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Japan-Soviet relations: Is there 'yukidoke'—slow thaw—at last?

by Uwe Parpart

When Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov visits Japan in mid-April next year, he will be the first Soviet leader ever to do so. And it will have been a most difficult delivery: At a time when U.S. President George Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov will meet at a drop of a hat, it took over two years of low-, middle-, and high-level preparatory meetings of Soviet and Japanese officials until the visit was finally confirmed during Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's three-day Tokyo sojourn in early September. From the Japanese government's standpoint, even after the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989-90, there was no point in rushing into a Japan-Soviet summit meeting in Tokyo as long as there was no Soviet motion on the thorny and longstanding Northern Territories issue.

In 1960, Moscow abrogated a draft agreement, drawn up between the two countries in 1956 at the time they reestablished diplomatic relations, covering the eventual return to Japan of the four southern Kurile Islands (*chishmia-retto*) of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and Habomai, occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War in the Pacific. Since then, Japan has kept relations frozen on all other fronts. This hardline *junctim* between the Northern Territories issue and other aspects of Japan-Soviet relations, often branded unreasonable by non-Japanese observers, has been a principle of Japanese foreign policy for the past 30 years. The reason is the outstanding strategic signficance of the four small islands for the security of the four major Japanese home islands.

Control by the Soviets of the southern Kuriles puts Hokkaido, the northernmost of the large home islands, into a pincer-hold between the Kuriles in the northeast and southern Sakhalin in the northwest. Since 1978-79, some 75,000 of the best-trained, best-equipped Soviet Far East forces are forward deployed on Sakhalin Island and the Kuriles chain, including ground troops, approximately of division strength and equipped with 130 mm cannon, on Etorofu, Kunashiri, and Shikotan, and Air Force units with about 40 aircraft at Tennei Air Base on Etorofu. These deployments directly threaten Hokkaido across the narrow Soya (La Perouse) Strait and the even narrower Nemuro Strait, and admit of no possible defensive interpretation of Soviet intentions.

In anticipation of the Gorbachov visit to Tokyo next spring, former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, in July of this year, thus called upon the Soviet Union to institute a unilateral arms reduction plan in the Far East as a confidence-building measure and as a first move toward reduction of East-West tensions in Asia. Such confidence-building measures are necessary in light of the dramatic—and as-yet-unreversed—offensive post-1975 Soviet Far East military buildup, as well as in light of the historical record.

But no significant reduction of Soviet Far East forces threatening Japan has occurred to date. In a goodwill gesture, and after much discussion, Japan's Defense Agency in its 1990 "Defense of Japan" White Paper dropped the term "Soviet threat," but defense officials at the same time cautioned against a "defense vacuum" in Northeast Asia and said that planned equipment purchases would not be influenced by this change of terminology.

Pre-summit developments and outlook

Expectations that a peace treaty will be signed during Gorbachov's April 1991 Tokyo visit are premature, and their realization will uniquely depend on Soviet willingness to return the Northern Territories to Japan. No Japanese prime minister will be able to accept a compromise of the type "two islands returned first and then we shall see," as was obliquely suggested by Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze in Tokyo in September.

And no Japanese politician from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) could have been unduly impressed, when Mr. Gorbachov received the leader of a Buddhist sect, Toynbee aficionado Daisaku Ikeda of Soka-ga-kai on July 28, to state that "the broadest cooperation and even friendship are possible" between Japan and the Soviet Union, and that he is "prepared to take big steps to meet Japan." What they

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will remembered instead is Gorbachov's subsequent remark regarding the southern Kuriles, that "the Soviet Union has no land to spare." A Japanese Foreign Ministry official has also ridiculed the Soviet notion, as expressed at a Singapore conference by Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov, that Japan risked being cut out of lucrative investments in Siberia by its hard-line attitude on the Kuriles. Japan is not exactly in need of economic assistance from the Soviet Union.

