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The Point in Dispute between Japan and Russia (2)

By ITO Kenichi

The Evolution of the Northern Territories Issue

It cannot be denied that the United States played a major role in the origin of the Northern Territories problem. There is a school of thought in Japan that blames the United States for the loss of the four islands of the Northern Territories. The strongest advocate of this argument is not, however, a Japanese – he is Gregory Clark, an Australian diplomat-turned-professor teaching at St. Sophia University in Tokyo. In a series of articles in the Japanese monthly magazine *Voice*,⁷ he argues that the United States sold out to the Soviets on the Northern Territories issue first at Yalta in 1945 and later at the San Francisco peace conference of 1951. In Professor Clark's view, the Japanese were forced unreasonably by the United States to renounce their rights to the Northern Territories. Of course, Japan did not actually renounce the four islands of the Northern Territories in San Francisco. But Clark's argument echoes nicely the anti-U.S. feelings among some segments of the Japanese population. This aspect of the Northern Territories problem could add special weight to whatever diplomatic initiative the Soviets may make.

Japanese-Soviet relations are often said to be a function of U.S.-Soviet relations. Japan's national security is dependent on the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States, which, in turn, constitutes one of the links of U.S. global strategy and is thus important to the politics of the U.S.-Soviet bipolar confrontation. Many argue that under this framework little maneuverability is left for Japan in its policy toward the Soviet Union, permitting Japan to improve its relations with the Soviet Union only when the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union are relaxed. In the post-World War II era improvements in Japanese-Soviet relations have occurred on two occasions. The first was the visit to Moscow of prime minister Ichiro Hatoyama in 1956. The second was that of prime minister Kakuei Tanaka in 1973. On both occasions, the Soviets were flexible enough to admit that there existed a territorial problem between the two countries. The first occasion coincided with the period of the "Geneva spirit" and the second with that of *détente*. If the Reagan-Gorbachev summit diplomacy succeeds in producing a major arms control agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, resulting in another thaw in superpower relations, one might expect new opportunities for the development of Japanese-Soviet relations.

Of course, Japan's dependency on the United States is not limited to the field of national security. Japan's economic prosperity is fatally dependent on its trade with the United States. In 1985 Japan's exports to the United States accounted for 37.2 percent of its worldwide exports, and Japan's imports from the United States accounted for 19.9 percent of its worldwide imports. In comparison, Japan's exports to the Soviet Union accounted for only 1.6 percent and imports only 1.1 percent in 1985.⁸ Moreover, the prospect of elevating these low-level economic ties between Japan and the Soviet Union is dim. Japanese business circles lost enthusiasm for joint resources development projects in Siberia after the oil crises of the 1970s as Japanese industries restructured from chimney-stack to high tech. Not since 1976 have the two countries agreed to a single new joint project, in contrast with three agreements in 1965-1969 and four in 1970-1975.⁹

Yet Soviet interest in strengthening its economic ties with Japan has not abated. For instance, in his July 1986 speech in Vladivostok Gorbachev specifically referred to "the amazing achievement attained by Japan in the short term in the fields of industry, trade, education, science and technology." The possibility of a linkage between the Northern Territories and economic cooperation is discussed often in Japan. However, it has become clear by now that economic cooperation on a purely commercial basis will not work. And Japan's economic cooperation on an official basis is inconceivable without a major Soviet concession on the territorial issue.

Two approaches are discussed in Japan as a way to move beyond the present deadlock. The first approach is called *iriguchi-ron* (the entrance theory). This is essentially the official position of the Japanese government. According to this theory, the territorial issue should be at the entrance of Japanese-Soviet relations, and the

door for improved relations between the two countries must not be opened unless the territorial issue is first removed. Critics of this policy advocate the second approach of *deguchi-ron* (the exit theory). According to this theory, the territorial issue should be at the exit of Japanese-Soviet relations, and improved relations between the two countries must come first through economic, cultural, and other exchanges, which, in turn, will pave the way for the eventual solution of the territorial issue. The dichotomy is, of course, a bit contrived, and the solution lies somewhere between the two extremes. Without mutual and reciprocal efforts to improve the relationship, no prospect will emerge for either the improvement of Japanese-Soviet relations or the solution of the Northern Territories problem.

