Abe have public opinions on their shoulders. There is also a political structure on the Japanese side, which caused Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro of the Liberal Democratic Party to say, “The majority of Japanese people felt disappointed.”

Sato: Nikai was not at fault in that case. It was negligence on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which did not explain the negotiations to the secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party in detail.

Yamauchi: There is also a public opinion in Russia that is as hard as bedrock, which says that it is impossible to allow the retrocession of the islands. Certainly, Russia cannot say, “I love you” at this point.

Sato: I think that the best love letter Abe handed to Putin in the latest round of negotiations was a letter that a former islander wrote to the Russian leader.

Yamauchi: According to a report by Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), the sender wrote of his wish to return home while he is still alive, wake up on the island he came from, visit his family grave whenever he wants to and travel to the island freely, after stating the present situation where the average age of survivors is 81.

Sato: At the news conference, Putin said that he has read an unforgettable letter from a former resident of one of the Southern Kuril Islands. There is no doubt that those words expressed his true feelings. At the same time, Putin must have read the letter more deeply, thinking that the letter reflects what Abe wants to do and that he must be serious this time around because he took the trouble to hand over such a tricky letter.

Yamauchi: The letter was leverage of a kind, because it contained no words such as “Return the islands.”

Sato: Putin must have ignored the letter if it had such an expression. Adding to the words I cited just now, Putin said at the news conference that he thinks it would be better for both Russia and Japan to put an end to the historic ping-pong over those islands. Historic ping-pong is not a word that government officials could think up. He came up with the word himself, and used it as a politician touched by the former islander’s plea after discerning the true intentions of the Japanese government behind the plea.

Real Intentions behind Putin’s Fervent Speeches

Yamauchi: Putin’s words, which Mr. Sato just introduced, are part of his statement that was just under 10 minutes long. Mentioning the history of the Northern Territories at the start, the president delivered quite a powerful speech.

Sato: Putin went back in time to the Japan-Russia Amity Treaty in 1855, instead of adopting the Yalta Agreement in 1945 as the starting point for the Northern Territories issue. In other words, Putin discussed history from the time when the four islands belonged to Japan. I think his perception of history deserves a great deal of attention.

Yamauchi: Putin studied at St. Petersburg State University. This school has a tradition of Oriental studies and Japanology. It is a suitable place for learning the history of Russia’s exchanges with Japan. Putin has an accurate understanding of Japanese people in the early days of Russo-Japanese relations at the end of the Edo period, such as Kondo Juzo, who went on an expedition to Iturup Island and erected a wood pole there that said Etotofu of the Great Empire of Japan, Mamiya Rinzo and Hori Oribenoshō. He understands the feelings of Japanese people who have a fixation with this place.

Sato: Putin said the following. Russia transferred the Kuril Islands to Japan to conclude a peace treaty in 1855. Japan began to feel that the islands were not enough to satisfy it exactly fifty years after their transfer. Japan acquired half of Sakhalin in 1905 as a result of the Russo-Japanese War. The Soviet Union obtained the Southern Kuril Islands forty years later, in addition to regaining half of Sakhalin, after the end of World War II in 1945. As Mr. Yamauchi said, Putin implicitly stated that he understands the special feelings Japanese people have for the Kunashir and Iturup Islands because of this history.

At the same time, however, Putin said that Japan abandoned the Kunashir and Iturup Islands once through the San Francisco Peace Treaty concluded in 1951, adding that Japan had agreed to delete the words “including the territorial issue” from the expression, “continuation of negotiations for a peace treaty including the territorial issue” in the final stage of bilateral negotiations in preparation for the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration that was issued in 1956. In short, Putin made an argument based on the principle that Russia has no obligation, at least legally, to return any islands other than Habomai and Shikotan.

Yamauchi: In his speech, Putin also expressed concerns. He stated that Russia must understand what may happen when its ships go out into the Pacific. He also said that a security treaty exists between Japan and the United States, that Japan has obligations under the treaty, and that he has no idea how Russian ships in the Pacific would affect Japan-U.S. relations.

