Volume 3 | Issue 7 | Article ID 2049 | Jul 06, 2005

Breaking the Impasse in Japan-Russia Relations

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This year marks the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Shimoda, the pact that established diplomatic relatins between Japan and Russia.

2005 also marks the 100th anniversary of the Portsmouth Treaty, which ended the Russo-Japanese War.

At those historic moments, Russia and Japan were two unique civilizations at different stages of national development: Russia was at the apex of its eastward expansion and Japan was at the end of more than two centuries of self-imposed isolation. By concluding those treaties, the leaders of the two countries taught us an important lesson: Success in bilateral relations was made possible by extraordinary political leaders who were able to overcome cultural differences and forge a peaceful relationship beyond the immediate consequences of imperialism and war.

The age of imperialism has long since passed and there exists no shadow of war over Russia and Japan. And yet, these two global powers seem unable to build a normal relationship by concluding a mutually acceptable peace treaty that clearly is overdue.

One of the obvious reasons is the absence of a strong and wise political leadership in either Moscow or Tokyo that can overcome domestic obstacles and remove the thorn in bilateral relations: the dispute over the Northern Territories, or southern Kuril Islands.

In the face of Russia's weakened position in world politics, continuing domestic economic woes, and deepening social crisis, Moscow relies heavily on nationalism to give pride back to its people and to keep the state from falling apart. The eastward expansion of NATO and the EU to Russia's immediate borders further fuels Russian nationalism.

Russian historiography directly links the Soviet occupation of the Kuril Islands to its victory in World War II, alongside its Yalta agreement partners. Moscow fiercely resists any attempts to rewrite the history of that war in which the Soviets suffered enormous human and material losses.

In Tokyo, political squabbles within the prime minister's ruling Liberal Democratic Party continue to delay the reforms necessary to bring Japan out of its long economic malaise, a source of frustration for the public.

Recent anti-Japan demonstrations in China and South Korea are a reminder to Japanese that the ghosts of history continue to haunt their country's image throughout East Asia.

With the tug-of-war between China and Japan for regional leadership in the background, anti-Japan sentiment in neighboring countries is giving rise to nationalistic fervor in Japan, although the postwar pacifism among the older generation remains strong.

Under these circumstances, there is no near-term prospect for a territorial compromise from either Moscow or Tokyo.

Creative leadership needed

However, the need is paramount for both sides to leave the past behind and forge a future-oriented relationship, the very type Tokyo has

https://doi.org/10.1017/S155746600500255X Published online by Cambridge University Press

been urging Beijing and Seoul to embrace.

There are a growing number of regional and global issues of common concern to Russia and Japan that call for bilateral cooperation: energy, environment, security concerns, nonproliferation, terrorism, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and regional economic integration.

The leaders in Moscow and Tokyo need to exercise creative political leadership to overcome the territorial problem. For example, the two sides might consider the following ideas.

Russia and Japan should conclude a peace treaty, in which the two sides reaffirm the 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration and the 1993 Tokyo Declaration.

In the first declaration, which was ratified by both governments, the Soviet Union agreed to return the Habomai islets and Shikotan island to Japan upon conclusion of a peace treaty. In the second, both sides acknowledged that Kunashiri and Etorofu islands were also in dispute. A peace treaty with this reaffirmation does not represent any change in either side's position since 1993.

Accordingly, Moscow should agree to return the Habomai islets and Shikotan island to Japan within a reasonable period of time, 20 years for example, and both sides should agree in the same treaty or in a separate treaty that they are committed to resolving the dispute over the other two islands. This would represent a major concession on Moscow's part.

In return, Tokyo should agree that during this "transition period" it will not raise the issue of the remaining islands in any official talks with Moscow. This would be tactical softening and not a surrender of sovereignty claims by Japan.

The two sides should also agree that the Russian citizens who currently reside on the disputed islands will be allowed to continue to live there during the transition period and that former Japanese residents of those islands will be allowed to visit their ancestral land freely, along with other Japanese citizens.

Japan should also agree to invest both public and private funds in the improvement of economic and social infrastructure for the benefit of both Russian and Japanese citizens in all the islands during the transition period.

The two sides should also agree that at the end of the transition period, Japan will exercise sovereign jurisdiction in the Habomai islets and Shikotan island but that Russian residents who wish to remain on the islands beyond this period will be allowed to do so as permanent residents of Japan. Permanent resident status presumably will be conferred upon the children of the current Russian residents if they so desire.

During the transition period, the criminal, civil, and other legal codes of each country will apply to their respective citizens who reside on the islands.

Disputes involving Russian and Japanese residents over properties, investments, contracts, injuries, and other issues will be submitted to a court in either country's jurisdiction to be selected by the litigants or to a special court of arbitration/dispute settlement to be established by Russia and Japan.

New challenges ahead

There may be variants of the above ideas or other initiatives that a determined leadership might come up with. The two sides need to be ingenious, recognizing that past approaches have failed and will continue to fail to bring about a mutually acceptable solution to the territorial row.

As at the decisive moments of past history,

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Russia and Japan today face serious internal and external challenges. Russia is climbing out of the chaos of the 1990s and Japan is emerging from its "lost decade." Both countries face mounting foreign policy challenges.

The two countries need to review the lessons of Shimoda and Portsmouth for today so that their political leaders can rise to the occasion and write a new chapter in the history of bilateral relations in the 21st century.

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This article appeared in the IHT/Asahi Shimbun on June 20, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus July 1, 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S155746600500255X Published online by Cambridge University Press