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Japan and Russia

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Introduction

When discussing Japan's diplomacy and security, the relations between Japan and Russia contain a peculiar ambiguity. In Japanese society, the presence of Russia's economy and culture since the end of the Cold War has been small compared with the countries of Asia, the US, and major Western European countries, and wariness also remains because of historical memory. In international issues, while there are continuous discussions in Japan regarding the US, China, the Korean Peninsula, and the nations of Southeast Asia, on occasion Russia abruptly becomes the focus of attention as a main diplomatic matter pertaining to territorial problems and disputes. This article attempts to consider whether such Japanese relations with Russia, which are easily confused because attention is intermittent in this way, can be understood within the overall image of Japanese foreign and security policy.

Prior history

(1) Historical memory since the time of the USSR

When Japan entered modern international relations in the latter half of the 19th century, Russia gave a certain stimulus to Japan. In response to Russia approaching Japan from the north, Japan advanced investigations and responses in international relations and concluded the Treaty of Shimoda with Russia in

1855 as one of Japan's first international treaties. Thereafter, Russia gradually advanced into the East Asian region, the Russo-Japanese War broke out in 1904, and Russia continued to be the main object of Japan's strategy.

What looms large in the present historical memory of the Japanese are numerous events that occurred in 1945. In August 1945, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) invaded Manchuria, the southern part of Sakhalin Island, and the Kuril Islands, committed atrocities against the local residents (not only Japanese, but also Chinese and Koreans), and transported about 600,000 people to the USSR (the Siberian Internment). This took place while the 1941 Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact was still in effect, and the fact that the USSR, although it was not attacked by Japan, committed an unjustified invasion and acts of violence left an adverse impact on the sentiment of the Japanese people in a different way from the cases of China and the US.

Moreover, the USSR treated the occupation of the Northern Territories (the four islands of Hokkaido) as if they had been incorporated into the territory of the USSR. A territorial dispute emerged which continues to the present day, and this has become a problem for the Japanese people. Because the countries agreed that the "four Northern Islands" are Japanese territory since the 1855 treaty and there has been no agreement for Japan to turn over the islands to the

USSR or to Russia since 1945, Japan's basic position through to the present day is that these are Japanese territory.

In 1956, the USSR sought to normalize diplomatic relations with Japan, the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration was signed, the state of war was ended, and diplomatic relations were formed. Japanese detainees were freed and returned to Japan, but during those 10 years more than 50,000 had died. A peace treaty was discussed in that process, but no agreement was reached for resolving the territorial issue. The text of the Joint Declaration, which was signed instead of a peace treaty, stipulated that the USSR would transfer the Habomai Islands and the island of Shikotan to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty between the USSR and Japan. The USSR also approved Japan's membership in the United Nations (UN).

At that time, the USSR did not view the US-Japan security framework as a problem, but the USSR has been hostile to the framework since the Security Treaty between the United States and Japan was revised in 1960, and refused to hold discussions with Japan regarding territory. Japan adopted a stance of demanding the return of all the "four Northern Islands," calling them the "inherent territory" of Japan. Relations as neighboring countries were managed with fishery agreements and other arrangements and cultural exchanges also advanced, but the relations between Japan and the USSR were defined by the

dual confrontation structure of the Cold War and the territorial issue.

The Japan Ground Self-Defense Force deployed a tank division in Hokkaido to prepare against a Russian military landing, but the US military did not station troops in Hokkaido. During the 1970s, when the USSR achieved the capabilities of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) which are launched from nuclear submarines, it increased its military capabilities for the defense of the areas around the Sea of Okhotsk where these are operated. As part of those efforts, the USSR established military bases on Iturup Island and Kunashiri Island and deployed combat aircraft and tanks to prepare against control of surrounding waters and seizure of the islands by the US military. In 1983, there was an incident where the Soviet military, which was overly concerned about nearby US military activities, mistook a Korean Air Lines plane for a US military aircraft and shot it down while it was flying from the Kamchatka Peninsula toward Sakhalin Island, and the signals intelligence intercepted by Japan and the US at that time was used to condemn the USSR.