The basic Japanese strategic attitude, which governs Japan-Soviet relations, was recently explained at length in an article "The U.S.-Japan Alliance in Historical Perspective" by Japan's ambassador to Thailand, Hisahiko Okazaki, a former planning chief of the Japanese Foreign Ministry:

> The Soviet Union may somewhat reduce the [military] force level in Siberia in the coming years. We can assume, however, that reduction will be made mainly in the forces directed towards China, which have been unrealistically large because of the past Russian paranoia towards the Chinese threat.
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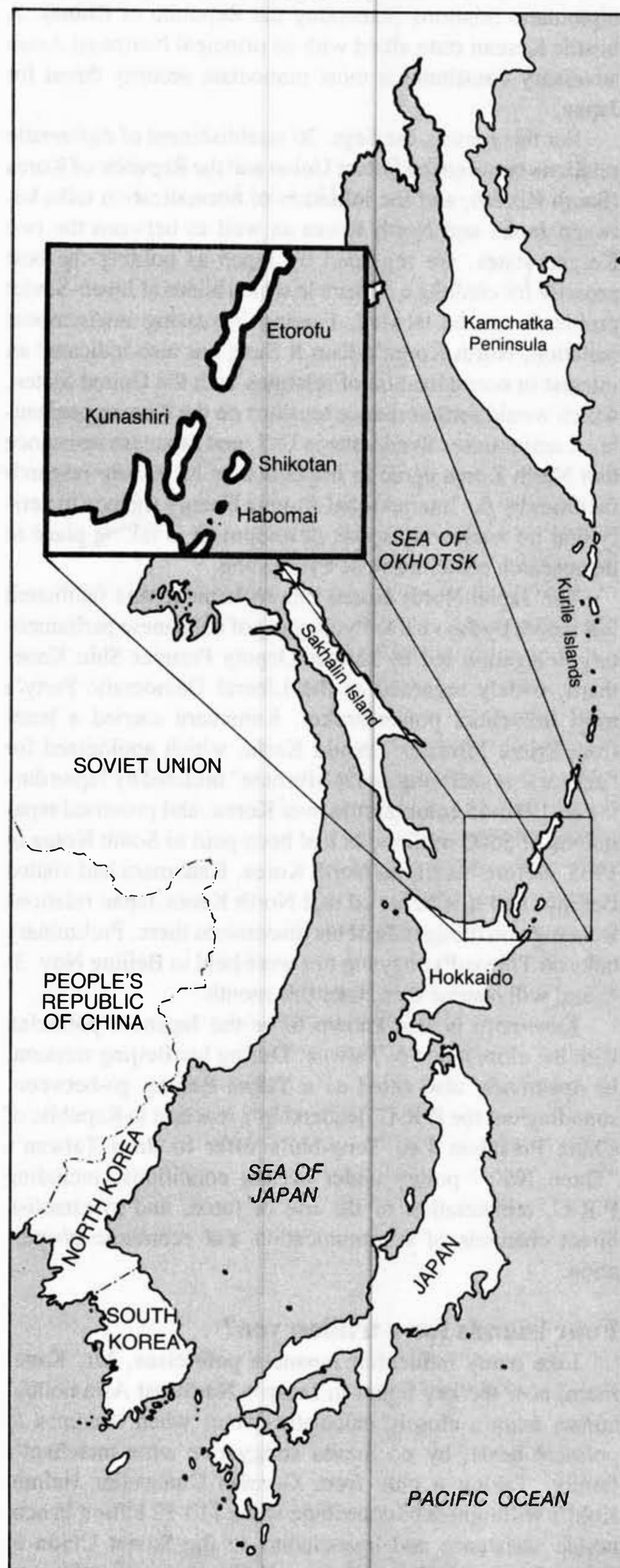
> In the course of time there may be a moment in which Russia could be quite friendly and less dangerous, and appear to be a profitable partner to deal with. It is very likely that the Soviet Union will appear to be markedly so in the coming few years. And in itself it is not a bad thing at all. But the basic international structure remains the same.
>
> We should never lose sight of the real threat. Japan once lost sight in the temporary disappearance of Russian power in East Asia during the period of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. America also lost sight of the Russian problem by its fascination with moralistic diplomacy in Asia. . . . [But] as long as Russia is a massive empire, whether Czarist or communist, it is the central problem . . . and as long as Russia has an interest in the eastward opening to the Pacific Ocean, it will always remain a potential threat to Japan.