To sum up, Russian fleets or private ships travel through the Kunashir Channel between the islands of Kunashir and Iturup when they attempt to reach the open sea of the Pacific from the Sea of Japan or the Sea of Okhotsk. The sovereignty of Japan will be established and its administrative power will be laid there if Russia returns those two islands. The U.S. armed forces become obliged to defend the transferred islands that become territories to which Article 5 of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is applied. In an extreme case, U.S. military facilities may be built on those islands. Can Japan eliminate these concerns? This is what Putin meant by those remarks. He gave Japan homework, in a sense.

Sato: I think it will be OK for Japan to answer that question in the following way: “Those islands cannot be excluded from the scope to which the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty is applied because the inability of the U.S. armed forces to get involved in the event is impossible if North Korea launches a missile into this region. But ideas such as positioning U.S. military bases on the islands require advance discussions at the Japan-U.S. Joint Committee. At its own responsibility, the Japanese government will secure an agreement with the United States that says that the United States will not deploy its armed forces there.”

Abe Commenced Post-War and Post-Cold War Settlement

Yamauchi: Mr. Sato, you said a while ago that Putin presented his legal perception, in addition to talking about history in a way that reflected his understanding of how Japanese people feel about the islands. I interpret those remarks as Putin’s message to Japan. In other words, he told us that laws

are different from history and psychology. He implied that psychology moves Russia, too, in addition to a view based on laws.

It was the letter written by a former islander that brought out this important message, and it was Abe who handed that letter to Putin. I think that we should straightforwardly evaluate the art of diplomacy displayed by Abe on the latest occasion.

Sato: I think that Abe probably clearly understands that moving Russo-Japanese relations including the territorial issue forward is double post-war settlement. Settlement is double in the sense that it covers both the Pacific War seventy years ago and the Cold War between the Eastern and Western blocs.

Yamauchi: I see. That is an extremely good expression. Perhaps Abe has personal thoughts about his father Abe Shintaro, a former foreign minister and a prime minister candidate who died before achieving his goals of becoming prime minister and linking the two types of settlement.

Sato: I think so, too. Like the current prime minister, Former Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro made an eight-point proposal covering matters such as economic cooperation to Mikhail Gorbachev, who was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the time. We put the proposal in order today and know that it was designed for double post-war settlement as well. We cannot move away from a paradigm that consists of victorious countries and defeated nations through post-war settlement. People have begun to understand that various structural readjustments are necessary, even in a period when post-Cold War settlement has become possible. A new approach is necessary for these readjustments.

Compared to those days, however, the world has destabilized to a level where it cannot be called post-Cold War. Threats posed by China have risen. Confusions in the Middle East have expanded. Events such as Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and the emergence of Donald Trump have occurred. I think that Abe clearly understands the historical significance of efforts to strengthen Russo-Japanese relations under these conditions while pulling strings attached to hooks placed on the pending territorial issue.

Yamauchi: I think we can call that strategic thinking.

Sato: Come to think of it, Yamaguchi is not only the home constituency for Abe, but also the place where his father's spirit dwells. Abe called Putin to this place and talked with him there for 90 minutes. I feel that there was a kind of turn of Fortune's wheel in the action he took.

What Russo-Japanese Rapprochement Means Today

Yamauchi: There is also a strong view that the improvement in Russo-Japanese relations sought by the Abe administration is a move to counter China.

Sato: The four countries of Japan, the United States, China and Russia are players when it comes to security in Asia and the Pacific. Looking at the relationships between them, Japan and the United States are allies. Japan and China have had a wide range of exchanges historically, although many problems lie between them. Relations between the United States and China grew suddenly tense with the inauguration of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, but their exchanges have ranged widely. China and Russia have built solid ties, even though they have not reached the level of a semi-alliance. The United States and Russia confront each other, but they have taken appropriate security measures. Compared with them, relations between Russia and Japan stand out as extremely poor.