(2) New relations with the Russian Federation

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and relations with Japan greatly improved around the time that the successor Russian Federation was established. The USSR proposed to Japan the holding

of regular maritime safety consultations equivalent to the Incidents at Sea Agreement between the USSR and the US, and an agreement between Japan and the Russian Federation was reached in 1993. Japan and Russia had both become democratic, market-economy system countries, relations were managed in line with that foundation, and people-to-people and economic exchanges greatly expanded. Japanese companies advanced into Moscow and other large Russian markets, their products were welcomed, Toyota operated a factory in St. Petersburg, Japanese firms participated in oil and natural gas concessions on Sakhalin Island, and Japan diversified its energy import sources.

Regarding the territorial issue as well, President Boris Yeltsin held frank discussions based on mutual beneficial relations and legal credibility, and several interim common understandings were reached. "Visa-free travel" was arranged whereby Japanese former residents of the four Northern Islands could visit graves without passing through Russian immigration procedures. From 2001, President Vladimir Putin stabilized domestic society, created an environment for development, and aimed at conducting stable relations with Western countries. As part of this, he demonstrated an eagerness to resolve border issues that cause instability, achieved resolutions with Latvia and China, and advanced negotiations with both Estonia and Japan. Nevertheless, there was a wide gap in the positions of Japan, which

maintained the principle that the four Northern Islands were all Japanese territory, and Russia, which required legal foundations and benefits to explain to its own people in order to transfer territory.

(3) National Security Strategy of the Abe administration

In Russia, the policy of focusing on the Far East and East Asia was strengthened when Putin began his third term as president in May 2012, and Russia advanced relations with China, India, South Korea, Japan, and other countries in parallel. Russia initiated maritime military exercises with China and approached Japan about strengthening the framework for dialogue in the security field.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who took office in December 2012 deemed that Russia desired to advance relations with Japan, and worked to position Russia in Japan's national security framework. Abe called for "proactive contribution to peace" whereby Japan would contribute to the peace of Japan and the world not passively but by proactively taking action, and advanced preparations for a system that could consistently analyze and strengthen national security across ministries and agencies. In parallel with these works, through summit meetings Abe confirmed that relations between Japan and Russia would not be confrontational but rather advance as comprehensive relations, and held the first "2+2" meeting of the foreign and

defense ministers of Japan and Russia in November 2013.

In December 2013, the Japanese government established the National Security Council and published the first National Security Strategy (NSS). In the section on advancing cooperation with partner countries (IV-3), after discussing the Republic of Korea, Australia, the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India, and China, the strategy touches on the issue of North Korea, which involves cooperation with relevant countries including Russia. Subsection (4) then directly addresses Russia and reads as follows.

(4) Under the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia, it is critical for Japan to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole, in order to ensure its security. Based on this recognition, Japan will cooperate with Russia in securing peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. With regard to the issue of the Northern Territories, the most important pending issue between the two countries, Japan will vigorously negotiate with Russia under a consistent policy of resolving the issue of the attribution of the four islands and concluding a peace treaty.

What can be seen from these efforts is the idea of enhancing bilateral relations with Russia overall to ease conflicts of interest and gain Russia's understanding and cooperation on security issues originating in North Korea and China that are difficult to avoid. In September 2012, tensions between China and Japan regarding the Senkaku Islands intensified, and while solidifying Japan's security foundations the Abe administration worked at stabilizing relations with China. However, in January 2013 there was an incident where a Chinese warship locked its weapons-targeting radar on a Japan Self-Defense Force ship. Japan had asked China to establish procedures to avert dangerous actions so that even though there were political tensions, accidental confrontations would not occur for that reason. In this regard, in view of Japan's long experience of procedures to avert clashes at sea with Russia, it was thought that there was more accumulated trust that contributed to stability with Russia than with China.

