



2016.12.20

Interpreting the Recent Abe-Putin Territorial Negotiation in an Historical Context

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Introduction

On December 15 and 16, what is claimed for 16th top meetings between Mr. Abe and Mr. Putin were held in Nagato, Yamaguchi Prefecture and Tokyo. Until sometime before the meeting, major newspapers had carried reports on the coming territorial negotiations with big headlines like “Path to the Negotiation Comes in Sight” or “Good Response to Be Felt”. However, the negotiations had achieved only a small progress that included “making a framework to promote economic cooperation in the Northern territories” and “expanding the freedom of visits of the former residents to the Northern territories without visa, often known as visa-free visits”

The tough acting power of Mr. Abe to manage to realize a summit meeting this time is remarkable indeed and we have no objection to the fact that the territorial disputes can't be resolved in a short space of time. But we cannot remain satisfied with the achievement that we have reached a starting point of the negotiations.

Since Japan has chosen the path of negotiation, could we expect a smooth construction of a model for a return of the territory that starts from a conclusion of peace treaty, i.e., a return of the territory and use of the territory in a way that is really beneficial to both countries? Let us consider the meaning of a series of Abe-Putin territorial negotiations while reviewing the history of negotiations between the two countries.

Origin of Territorial Issue

In 1855, Japan concluded the Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation with Russia, after it concluded the similar treaties with the US and the UK. Japan and Russia agreed that the four islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Habomai and Shikotan belong to Japan and Karafuto remains unpartitioned between Japan and Russia on which island the residents of both countries can continue to reside. In 1875, Japan concluded the Treaty of the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kurile Islands in which Japan confirmed the whole island of Karafuto as a Russian territory and

in exchange for it Japan obtained the Kurile Islands comprising 18 islands ranging from Shumushu to Uruppu. In 1905 based on the Portsmouth Treaty, Russia ceded to Japan the southern portion of the island of Sakhalin with the fiftieth degree of north latitude set as the northern boundary of the ceded territory.

The Second World War

In February 1945, the US, the UK and the USSR agreed at Yalta Conference that the southern part of Sakhalin as well as all the islands adjacent to it shall be returned to the Soviet Union, and Japan shall cede the Kurile Islands to the Soviet Union. In April, the Soviet Union gave Japan a notice of non-extension of the Soviet-Japan Neutrality Treaty. In July, the Potsdam Declaration was announced to Japan which contained the unconditional surrender of Japan and the contents of the Cairo Declaration (“the Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyuushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as (the Allies) determine”).

Participation of the Soviet Union in the war

On August 6th 1945, the Allies dropped an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, and on the 9th the Soviet Union gave Japan a notice that it would participate in the war, which was accompanied by the second drop of an atomic bomb over Nagasaki on the same day. On the 14th Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration and surrendered. On the 15th, the emperor declared the end of the war by issuing an imperial rescript. On the same day the Soviet military forces invaded to Kurile Islands, and by the 31st of August it made the Japanese army disarm from Shumushu to Urup, occupying the northern four islands by September 3rd.

San Francisco Peace Treaty

On September 8th 1951, Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty and agreed to obey the provision that reads “Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kurile Islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it.” During the meeting, the Plenipotentiary Shigeru Yoshida raised an objection stating that he could not accept the argument of the Soviet Plenipotentiary that the Kurile Islands and northern part of Karafuto were taken over by Japan by its invasion, insisting that the northern four islands were the traditional Japanese territory. The Soviet Union sent the Representative Gromyko to the San Francisco Peace Conference where he presented his dissenting view at length on the ground that “although the proposed treaty contained the words that Japan renounces the Kurile Islands and Northern Karafuto, it did not contain that those territories belong to the Soviet Union”. After all, he rejected to sign the treaty.

Japan-Soviet Joint Statement

In June 1955, a negotiation started between Japan and the Soviet Union to conclude an individual peace treaty. On September 7th, 1956, the United States supported Japan by issuing a “US Memorandum on Japan-Soviet Negotiation” with an official view that “the northern four islands are at all times part of Japanese territory and under the Japanese sovereignty.” Although

the two countries did not reach a consensus on the territorial issues, on October 19th , 1956, the two countries changed the focus of negotiations from that for peace treaty to that for re-establishment of diplomatic relations, with a view that the recommencement of a normal diplomatic relationship should be a priority, and signed the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. In this declaration, they agreed “to continue negotiations for the conclusion of a peace treaty after the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between them, and the Soviet Union agreed to hand over Habomai and Shikotan to Japan, provided that the actual handover of these islands should take place after the conclusion of a peace treaty.” .

Soviet Default of the Declaration after Ratification by Both Parliaments

The Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration came into effect on December 12, 1956. However, the Soviet Union, looking at the conclusion of the Japan-US Security Treaty in 1960, imposed strict conditions on the return of the islands, demanding all foreign military forces should be evacuated from the Japanese territory. The Japanese government retorted to this pointing out the fact that the old US-Japan Security Treaty had already existed at the time of signing of the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration and foreign military forces had been stationed in Japan. Prime Minister Khrushchev gave a written notice to Japan stating that there was no territorial issue remaining between the two countries.

Negotiations between Mr. Abe and Mr. Putin

Prime Minister Abe, who headed the second Abe administration in December 2012 (after the first one for July 2006 to July 2007), had since tried to have many meetings with President Putin. In May 2016, he visited Mr. Putin at Sochi, and declared he was ready to energetically promote the negotiations over the northern territories based on the “New Approach”, and proposed a “cooperation plan in 8 points”. At their meeting at Vladivostok in September 2016, Prime Minister Abe invited President Putin in his speech to join in “overcoming all manner of difficulties to leave to the young people of the next generation a world that makes (their) possibilities come into full bloom.” And Japan had positively acted to promote the cooperation including presentation in November of 30 items for bilateral cooperation, extension of loans by JBIC of approximately 4 billion yen to the Sberbank (Savings Bank of the Russian Federation) in December, as well as loans by megabanks to Gazprom amounting to 95 billion yen.

On the other hand, President Putin stated in September 2006 that “if Japan plays a political show, he will respond to it by a political show. There will be no other way than a draw in solving the territorial issues.” Since then, he also stated that nothing has been decided on the detailed rules on the hand-over of the two islands, even if the two countries start to negotiate from the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. The concerned personnel also confirmed that the four islands belong to Russia.

After all, the recent Nagato and Tokyo meetings resulted in the confirmation of “start of negotiation for joint economic activities”, “and sincere willingness for conclusion of a peace

treaty” but “no progress in the territorial issues.”

In Conclusion

The recent opinion polls in two countries show a clearly different attitude toward the northern territories issues from each other. Japanese opinion shows that 53% of respondents support “the early return of a part of the islands with continued negotiation for the return of the rest,” while, in Russia, 70% of respondents consider that “even the two islands should not be handed over.”

Japan has been trying hard to settle the territorial issues by negotiation, not by war. It is true that Japan has no other choice, but if it is a negotiation with a territory at stake, Japan should approach it by taking all-around view on (i) international environment that includes Japan-US Security Treaty, economic sanction on Russia by the G7 countries, new administration of the US, as well as responses and their timing to the island issues with China and Korea, (ii) the domestic situation in Russia ahead of the Presidential election, (iii) national interest in Japan with an increasing number of people having indifferent attitude, (iv) deployment in the US of a hard negotiator like a new State Secretary Tillerson and their future ways of negotiation on Russia, and (v) the cases like the doomed experience of East Germany. It would be important for Japan to exploit all available resources of human resources and networks to do this.

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