For this reason, moving closer to the other party is probably a win-win strategy for both Russia and Japan. Regarding the move against China that you pointed out as well, Japan may be able to use the Russian card as a variable. But the overall balance among the four countries that exists at the moment prescribes the conditions in this region. It is impossible for Japan to join forces with Russia and suppress China.

Yamauchi: As you pointed out, China and North Korea are attempting one-sided provocation. This fact exists, but Japan is not responding directly to their attempts on the same level. The way of thinking that moves Japan into a new alliance with Russia is nothing less than selecting exactly the same approach as China, which believes that logic and worldviews limited to itself can guarantee safety. Contrary to what Japan intends to achieve, this way of thinking will be a main cause of the destruction of peace and order.

I think that what Russo-Japanese relations mean to Russia is an extremely important point as far as security is concerned. In a place called Eurasia, for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the EU, Ukraine, Crimea, Syria, Central Asia, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and China are all nothing less than destabilizing factors for Russia. But extremely stable factors for Russia exist in the east when the country turns its sights in that direction. Putin attaches importance to this situation, naturally. There was a reliable partner with which Russia could build the practical condition of peace, even though the territorial issue and the issue of peace treaty conclusion lay hidden in relations with this partner. Destroying relations with Japan is not a good idea for Putin.

Sato: That is the case because destabilizing factors surround Russia in the east and west if it destroys the relations.

Yamauchi: That's right. Putin is taking actions based on the strategic thinking of strengthening relations with Japan, instead of destroying them, commanding a bird's-eye view of the world with a focus on Eurasia.

In the meantime, Abe, who said that Russia and Japan need future-oriented ideas free from their past at the news conference held after his summit talks with Putin, is also a politician who presented strategic global diplomacy in spite of the various types of criticism he faced. I believe that his summit talks with Putin at the end of last year proved this point once again. The important point is that Putin found common ideas in Abe's strategic thinking and trusted him. Both the Russian and Japanese leaders have built long-term governments with strategic thinking by chance. It would be a waste not to take advantage of this craft of history.

New Ping-Pong Diplomacy

Sato: I think that national borders can move. To repeat myself, Putin described the history of the Northern Territories in detail in his speech at the news conference. I think that those descriptions were his message that national borders have moved to such an extent up to that point, and that Russia and Japan can move the current borders as well, and that they should therefore do things that can withstand historical verification.

Yamauchi: How long do you think it will take for the situation to change?

Sato: I don't think it will take that long. In my opinion, a course will emerge in a year or two. To put it the other way, a fixed situation may continue for a long time if things stop moving forward at this point. This period immediately after the confirmation of love is important for both Russia and Japan.

Yamauchi: There is also a destabilizing factor called public opinion. Many Japanese people believe that it was Abe who assumed greater risks in the summit talks. But the leader who assumed these risks may be Putin in reality. This is the case because Russia is a country with nationalism and a view of the state that differ entirely from those in Japan.

In any case, Putin definitely stated that Russia and Japan should put an end to their historic ping-pong over these islands. What will start from this point on is not an unproductive rally in which one party just hits the ball back to the other. We must transform exchanges into new ping-pong in which we think about the meaning of the ball that came back and send a pile of messages in response to the meaning.

Sato: At the same time, this ping-pong will be a game with two referees who make decisions based on their consultations. These two referees will be a legal referee who bears no legal obligation beyond the transfer of Habomai and Shikotan Islands and a historic referee equipped with the mentality of tracing things back to 1855.

Yamauchi: In any event, it will not be a zero-sum game. I think the way to new ping-pong will open up if Russia and Japan repeat their negotiations by making mutual concessions based on their strategic thinking.

Sato: I think the key is whether or not Putin and Abe can take actions based on their professional conscience, instead of their individual conscience. Abe may be thinking in his heart that Russia should return the Northern Territories, 22 Kuril islands and Southern Sakhalin as a rightist politician. But I would like to ask him to do his utmost at this point to achieve a solution based on the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration for starters. He may experience pressure from various circles, but I hope he keeps playing the game based on national interest without yielding to them.

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