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# The Point in Dispute between Japan and Russia (1)

By ITO Kenichi

International affairs since World War II have been marked by far-reaching and powerful changes. Among the most important of these are the growing economic power of Japan and its upgraded position in the international community. In stark contrast to these trends is the complete petrification of relations between two of the most powerful countries – Japan and the Soviet Union. They have been locked in political confrontation over the issue of the Northern Territories. To move beyond deadlock requires some resolution of this Gordian knot. The accession of a new generation of leadership in the Soviet Union and its adoption of a new style of diplomacy suggest the possibility of some movement in the relations between the two countries. But whether General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev is bold and wise enough to recognize the futility of past policy is unclear.

## Japan and the Soviet Union

The chief architect of Soviet foreign policy in the postwar era, former foreign affairs minister Andrei Gromyko, is known for his rigidity and inflexibility in the handling of Japanese affairs. His diplomacy consistently neglected Japan and underestimated its power. Accordingly, Japan's growing position in the international community has been an embarrassment to the Soviet Union. Japan is one of the few neighboring countries of the Russo-Soviet empire that no head of state, neither a tsar nor a general secretary of the Communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), has ever visited. Anatolyi Dobrynin, former Soviet ambassador to the United States and currently CPSU secretary in charge of international affairs, told Saburo Tsukamoto, chairman of Japan's Democratic Socialist party, at their meeting in Moscow in July 1978 that among all the bilateral relations the Soviet Union had with other countries, the worst were its relations with Japan.<sup>1</sup> This is no exaggeration.

There is as yet no formal conclusion to the war between Japan and the Soviet Union of more than 40 years ago, though peace treaties were concluded between Japan and the other allied nations decades ago. Moreover, the continued Soviet occupation of the Northern Territories of Japan is an extension of that war – in the absence of any peace agreement between the two countries, the Soviet occupation of the parts of the territory of the Empire of Japan including Southern Sakhalin and stretching southward from Shimushu Island to Kunashiri Island and the Habomais remains legally a continuation of military actions at the end of the last war.

The term "Northern Territories" requires a precise definition. The correct usage of the term describes all those parts of the territory of the Empire of Japan that came to be occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of the last war. However, in a narrower sense, the term is often used to indicate only the four islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan, and the Habomais, all of which lie south of the Kuril Islands, a chain of the islands stretching southward from Shimushu Island to Uruppu Island. Those four islands have a different history from the rest of the Northern Territories in the sense that they have never belonged to any country other than Japan. They are called by the Japanese *koyu-no-ryodo* (inherent land).

The reversion of those islands offers one of the very few political agendas in Japan on which all the political parties, including the Japan Communist party, can agree. Yet over the years, the Soviet position on the Northern Territories issue has stiffened. The principal motive of the Soviets seems to be a desire to see a defeated Japan surrender to a *fait accompli* in the Northern Territories.

With the passing of Gromyko from the scene and a new Soviet diplomacy of openness, some movement in Japanese-Soviet relations toward a resolution of the Northern Territories issue might be expected. However, although there certainly is a subtle but significant change in Soviet foreign policy in general, optimism for improved Soviet attitudes toward Japan at this stage would be misplaced. It is wishful thinking to read into

this change an instant softening of the Soviet position on the Northern Territories issue. There has been no sign or hint of official Soviet willingness to resume negotiations for the conclusion of a peace treaty that will put an end to the territorial dispute between the two countries. An official Soviet commitment to resume negotiations was made in both the 1956 joint declaration and the 1973 joint statement, committing Japan and the Soviet Union to “continue negotiations for the conclusion of a peace treaty.”

Notwithstanding, if the diplomatic *perestroika* currently proceeding under the leadership of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev is bold and wise enough to recognize the futility of the past policy of the Soviet Union toward Japan and if it dare launch a great offensive including the presentation of a program for reversion of the four islands, it might possibly bring about a dramatic turn of national sentiment in Japan toward the Soviet Union. There is a precedent. A similar turn of Japanese national sentiment occurred in 1972 with the opening to the People’s Republic of China. This paved the way to a fundamental restructuring of the correlation of forces in northern Asia. The shock of the Japanese-Soviet rapprochement could be as dramatic and profound as that of the Sino-U.S. rapprochement in 1971.

## Japan and the United States

Former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt repeatedly has warned Japan of the vulnerability in having only one ally – the United States.<sup>2</sup> This vulnerability is increasingly apparent to the Japanese public as “Japan-bashing” grows more virulent in the United States.

From the Japanese perspective, U.S. attitudes are ill-founded. Many Japanese share the U.S. feeling that Japanese import barriers should be removed as quickly as possible. But they do not share the view that this will solve Japan’s huge trade imbalance with the United States, the real cause of which lies in the ailing competitiveness of U.S. products and the propensity of U.S. consumers to buy rather than save. Those Japanese think Americans are using Japan as a scapegoat for problems of their own making.

The Japanese, however, are well aware of their strategic position vis-à-vis the United States. After all, they are in the position of the Carthaginians vis-à-vis the Romans. They have no other choice but to surrender when the Americans are in anger, just as the Carthaginians had to when the Romans were in anger. But Japan bashing in America leaves a scar on Japanese political culture to the detriment of the political alliance between the two countries.

A recent opinion poll conducted by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone’s office supports these assessments. The survey indicates that now only 67.5 percent of the Japanese public like the United States – the lowest percentage ever, down from 75.5 percent in the previous survey in 1985. Dislike for the United States has climbed to a record of 28.1 percent.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the same poll indicated that 68.6 percent of the Japanese public like China and 24.8 percent dislike it.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the United States has been replaced by China as Japan’s best friend, at least as far as this public poll is concerned.

The survey also polled attitudes toward the Soviet Union. Only 8.9 percent of Japanese like the Soviet Union and 83.9 percent dislike it.<sup>5</sup> But 57.7 percent of that 83.9 percent cited the reason for their dislike of the Soviet Union as its unwillingness to solve the Northern Territories problem.<sup>6</sup> Although this sense of distrust of the Soviets is shared widely among Japanese, it stems mainly from one recent historical experience. The Japanese believe the Soviets stabbed them in the back on August 9, 1945, in a breach of the Pact on Neutrality between Japan and the U.S.S.R., which had been concluded in 1941 and was still in effect at the time of the Soviet Union’s declaration of war against Japan. In the mind of the average Japanese, the Northern Territories problem serves as a constant reminder of this infidelity on the part of the Soviet Union. (Continued)

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<sup>1</sup> Ono, “Katasukashi Kutta Tsukamoto Inncho” (Chairman Tsukamoto Dodged by the Soviets), *Yomiuri Shimbum*, July 31, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in his interview with Nihon Hoso Kyokai (Japan Broadcasting Association) in the nationwide TV program “Naze Nihon dake ga Koritsu suru no ka” (Why Is Japan Alone Isolated?) on August 14, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> “Gaiko ni kannsuru Yoronchosa” (Public Poll on Diplomacy), (Tokyo: Public Relations Division, Prime

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Minister's Office, 1987), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.