Prime Minister Abe was strongly aware that the Northern Territories issue should be resolved from the political and humanitarian perspectives, and he sought new means under the initiative of the Prime Minister's office because advances had not been achieved using the prior approaches. Abe sought an entry point through close dialogue with President Putin and Japan-Russia cooperative relations. Abe's personal enthusiasm stood out, and in Japanese

society, where there was little interest in Russia aside from the Northern Territories issue, the mass media tended to cover Japanese-Russian relations pulled by whether or not there was progress in the Northern Territories issue. For that reason, assessments were often seen that Abe was moving too close to Putin in order to resolve the Northern Territories issue.

Nevertheless, in its NSS the Abe administration gave priority to addressing North Korea and China issues while deepening collaboration with countries worldwide, and the Northern Territories issue was not its only item concerning Russia. While Russia was moving closer to China, conflicts of interest also emerged between those two countries, and because Russia was working to involve India, South Korea, and Japan in the development of the Russian Far East, positioning Japan in Russia's interests was considered effective. By advancing Japan-Russia relations, the Abe administration must have had the two large goals of easing aggravation of problems with China and finding a path toward the resolution of the Northern Territories issue.

(4) The shock of Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty

In February 2014, Russia held the Winter Olympics in the southern city of Sochi, and Prime Minister Abe attended the opening ceremony and met with

President Putin. At that same time, however, there was political upheaval in Ukraine as Russia had the Crimean Peninsula separate from Ukraine and be annexed by Russia and then began to instigate and support secession and armed struggle in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

Japan condemned Russia's change of the status quo by force and its violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity and of human rights. These were necessary assertions to defend Japan's position regarding the Northern Territories and other territories. Japan took a clear stance of condemning Russia together with Ukraine, the nations of Europe, and the US. The EU and the US began placing economic sanctions on Russia, and Japan also implemented the economic sanctions that were feasible. Japan postponed defense and other exchanges with Russia and the implementation of high-level, highly symbolic dialogues. Meanwhile, Japan compiled and continues to implement a Ukraine assistance package of approximately US\$1.86 billion, which is one of the largest as bilateral assistance, including energy efficiency improvements and judiciary system reforms so that Ukraine can develop over the long term.

The circumstances concerning this Ukraine crisis caused dual difficulties for the Abe administration's NSS. These are the management of cooperative relations to uphold the international order and the worsening of Japan-Russia

relations. Because highly effective sanctions on Russia implemented by Japan were limited and the above-mentioned significance of Japan-Russia relations was maintained, even slightly, from the perspective of those who were harsh on Russia, the Japanese response appeared to be halfway. On the other hand, Russia assumed only the US pressure made Japan take actions hostile to Russia, and presented a harsh stance toward Japanese interests while seeking removal of the sanctions. It is thought that Russia's further development of relations with China from this time is designed to supplement its economic and diplomatic relations and also intended as a warning of possibly causing harm to American and Japanese interests.

Prime Minister Abe sought ways to achieve at least to some small extent the difficult demands of both continuing dialogue between Japan and Russia and advancing the priority issues of the NSS. After many high-level dialogues had been postponed for some time, Japan received several key Russian figures with visits to Japan by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in April 2016, President Putin in December 2016, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu in March 2017 (for the 2nd Japan-Russia meeting of foreign and defense ministers), and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov in December 2017 (this had been postponed from March 2014). In this process, while Japan and Russia both stressed their different positions, they reached an agreement on the

significance of continuing exchanges of opinion through dialogue. Also, both countries had dispatched warships to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden from the past, and the level of collaboration was stepped up through joint exercises in November 2018 including receiving helicopters and personnel from a Russian warship on a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ship. Through such developments, it may be understood that Japan and Russia both limited further degradation of bilateral relations and acted in concert to promote practical cooperation.

Nevertheless, after all, it is difficult to say that the Abe administration moved toward achieving the two strategic interest goals which it was aiming at regarding Russia. Russia advanced not only economic cooperation but also military cooperation with China, delivered relatively high-level equipment to China including Su-35 fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, and demonstrated strengthening of cooperative relations through military exercises. In July 2019, Russian and Chinese bombers linked to both countries' airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) were jointly patrolling the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan and a Russian A-50 AWACS aircraft entered airspace above Takeshima Island, which is under Japanese sovereignty. Japan strongly protested to Russia, and so did South Korea, which claims the island as its own territory. From 2018 through 2020, the participation of Chinese

troops in large-scale Russian military exercises was also conspicuous. Russia and China strengthened their common stance toward opposing alliances that involved the US, and unlike China, the leeway for Russia to act advantageously for Japan declined.

