

Is Washington Trying to Ruin Shinzo Abe's Legacy of Japan's Rapprochement with Russia?

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Global Research, December 09, 2020

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Recent reports from Japanese media alleging that US immigration authorities there consider Russian nationals in some of the Kuril Islands to legally be Japanese represent an attempt by the fading unipolar superpower to ruin former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's legacy of rapprochement with Russia by pressuring his successor Yoshihide Suga into backtracking from that forward-looking policy.

American Meddling In Northeast Asia

Russia is deeply offended after recent reports from Japanese media alleged that US immigration authorities on that island nation consider Russian nationals in some of the Kuril Islands to legally be Japanese. [RT](#) quoted the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs rhetorically asking in response, “do you need more proof that the US is a revisionist power?”, as well as a spokesperson who said that “In 1945, the Kuril Islands were transferred to the Soviet Union. But today the State Department is seeking to reopen the settlement of the Second World War and encouraging territorial revanchism.” This legal provocation follows an earlier one two weeks prior after the USS John McCain [intruded into territorial waters](#) off of Vladivostok that Moscow claims as its own but ended up retreating after the Russian Navy threatened to ram it. After that incident, Russia [announced](#) that it'll deploy S-300 air-defense missiles in order to defend its territorial integrity in the Far East from other forms of American aggression that might soon be forthcoming.

The “Kuril Islands Dispute”

These series of events, and especially the latest one related to US immigration authorities' provocative policy regarding Russian nationals in part of the Kuril Islands, raises worries about the future of former Japanese Prime Minister's legacy of rapprochement with Russia. Japan's longest-serving post-war leader prioritized efforts to resolve what Tokyo unilaterally regards as the “Kuril Islands dispute” with Russia but which Moscow denies is even an issue after the Allies agreed to the Soviet Union's restoration of control over that formerly disputed island chain in the closing days of World War II. The issue has thus far prevented the two former combatants from signing a peace treaty for ending that conflict, which in turn has served as a major impediment to their relations ever since. Russia regards the issue as an artificial one dishonestly provoked by the US to divide and rule those two countries in order to indefinitely perpetuate its military presence in the geostrategic region of Northeast Asia.

The “Northern Islands Socio-Economic Condominium”

For as closely allied as the US and Japan are, Abe showed an impressive degree of political

independence in seeking to resolve this issue in his many interactions with President Putin over the past few years prior to his sudden resignation a few months ago for health-related reasons. Nothing of tangible significance ever came out of these efforts, but the author nevertheless suggested four years ago that his unique proposal for a “Northern Islands Socio-Economic Condominium” ([NISEC](#)) might present the most outcome for both parties. This concept refers to the idea of formalizing the post-war territorial status quo but bestowing special socio-economic privileges upon the residents of Russia’s Sakhalin Oblast (which includes the Kuril Islands) and Japan’s Hokkaido which could lead to them pioneering a new regional economic community between their islands. Free trade, investment, and travel between them could do wonders for both countries’ grand strategies, particularly with respect to Russia’s “Asian Pivot” and [Japan’s desire to obtain much-needed resources](#) from Russia’s Far East.

“Balancing”

The proposed NISEC breakthrough would have also greatly advanced both Great Powers’ geostrategic “[balancing](#)” acts vis-a-vis their close Chinese and American partners respectively in the New Cold War. Russia is [trying to prevent](#) the emergence of any dependent relationship with the People’s Republic while Japan aspires to progressively reduce its existing dependence on the US. The only obstacle standing in the way of their shared vision is the so-called “Kuril Islands issue”, which Washington is once again trying to exacerbate through its naval provocations and reported immigration policy. These two moves are intended to trigger predictable Russian defensive reactions related to Moscow militarily defending its territorial integrity in ways that could then be misportrayed as “aggressive” to the Japanese audience (threatening to ram the USS John McCain and deploying S-300s to the Kuril Islands) as well as proudly reaffirming its unwavering stance to preserving its post-war control over the Kuril Islands, both of which might put pressure on new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.

Russian Expert Insight

To be clear, Russia has absolutely zero interest in pressuring Abe’s successor in any way, but it also won’t sit back and let the US militarily and legally threaten its core national interests with impunity either. The timing of these provocations importantly coincides with Japan’s transfer of power. As reported by [TASS](#), Izvestia quoted Carnegie Moscow Center expert Maxim Krylov as assessing the following: “In the foreseeable future, Suga’s Japan will be an introvert country closed for repairs, passively reacting to external impulses precisely to the extent necessary. There will be no ambitious political initiatives until at least the next fall (after parliamentary elections). And after that, it is also unlikely, regarding Russia. The activation of bilateral contacts that had begun in 2016 was Abe’s unilateral initiative, based on his feeling that he had a historic mission and based on his personal relations with Putin. Abe’s successor has neither of those things. He has no experience in international affairs so far, and it seems that he has no desire to leave the fortress that he is rebuilding unless it is necessary.”

US “Perception Management” Operations

It can therefore be surmised that the US is seeking to capitalize off of Japan’s sudden introversion, the unexpected trend of which is predicted to last for least the next 10 months. The refocusing on domestic issues means that Russia’s reaction to American provocations might be even more sensitive for the Japanese populace than if it happened in any other

context such as during Abe's regionally minded rule. Thus, it might be comparatively easier for the US and its allied information outlets in Japan to dishonestly misportray Russia's defensive military and political reactions as "aggressive", thus putting further pressure on Suga to at least freeze — if not reverse — his predecessor's sincere efforts to reach a rapprochement with Russia. In fact, it might even be the case that with Chinese-Japanese relations somewhat warming after last month's clinching of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ([RCEP](#)) between them and 12 other Asia-Pacific countries, the US might attempt to frame Russia as the "ominous other" which supposedly poses a "dire threat" to Japan.

Concluding Thoughts

It's with all of the above insight in mind that the author passionately feels that his NISEC proposal deserves to be discussed now more urgently than ever. Abe's dream of resolving the so-called "Kuril Islands dispute" with Russia mustn't be allowed to die as a result of American provocations aimed at pressuring his successor into reversing the former leader's forward-looking policy. The US will likely continue to provoke Russia in order to elicit defensive military and political reactions that it could then exploit for the purpose of misportraying Russia as a "threat" to a suddenly (and hopefully only temporarily) inward-looking Japan. What's needed under these difficult conditions is a breakthrough of some sort, even if only the symbolic one that would be associated with officially discussing the author's NISEC proposal. That would allow both parties to retain and build upon the goodwill and trust achieved over the past years as well have a tangible basis for resuming negotiations as soon as possible, which could in turn revolutionize Northeast Asian geopolitics if ultimately successful.

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This article was originally published on [OneWorld](#).

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