

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 3 | MARCH 12, 2019

## RESOLVED

### Japan Could Play the Russia Card Against China



Photo: ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AFP/Getty Images

## FROM THE EDITOR

*Northeast Asia has been a theater for geostrategic competition between global and regional powers. During the Cold War, U.S.-China rapprochement was pursued to balance against the Soviet threat. Today, the United States considers strategic competition with China and Russia a central challenge to U.S. security and prosperity and seeks cooperation with its allies to maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe has strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance, a cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy, during his current term but has also made repeated efforts to improve ties with Russia. Abe has met with Russian president Vladimir Putin 25 times since September 5, 2013, to explore joint economic projects in the context of discussions about the Northern Territories and potential peace treaty negotiations. But this flurry of bilateral diplomacy also takes place against the backdrop of a rising China. Could Japan play the Russia card against China in this era of strategic competition?*

*In this fifth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Mr. Shinji Hyodo of The National Institute of Defense Studies and Dr. Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center to assess the China factor in Japan-Russia relations.*



Mr. Shinji Hyodo  
 Director, Regional Studies Department,  
 National Institute for Defense Studies  
 (NIDS)

Dr. Dmitri Trenin  
 Director, Carnegie Moscow Center



“Under the increasingly severe security environment in East Asia, it is critical for Japan to advance cooperation with Russia in all areas, including security and energy, thereby enhancing bilateral relations as a whole, in order to ensure its security. Based on this recognition, Japan will cooperate with Russia in securing peace and stability of the Asia- Pacific region. With regard to the issue of the Northern Territories, the most important pending issue between the two countries, Japan will vigorously negotiate with Russia under a consistent policy of resolving the issue of the attribution of the four islands and concluding a peace treaty.”

This is the Japanese government’s view on Russia taken from Japan’s first [National Security Strategy](#) published on December 17, 2013. Against the backdrop of Japan’s effort to strengthen ties with Russia is the strategic thinking that it is desirable for Japan to at least sign a peace treaty with Russia and normalize relations with its neighbors amidst the increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan. The rise of China, the destabilization of the Korean Peninsula, and the declining power of the United States all factor into this thinking.

The Japanese approach of “proactive contribution to peace,” which includes [“diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map,”](#) reflects the country’s growing awareness that it must think of ways to deal with a rising China. In fact, there is a scant expectation on the Japanese side that Russia would serve as an effective card to play against the rise of China in the long run. Although using such a card would be unrealistic in the short term, Japan hopes to avoid China-Russia cooperation that would amount to an anti-Japanese front. In short, Japan strategically intends to strengthen Japan-Russia relations to prevent Russia from completely aligning with China on its approach towards Japan.

While some call it a “marriage of convenience without divorce,” China-Russia relations are structurally complex and include elements of anti-U.S. alignment on the surface as well as potential mutual distrust. Since the Ukraine crisis of 2014, Russia has emphasized anti-U.S. and pro-China rhetoric and tightened relations with China as Russia-U.S. and Russia-EU relations atrophied. However, Russia is limited in how far it can pursue such

Forget it. Japan has no chance of playing the Russia card in its relations with China. The main reasons are as follows.

Russia puts its relations with China and Japan into very different baskets. China is a great power and an emerging superpower, rivaling the United States. In the present situation of U.S.-Russian hybrid war confrontation, Moscow has come to rely more on China, economically and financially, but also technologically, than before. Japan, of course, is a major economic player, but in geopolitical and strategic terms it remains a junior ally of the United States, which basically follows in the wake of U.S. policies.

For Russia, maintaining good neighborly relations with China, with which it shares a 4,300 km-long border, is a must. Adversarial relations with China are a nightmare for Russian strategists, to be absolutely avoided. From Moscow’s perspective, improving relations with Japan is certainly desirable but not at any cost. If push comes to shove, Russia will do nothing that might threaten to derail its relations with China.

The Kremlin takes a dim view of any attempt by another country to use Russia as a card against a third player. Moreover, Japan’s activity toward that goal would be seen as closely coordinated with the United States, seeking to turn the Washington-Beijing-Moscow triangle against China. In the current circumstances, neither Tokyo nor Washington will be permitted to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing.

It is not clear at all what Japan could offer to Russia that even theoretically might be capable of weaning Moscow off Beijing. Japan’s room of maneuver in its relations with Russia is rather narrow. Within the G-7, Tokyo loyally subscribes to the U.S.-led drive to impose economic sanctions on Russia. Japan also maintains strict controls on technology exports to Russia. It is unlikely that the United States would agree to a significant relaxation of these sanctions and controls without major concessions from Russia that go way beyond Russo-Japanese relations.

That said, Japan certainly needs a strong relationship with Russia. As China grows stronger, and the United States focuses more on itself, Japan is wise to look for regional partners to complement its alliance with the

discourse in East Asia. Under the unipolar world dominated by the United States, Russia's pro-China stance to create a multipolar world appeared to be reasonable. However, in this multipolar world, where relative power is recognized to be shifting from the United States to China, Putin is now facing his largest strategic challenge: to decide where Russia stands between the world's two poles—the United States and China.