When President Putin visited Japan in December 2016, Prime Minister Abe proposed an eight-item economic cooperation program and Russia compiled a framework in the interests of cooperative relations with Japan, which Japan implemented. In November 2018, the two countries agreed on accelerating negotiations on a peace treaty based on the 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration, and Japan showed a flexible negotiating stance. Regardless, in January and February 2019, statements by Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov and the hardening of Russian public opinion made it clear that Russia was not prepared to turn over any territory whatsoever to Japan. With this, it became clear that under the methods taken by Japan to date Russia did not seek to gain benefits through cooperative relations with Japan or to exploit differences in the Japanese and American positions.

In this process, Russia's tone in expressing dissatisfaction with Japan was more amicable than its tone toward the US. But within the context whereby Russia asserted its territorial rights to the four Northern Islands for military purposes, Russia developed the narrative that Japan, which is in an alliance

with the US, has no free will and that if the islands were turned over to Japan, the US military would locate military bases there. However, this type of narrative was not seen officially from 2014 to 2015. It was emphasized when there seemed to be some progress in the 2018 territorial issue negotiations, and it is not very clear if it was raised based on specific national security concerns and countermeasures or was rhetoric related to the territorial issue negotiations. The Abe administration did not consider revisions to Japan-US relations that would lose crucial strategic interests for the purpose of its negotiations with Russia.

Present conditions and issues

(1) Continuity in the Suga administration and the Kishida administration

Prime Minister Abe resigned because of poor health in September 2020, and the administration of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga was formed. Suga had served as Chief Cabinet Secretary for nearly eight years under Prime Minister Abe, and generally maintained the existing policies in foreign affairs and other ongoing policies. Suga worked to form close relations with the US Trump and Biden administrations and aimed at maintaining stable relations with China and Russia while advocating the necessary positions.

In relations with Russia, similar to Prime Minister Abe, while not an outstandingly passionate approach, Suga continued the dialogue between leaders, steadily advanced bilateral cooperation based on cooperation plans, and worked to make Russia a stable partner as much as possible.

The administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was formed in October 2021. Throughout 2022, Kishida expressed the idea of revising the NSS, and a different handling of Russia was also expected. Right after he took office, Prime Minister Kishida had a telephone meeting with President Putin, and then four months passed without any further meetings.

(2) Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Japan's determination regarding the principle of international order

From 2021 through 2022, Russia prepared military forces near its border with Ukraine and tensions heightened. On February 17, 2022, Prime Minister Kishida had his second telephone meeting with President Putin and requested that issues be resolved through diplomatic means rather than a unilateral change of the status quo through force. On February 18, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated its willingness to continue

negotiations with the US regarding the deployment of missiles and confidence-building measures. However, on February 21 Russia declared that it had recognized the territories controlled by breakaway forces in eastern Ukraine as "independent countries," and on February 24 Russia announced it was initiating a "special military operation" to maintain safety in those territories and launched a full-scale war against Ukraine which greatly surpassed that purpose.

On that same day February 24, Minister of Foreign Affairs Yoshimasa Hayashi summoned Russia's ambassador and condemned Russia's actions as an attempt to change the status quo by a unilateral use of force that violated Ukraine's sovereignty. At 11 pm, Prime Minister Kishida attended an emergency online G7 meeting. Since then, as a member of the G7, the Japanese government has advanced measures one after another placing sanctions on Russia and providing support to Ukraine, in coordination with each nation.

