



Japan-Russia engagements generate hope for a Peace Treaty

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Japan and Russia are making strenuous efforts to sign a peace treaty which has been lingering between the two countries ever since the end of the World War II. They inched closer to achieve the goal during the Winter Olympic inaugural ceremony on February 8, 2014 at Sochi, Russia, where Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting and discussed various issues concerning bilateral relations including the long-pending issue of the peace treaty. In his second term Abe is proactively engaged in strengthening ties with Russia and resolve the territorial issue. He decided to represent Japan in the Olympic ceremony even as Japan's western allies including the US boycotted the event citing Russia's human rights records and the enactment of anti-gay legislation. The Japanese analysts believe that Abe chose not to follow the US's line as he wanted to seize the opportunity to deepen relationship with Russia. Significantly, Abe's meeting with Putin at Sochi was the fifth interaction between the two leaders within a year.

After the meeting at Sochi, in an apparent reference to long pending territorial row, Putin stated the need to create a "good environment" to help resolve the "most difficult problem in bilateral relations", while Abe announced to address "difficult problems" and "conclude a peace treaty as soon as possible." It may be mentioned that for over six decades, Japan had been maintaining that it will "conclude a peace treaty" with Russia "contingent on the resolution of the Northern Territories issues" – a group of islands off the coast of Hokkaido, known as Kurile

Islands in Russia. During the Sochi meeting, Abe invited Putin to visit Japan in October 2014. According to Japanese media, a statement between the two countries to sign a peace treaty is likely during Russian leader's visit. However, if Japan agrees to sign a peace treaty without resolving the territorial issue, this would be a departure from its previously held stance.

Despite overtures and efforts by previous leaderships in the past, talks on resolving the territorial issue could not reach fruition since Japan and Russia had continued to stick to the official positions; Japan maintains that the four islands (Shikotan, Habomai, Itorofu and Kunashiri) are under "illegal occupation" of Russia, while Russia has been asking Japan to "accept the outcome of the World War II just like other countries have." The Russian view, reiterated by Medvedev administration, was interpreted in Japan that Moscow no longer wants to negotiate the settlement. However, the overtures by Putin hint that Russia is ready to return to the 1956 proposal of handing over two islands to Japan and retaining the other two.

The Japanese nationalists have been opposed to any deal with Russia over the territorial issue. Japanese government has not considered 1956 proposal offered by Russia in view of strong nationalist sentiment within Japan. During the last few years a new line of thinking has emerged in Japan and a section of Japanese has asked the government to settle for "two plus little extra." This opinion was also backed by former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama. Former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, who was designated by the previous government as an envoy to negotiate territorial issue with Russia was also of the view that Japan should settle the dispute with Russia if the latter agrees to hand over the first three Island facing Japan. The insistence from Japanese side to settle for "two plus little extra" is motivated by the fact that the total area of the two islands offered by Russia is merely seven per cent of the total territory in question. As soon as Putin resumed his second term of Presidency, he expressed his readiness for a *hikiwake* (a term used for a draw in judo) with Japan. Therefore, for a "draw" with Russia, Japan is asking at least half of the area of the contested territory.

There are a number of factors that has led the two countries to revisit their previous positions. Russia wants to develop its far east including the contested territories through foreign investment. In the past, Japan has objected to an international bidding by Russia to develop the

islands, claiming that the bid violates Japanese sovereignty over the territory. A mutually agreed settlement will ease Russian efforts to develop infrastructure on the territories. Secondly, following low demands of its natural gas in recession hit Europe, as well as competition with new and relatively cheaper energy resources such as Shale gas, Russia is in search of another market. Post-Fukushima, LNG demands remain high in Japan as most of its nuclear reactors remain offline. Russia eyes Japanese energy market to compensate the low demand of its LNG. Apart from the economic compulsions, there is a human aspect to the issue. The former inhabitants of the islands, who left the four islands after Russia gained administrative control of the territory in 1945 during the World War II, are demanding return of the islands so that they fulfil their dream of going back to their homes. This year too, on February 7, a day before Abe's meeting with Putin, they organised a rally in Hokkaido and demanded the Japanese government to resume talks towards settlement of the territorial issue.

In Russia, Abe stated that the issue of territorial resolution "should not be left to the next generation." Regional politico-strategic compulsion is also a factor behind nationalist Abe's policy of proactive engagement with Russia. He wants to keep Moscow engaged diplomatically as two of its neighbours South Korea and China have suspended political interactions with Japan citing their concerns over Abe's hawkish view on history. Within Japan there were criticisms of Abe's visit to Yasukuni shrine. A section of Japanese media expressed concerns and argued that his stance on history could cast "shadow on Japanese diplomacy" and it will lead to country's diplomatic isolation. Keeping all diplomatic channel open with Russia, its northern neighbour, Abe wants to shun the criticism that it has been isolated by regional countries.

The domestic constituencies in both the countries, however, have generally been averse to any compromise on the territorial issues. Therefore, much would depend if they soften their stance and back their leaderships' decision. Hoping that the Japanese would back their Prime Minister's efforts, Abe informed the Japanese Diet after returning from Russia that "it is crucial for leaders to share an understanding that they are the ones who will make final decision on the territorial issues."

The frequent meetings between the Japanese and Russian leadership has generated a hope towards the resolution of long pending issues between the two countries. If they sustain the momentum and remain engaged in dialogue they may achieve a mutually agreed solution. The resolution of the territorial dispute will have a positive impact on regional peace and security in Northeast Asian region which has a number of unresolved territorial issues.

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