China intends to expand its influence in the Arctic Ocean by connecting the “polar silk road,” which Russia considers to be in its sphere of influence, with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Furthermore, with the disappearance of the INF treaty, the arms control regime between the United States and Russia has been lost, and there is an emerging military concern over how Russia should deal with the Chinese buildup of its nuclear capabilities. For Russia to demonstrate its influence in international society, it must improve ties with the United States, which has been in the worst state since the end of the Cold War, to alter Russia's over-dependence on China.

Given the lack of room for the Trump administration to improve ties with Russia amid the “Russiagate” problem, we cannot expect a dramatic change to Russia's anti-U.S., pro-China approach soon. Yet, Putin himself likely doesn't want to see continued hostility from the United States and Europe, nor does he want his country to become China's junior partner. In the near future, Putin will try to focus on relations with India and Japan to try to maintain a strategic balance between Asian countries other than China. To the extent that Russia does not want to become a vassal state of China, there will be room for the development of Japan-Russia relations vis-à-vis China.

In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is trying to accelerate peace treaty negotiations based on the 1965 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, through a new framework led by the foreign ministers. He is aiming to conclude the treaty before his term as prime minister expires in 2021. In fact, all three conditions necessary to conclude the treaty are almost in place: 1) the two nations' political bases are stable, and the two leaders have nurtured a trustful personal relationship; 2) the two countries have shared interests to enhance the Japan-Russia relations based on today's East Asia's strategic environment; and 3) the two countries do not anticipate the United States to intervene in the rapprochement between Japan and Russia as it used to in the past. Discussions over the Northern Territories have also shifted from marginal areas—economic and resource development

United States rather than replace it. Alongside India, Russia is a natural candidate for that role.

In particular, Tokyo needs to make sure that Moscow does not embrace Beijing's views of Japan and does not build a united political front against Japan. However, crudely playing a Russia card against China is not the way to achieve this. A more realistic approach would require a sustained effort to construct a close economic relationship and a security dialogue with Russia. Making Japan a valuable economic partner to Russia would materially incentivize Moscow to take Tokyo's legitimate interests into account. Russia, after all, has demonstrated an uncanny capability to manage parallel relations with countries that see each other as adversaries, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan; Israel and Iran; Iran and Saudi Arabia; or India and Pakistan. Holding a balance in its foreign policy between China and Japan should not be impossible for the Kremlin. This is probably the most that a smart Japanese approach can achieve.

cooperation—to central themes—interpretations on history and security. The remaining challenge is whether the two heads of state could make a political decision and whether their people could accept that decision.

*Debating Japan is published by the Office of the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).*

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**SHINJI HYODO** is director of the regional studies department at The National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) in Tokyo. His specialty is Russian Area Studies in terms of East Asian Security. He learned the Russian language and Russian area studies at Sophia University (Tokyo, 1992) and Far Eastern State University of Russia (Vladivostok, 1991). He obtained an M.A. degree in international relations from Sophia University (Tokyo, 1994) and began his academic career as a research associate at NIDS from 1994. He has worked as a special researcher, Embassy of Japan in Moscow from 1996 to 1998 and also worked in the cabinet secretariat of the National Security Council from 2001 to 2003. He was a visiting fellow of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security studied in London in 2007 and an advisor of the National Security Secretariat from 2016 to 2018. He is the Editor in Chief of East Asian Strategic Review, NIDS, and a board member of the Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies and the Japanese Association for International Security. He teaches Russian studies at Aoyama Gakuin University and International Christian University. He has published many articles on Russian area studies.

**DMITRI TRENIN**, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has been with the center since its inception. He also chairs the research council and the Foreign and Security Policy Program. He retired from the Russian Army in 1993. From 1993–1997, Trenin held a post as a senior research fellow at the Institute of Europe in Moscow. In 1993, he was a senior research fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome. He served in the Soviet and Russian armed forces from 1972 to 1993, including experience working as a liaison officer in the external relations branch of the Group of Soviet Forces (stationed in Potsdam) and as a staff member of the delegation to the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms talks in Geneva from 1985 to 1991. He also taught at the War Studies Department of the Military Institute from 1986 to 1993. He obtained a PhD from Institute of the USA and Canada, Russian Academy of Sciences.

## RELATED RESOURCES

CSIS Resources: [Japan Chair](#), [Russia and Eurasia Program](#), and [Europe Program](#).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan's resources on [Japan-Russia relations](#) and on [Japan's Security Policy](#)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia's [resources](#) on Russia-Japan relations.

## PREVIOUS ISSUES

Vol. 2

**Issue 2:** "[RESOLVED: A U.S.-DPRK Peace Declaration Is Good for Japan](#)" (February 2019)

**Issue 1:** "[RESOLVED: Japan Should Spend 2 Percent of GDP on Defense](#)" (January 2019)

Vol. 1

**Issue 2:** "[RESOLVED: Japan-China Rapprochement Will Fail](#)" (December 2018)

**Issue 1:** "[RESOLVED: It Is Good for Japan If Shinzo Abe Is Prime Minister until 2021](#)" (November 2018)

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

**YUKA KOSHINO** is a research associate with the Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where she focuses on projects involving U.S.-Japan relations and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

### FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL

**Twitter** @JapanChair

**Facebook** CSIS Japan Chair

To Subscribe to *Debating Japan* and receive invitations for Japan Chair events, [Click Here](#)



For more information on the CSIS Japan Chair, please visit <https://www.csis.org/programs/japan-chair>