There is some basis of anticipation of movement in this direction. In a speech at a secret meeting in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 23, 1986, Gorbachev is reported to have said the following,

If individual nations seek their own interests only and disregard interests of others, it will become difficult to achieve the health of international relations. One of the decisive forms of diplomacy is negotiation. One should fully understand what is the desire of others. One should never drive others into the corner of deadlock. It is not permissible to regard others as more foolish than we. We must resolutely avoid a situation in which our delegation is called "Mr. Nyet" because of its meaningless stubbornness.¹⁰

As Gorbachev suggested, Soviet diplomacy toward Japan has been negative. If the new thinking in Soviet foreign policy demonstrated in recent months is genuine, a Soviet review of its policy toward Japan should be made forthwith. Under the leadership of Andrei Gromyko, Japan held a very low priority in Soviet foreign policy. For instance, in the organizational structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the administrative unit in charge of Japanese affairs had long been a section within a larger administrative unit of division. However, in the latest organizational restructuring of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japan Section was elevated to become a Japan Division within the newly formed Pacific and Southeast Asian Nations Bureau.¹¹ This reorganization apparently represents a rising interest in the strengthening of Soviet relations with Japan and other Pacific nations.

What accounts for the particular rigidity and inflexibility of Soviet diplomacy toward Japan? Cold war attitudes certainly have been significant. Soviet strategic calculations have dictated the nonreversion of the Northern Territories. For many years the Soviet Union has accused Japan and the United States of aggressive intent in their security treaty. Moreover, in recent years the Sea of Okhotsk has become joined with the Barents Sea as a major bastion for the Soviet nuclear missile submarines. This military factor may have made the reversion of the Northern Territories more difficult than ever. But the military factor may change yet again, as Typhoon-class submarines replace outdated Delta-class subs. Given the longer range of the missiles aboard the newer subs, the Soviet fleet of SSBNs might retreat to the Sea of Japan, which is deeper and can provide a safer shelter for them than the Sea of Okhotsk.

Whatever the Soviet rationale may be regarding the basis of power politics and military calculations, the Soviets have been unable to marshal any credible legal or moral defense of their continued occupation of the Northern Territories. The historical precedents are straightforward. The Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation of 1855 was the first agreement on the demarcation between Japan and Russia. The treaty established the border as lying between Etorofu Island and Uruppu Island and provided that all of Sakhalin be a joint possession of Japan and Russia. China ceded to Russia the northern shore of the Amur River in 1858, then the eastern shore of the Ussuri River in 1860. Those were years of eastward expansion of Russian imperialism, and in 1875, under diplomatic pressure of the tsar, Japan was forced to sign the Treaty of Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands. However, after winning the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 Japan regained the possession of the southern half of Sakhalin.

This was the state of demarcation between Japan and the Soviet Union before August 9, 1945, when the Red Army attacked Japan. The Soviets avoid legal arguments with the Japanese. As a rule, they state that the territorial problem has been solved. To defend this position, they can cite only the Yalta agreement and the San Francisco peace treaty. But it is clear to anybody who understands the basics of contract that the Yalta agreement can have no effect on Japan since the latter was not a party to it. Similarly, the Soviet Union is not in a position to resort to the San Francisco peace treaty since it refused to be a party to it. Additionally, Article 25 of the San Francisco peace treaty provides that "the present Treaty shall not confer any rights, titles or benefits on any State which is not an Allied Power as herein defined (a party to the Treaty except Japan)."

Thus the Soviets are well aware of the lack of legitimacy in their continuation of the de facto occupation of the Northern Territories. Without a solution acceptable to both sides, the normalization of Japanese-Soviet relations will never be achieved, much less any significant improvement beyond normalization. (Continued)

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⁷ Printed in *Voice* (Kyoto: PHP Kenkyujo, March and November 1985 and December 1986).

⁸ “Japan 1986 – An International Comparison” (Tokyo: Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs, 1986), pp. 40-41.

⁹ Kazuyuki Kimbara, “Nisso Shiberia Kaihatsu Kyoryoku no Kaiko to Tembo” (Retrospect and Prospect for the Japan-Soviet Cooperation for Siberian Development), printed in *Tenkanki no Soren* (Soviet Union in Transition) (Tokyo: Japan Institute of International Affairs, 1986), pp. 300-322.

¹⁰ Tsutomu Saito, “Gorubachofu Enzetsu wo Irei no Kohyo” (Unprecedented Release of the Text of Gorbachev Speech), *Sankei Shimbun*, August 11, 1987, p. 1.

¹¹ Tsutomu Saito, “Soren ga Kiko Kaikaku wo Danko” (Organizational Restructuring in Soviet Foreign Ministry), *Sankei Shimbun*, August 15, 1987, p. 4.