Japan was harsher on Russia compared to the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and took measures that would entail pain for Japan itself largely because of the same reasons as the other G7 nations. That is, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was too clearly a large-scale invasion of another country, even when compared with the opaque method of the so-called "hybrid warfare strategy" of 2014. Moreover Russia, which has a duty to uphold the international order as a

permanent member of the UN Security Council, did not fully utilize the UN or other dialogue frameworks as means to resolve its international issues, made the unilateral assertion which was not objectively verified that a neo-Nazi administration was oppressing the residents of eastern Ukraine, disregarded the sovereignty of the independent state Ukraine, and sent the military to cause large-scale humanitarian damages. This had a more severe negative impact on the international order overall compared to other regional conflicts. For that reason, Japan, which has a duty to maintain the existing international order as a member of the G7, views this as an issue that is not limited to regional conflict in Europe and is taking measures so that Russia cannot unilaterally gain benefits.

Moreover, there is very little that Japan can expect to gain strategically from taking a flexible stance toward Russia. Through several years of a flexible approach, it has already become clear that Russia will not take actions that would benefit Japan regarding issues concerning China and territorial issues. On the contrary, if Russia succeeds in unilaterally changing the status quo by force, the normative strength of the international order will be weakened, and there are concerns that people who believe that the status quo can also successfully be changed nearby Japan by force will gain momentum. Therefore, it is considered necessary for Japan to clearly show its opposition to such circumstances.

Prime Minister Kishida has greatly advanced Japan's approach to national security by supporting Ukraine, which is resisting the Russian invasion, and reinforcing Japan's own preparations against this type of situation as important pillars. The NSS which was revised in December 2022 notes the problems caused by Russia's actions and Japan's basic stance toward Russia as follows.

By its recent aggression against Ukraine and others, Russia's external and military activities and others have shaken the very foundation of the international order, and are perceived as the most significant and direct threat to security in the European region. In addition, Russia's external and military activities and others in the Indo-Pacific region, including Japan, together with its strategic coordination with China, are of strong security concern. ...

With regard to the relations with Russia, Japan will respond in a manner that protects its own national interests in light of the severe security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, Japan will prevent Russia from taking actions that undermine the peace, stability, and prosperity of the international community, while cooperating with its ally and like-minded countries and others. As for

the Northern Territories issue, which is the greatest concern regarding our diplomacy with Russia, Japan's basic policy of concluding a peace treaty through the resolution of the territorial issue remains unchanged.

In preparing for the May 2023 G7 Hiroshima Summit, Prime Minister Kishida strengthened cooperative relations that support Ukraine and worked to set a venue to promote dialogue between Ukraine and India, Indonesia, Brazil and other countries which desire to pursue independent diplomacy.

Facing Japan's stance of not accepting its activities in Ukraine, Russia added Japan to its list of non-friendly nations, suspended peace treaty negotiations, and took other retaliatory measures. Although there is bilateral cooperation for maritime safety around Hokkaido and fishery agreements are being implemented, the environment for practical discussions has worsened forcing their delay. Japan implemented measures prohibiting imports of Russian coal and gold, but the policy of keeping the Sakhalin 2 liquefied natural gas (LNG) project concessions as advantageous to Russia as possible has been maintained. While the sanctions on Russia aim at limiting its resources to conduct war over the short term and its growth prospects over the middle to long term, the perspective of not disrupting people's livelihood from the problems caused by

Russia is necessary, and like other countries Japan is being forced into taking difficult choices and actions.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine appears to have greatly changed Japan's policy toward Russia. However, what has greatly changed in Japan is similar to what has changed in Europe, the US, and other nations with which Japan maintains strong cooperative relations. For example, Germany has also been forced to greatly change its relations with Russia and its defense efforts. Beyond that, while it may be said that Japan was advancing bilateral practical cooperation in its relations with Russia up to 2022, improvements of conditions concerning major strategic interests were not gained from Russia. Japan demonstrated flexibility requiring major decisions in economic cooperation programs, peace treaty negotiations based on the 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration, and other initiatives, while Russia conversely came to take a hard line in its attitude regarding territorial issues. Having experienced the ineffectiveness of adopting a flexible position, Japan has been unable to expect any benefit from a more flexible stance toward Russia since February 2022.

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