

November 13, 2005

Dealing with the Real Russia

By ITO Kenichi

Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to visit Japan Nov. 20-22. The last time he came here was about five years ago, in September 2000. By contrast, Japan's prime minister has visited Russia four times in the same period.

Putin, it is said, agreed to make a second visit after Tokyo's strong persuasion, though he was reluctant to do so. On Sept. 27, Putin said on state television, in effect: Russian sovereignty over the four northern islands (Kunashiri, Etorofu, Habomai and Shikotan) is guaranteed by international law as a result of World War II. Russia has no intention of discussing this matter with Japan.

The Japanese government should have openly protested the statement, but did not - perhaps because it did not want to provoke the Russians. It is hard to understand why Tokyo remained silent.

Indeed, something is wrong with the way Tokyo deals with Moscow. In fact, that's how many Japanese are beginning to think regarding Japanese diplomacy toward Russia. Japan is decidedly in a position of disadvantage, like a sumo wrestler losing balance against a formidable grappler. As things now stand, Japan is in a no-win situation. What went wrong?

During the Cold War the Soviet Union consistently denied the existence of any territorial issue with Japan, while Japan made it clear that it would not sign a peace treaty with Russia unless the issue of the four northern islands was resolved. Thus, to use the sumo analogy, the two countries were grappling squarely.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world began to tout the "democratization" of Russia, believing that the country was changing for the better. At least the United States under President Bill Clinton believed that, and so did West European nations. Japan could be forgiven for having followed suit.

In subsequent years, Tokyo pulled off some diplomatic achievements. In 1993, President Boris Yeltsin signed the Tokyo Declaration, which called for the resolution of the territorial issue

involving all four islands in accordance with the documents the two countries had signed, as well as the principles of law and justice. In November 1997, at a summit meeting in Krasnoyarsk, the two sides formally pledged to make “utmost efforts” to conclude a peace treaty by 2000.

As a result, Japanese policy toward Russia came perilously close to one of “Japan-Russia joint actions,” departing progressively from an earlier policy linking politics with the economy and a subsequent policy aimed at improving ties through a balanced expansion of exchanges. The move toward “joint actions,” insofar as it was designed to promote Japan’s legitimate territorial claims, also could have been forgiven.

At the Kawana summit meeting in April 1998, however, Japan’s proposal for a breakthrough was rejected by Russia, making many Japanese wonder whether the nation should continue to follow such a conciliatory course. Moreover, 2000 passed without any tangible achievement. Putin’s debut as the new Russian president and his open denial of the territorial issue - a throwback to the Soviet-era statement - raised further questions about the wisdom of Japan’s “stay the course” diplomacy.

What needs to be done? My answer is that we should go back to where we started and re-examine our basic strategy. Japan’s present strategy toward Russia is based on a wrong perception of Russia that prevailed during the post-Soviet Yeltsin era - a view that Russia was moving steadily toward democracy.

The truth is that the Yeltsin era was not an era of democratization but merely a “period of turmoil” similar to those that have occurred at almost every major turning point in Russian history. After such a turning point, Russia always shows its “true colors” as a despotic state, as it did in Czarist Russia and Communist Russia. In other words, Russia is a state where the “rule of violence” prevails as opposed to the “rule of law,” “rule of personality,” “rule of consensus,” etc.

In my view, Putin’s Russia is beginning to reveal itself as a despotic state - a national system embedded in a political culture that worships violence at home and abroad as the “supreme god.” Such violence-oriented Russian politics and diplomacy is behind the reason that Moscow has scrapped both the Tokyo Declaration and the Krasnoyarsk agreement so easily.

In dealing with Russia, therefore, Japan should keep in mind this hard reality: Neither the principle of “law and justice” nor a policy of “joint actions” is going to work. The only thing that works, in the final analysis, is the calculus of power. The question is whether Japan has such power.

U.S. President George W. Bush, speaking in Riga, Latvia, on May 7, said the Yalta agreement was an “evil agreement,” as were the German-Soviet nonaggression pact (which divided Poland) and the Munich appeasement (which sold off Czechoslovakia). The Japanese government should

pay greater attention to Bush's statement.

Putin, as I have noted, said Russian sovereignty over the four northern islands is guaranteed by international law as a result of World War II. By “international law,” he means nothing but the Yalta agreement.

(This is the text of an article by Prof. ITO Kenichi, President & CEO of the Japan Forum on International Relations, which originally appeared in the “Seiron” column of the “Sankei Shimbun” on October 22, 2005 and was translated into English and posted in “The Japan Times” on November 8, 2005)