

Originality, Not Succession ---Policy Recommendation for PM Suga's Diplomacy on Russia

By HAKAMADA Shigeki

In this article, the author would like to explore new Prime Minister Suga's diplomacy on Russia, who said to be basically succeeding the predecessor PM Abe's policy. The author entirely values PM Abe's diplomatic achievements highly, including how passionate he was on the policy towards Russia, compared to any other predecessors, and expresses his respect for that. However, the Northern Territories issue, of which PM Abe aimed to conclude by signing the peace treaty with Russia based on the friendship with President Putin during both leaders' term, was not even got closer to the goal but rather, in the author's perspective, fell back further. That is to say, Pres. Putin got much tougher on the issue. PM Abe voiced how regretful his administration was not able to solve the issue, but did not say how it happened. Without examining how it was not, succession of Abe diplomacy would only to be led to repeat the failure. In this article, therefore, the author will examine the issues caused in PM Abe's diplomacy on Russia, and indicate lessons for the successor, PM Suga.

The following is the summary of what did not go well in PM Abe's diplomacy on Russia: (1) The Abe administration did not see Russian counterpart's very cynical, realist way of thinking or mentality. They believed the fundamental good of humanity and expected Russia's goodwill reaction when Japan shows goodwill, which was naïve. (2) Pres. Putin sees the outer Russia is enemies, and does not see Japan as an independent state due to its dependence on the United States. (3) Pres. Putin understands the international laws or treaties are to be utilized as much as possible when necessary, including the loopholes, as political wisdom. At the United Nations, for example, Russia did not care the General Assembly's resolution on opposing Crimea annexation at all, but makes use of its veto at the Security Council. At the Northern Territories negotiation, too, Russia always brings up the UN Enemy State Clause, the Article 107 of the UN Charter, to emphasize that the loser of the World War II cannot refuse the decision of the winner, which was decided and supposed to be removed from the Charter at the General Assembly in 1995.

For PM Suga to not repeat the abovementioned diplomatic failures, the author would like to clarify there were no true trust or recognition shared between PM Abe and Pres. Putin, with specific cases of Japan having single-handedly rushed on its wishful thinking as listed below, so those parts will not be succeeded.

On September 4, 2016, PM Abe made a speech at the Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok, and passionately called on to President Putin with his first name to be friendly, "We

stand here today shouldering our respective viewpoints on history ... Putting an end to the unnatural state of affairs that has continued these 70 years, shall we not together carve out a new era for Japan and Russia going forward? Vladimir, in order to carve out towards the future bilateral relations overflowing with unlimited potential, I am resolved to putting forth all my strength to advance the relationship between Japan and Russia, together with you.” President Putin talked about this with insulting tone in his press conference in Hangzhou where he was visiting on the following day, though this was not reported in Japanese media as far as the author knows, probably due to the occasion was held only for the Russian media. “He is an outstanding and remarkable speaker. What he was great about in the speech at the Vladivostok summit meeting, however, was not the territorial issue part, but what he said about the 8 cooperation proposals (in economy and other areas that PM Abe proposed in Sochi meeting in May, 2016) and their prospects. Pres. Putin gave a cold shoulder about the territorial issue and the signing of peace treaty that PM Abe passionately talked about, while only bought the part of economic cooperation which would be practically beneficial to Russia ---Pres. Putin was somewhat honest.

On November 14, 2018, the Summit meeting between PM Abe and Pres. Putin was held in Singapore. Afterwards, PM Abe said to the media that he is “willing to solve the territorial issue based on the trust being built, to sign the peace treaty. Pres. Putin and I are in a complete sync of strong willingness to conclude the issue by our own hands, of which left for over 70 years since the end of WWII to be not inherited to the future generations.” PM Abe often has stated that he and Pres. Putin were in a complete sync of their strong willingness to conclude the territorial issue and sign the peace treaty. About a year in prior, however, Pres. Putin had said another comment that PM Abe loses his face, at the press conference in Da Nang, Vietnam on Nov. 11, 2017, that “Whoever the leader of Russia or Japan at the time of signing the peace treaty between the two countries, would not be important.” Frankly, what he meant would be that he was not willing to sign the peace treaty while he is in power. This comment was not reported in Japanese media either.

What went through then was exactly what Pres. Putin had said. PM Abe was spreading the fantasy with his Russia approach, which of course was very convenient for Pres. Putin. The Russian leadership is, therefore, welcoming PM Suga’s attitude that he is basically succeeding PM Abe’s diplomacy on Russia. As soon as Mr. Suga was elected as the new prime minister, Pres. Putin stated that he “expects PM Suga consults with Mr. Abe on his diplomacy on Russia, just like Mr. Abe consulted with (designated as an envoy to Moscow) former PM Mori,” according to a report on Sept. 14.

While succeeding the basic policies of Abe diplomacy, PM Suga also said he is taking its own stance. A Russian Japan expert, V. Kistanov, is paying close attention to what PM Suga said about “willing to build a solid foothold of own diplomatic stance.” (“Nezavisimaya Gazeta,” Sept. 21). After the Summit meeting with Pres. Putin in Singapore, PM Abe said “It was decided to accelerate the negotiation of peace treaty based on the Joint Declaration of 1956,” which means it is willing to make

a deal with 2 smaller islands solution. On the contrary, on the following day of the Summit meeting, Mr. Suga clearly stated at the press conference that “It has been Japan’s consistent attitude to solve the attribution of the four islands of Northern Territories, to sign the peace treaty. There has been no change made on that” as then-Chief Cabinet Secretary. On Sept. 14, too, Mr. Suga had stated it was not just the two islands stated on the Joint Declaration of ’56, but to “clarify the attribution of the four islands to sign the peace treaty.” Dr. Kistanov says what Mr. Suga said are noteworthy in “giving a new nuance to Mr. Abe’s stance that avoided to include all four islands.” “Conclusion of a peace treaty through the solution of [the] issue [of where Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai Islands belong]” is the exact sentence of the Tokyo Declaration on Japan-Russia Relations agreed in 1993, which Pres. Putin had recognized in 2001 and 2003. The expression though does not clarify where the islands would belong to, and it is different from how some hardliners interpret it as ‘returning of four islands at once’ solution. The agreement made in Singapore summit states to ‘accelerate the negotiation’ in Japanese version, but in Russian one it is to ‘activate the negotiation’ which is nuanced no hurry.

In sum, the following is the author’s recommendations for PM Suga: (1) Grasp the Russian leadership’s way of thinking and mentality accurately. (2) Do build his original diplomatic stance on Russia, even if it would be harder than succeeding PM Abe’s policy without a criticism. (3) Do not rush to earn achievements, be patient when odds seem to be against, and deal with the issue as it would be in the decades to come.

(This is the English translation of an article written by HAKAMADA Shigeki, Trustee, JFIR / Professor Emeritus, Aoyama Gakuin University and University of Niigata Prefecture, which originally appeared on the e-forum “Hyakka-Seiho (Hundred Flowers in Full Bloom)” of JFIR on October 20, 2020.)