In the same article, and again in a recent interview with *The Nation* of Bangkok on Oct. 22, Ambassador Okazaki also warned about the danger, inherent in growing U.S.-Japanese tensions, of a lapse in the U.S.-Japan security alliance: "Once that tie is cut, Japan will feel insecure [vis-à-vis the Soviet Union], and that's when I think Japan will be compelled to resort to a unilateral military buildup." The unspoken Japanese security concern, of course, is not just with the Soviet Union, but with a "Greater China" after 1997, when the People's Republic of China will incorporate Hong Kong, and, as the Japanese expect, soon thereafter Taiwan.

The Korea factor

Throughout the last century, Russo-Japanese relations have been to a significant extent determined by the state of

The Southern Kurile Islands



affairs on the Korean peninsula. North Korea today is the only country on the globe with which Japan does not maintain diplomatic relations (excepting the Republic of China). A hostile Korean state allied with its principal Northeast Asian adversary constitutes a most immediate security threat for Japan.

For this reason, the Sept. 30 establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and the initiation of normalization talks between Japan and North Korea as well as between the two Korean states, are regarded by Japan as holding the best promise for creating a climate in which bilateral Japan-Soviet problems can be tackled. Fearing increasing international isolation, North Korea's Kim Il Sung has also indicated an interest in normalization of relations with the United States, which would further reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula. A major unresolved issue is U.S. and Japanese insistence that North Korea agree to inspection of its nuclear research facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency to verify that no nuclear weapons development is taking place at the research center north of Pyongyang.

The Japan-North Korea rapprochement was facilitated last month by the visit to Pyongyang of a Japanese parliamentary delegation led by former Deputy Premier Shin Kanemaru, widely regarded as the Liberal Democratic Party's most influential power-broker. Kanemaru carried a letter from Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, which apologized for "unbearable suffering and misfortune" inflicted by Japan during its 1910-45 colonial rule over Korea, and promised reparations of $500 million, as had been paid to South Korea in 1965. Before his trip to North Korea, Kanemaru had visited Beijing, and it is believed that North Korea-Japan relations were high on the agenda of his discussions there. Preliminary talks on Tokyo-Pyongyang ties were held in Beijing Nov. 3-4, and will resume there later this month.

Kanemaru is also known to be the Japanese politician with the closest ties to Taiwan. During his Beijing mission, he apparently also acted as a Taipei-Beijing go-between, sounding out the P.R.C. leadership's reaction to Republic of China President Lee Teng-hui's offer to drop Taiwan's "Three No's" policy under certain conditions, including P.R.C. renunciation of the use of force, and to establish direct channels of communication and economic cooperation.

Four islands for a trillion yen?

Like many influential Japanese politicians, Mr. Kanemaru, now the key figure in Japan's Northeast Asia policy, comes from a closely calculating, but, when it comes to political deals, by no means stingy rice wine merchant's family. Taking a clue from German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's willingness to contribute some $10-12 billion in economic assistance and investments to the Soviet Union in return for a smoother path toward German unification and early repatriation of Soviet soldiers stationed in Germany, Mr. Kanemaru is credited with the calculation that a comparable sum—exceedingly cheap taking into account current Japanese land prices—might just be what is required to break the ice on the Northern Territories issue. Such notions run counter to Japan's policy stance at this year's Houston Group of Seven economic summit, where Prime Minister Kaifu sided with Mr. Bush and Mrs. Thatcher in rejecting large-scale economic assistance to the Soviet Union, but, as some of Mr. Kanemaru's factional allies have pointed out, "We are able to pay. They are not."

For similar reasons, considering Japan's long-term interests vis-à-vis China and the Koreas and those countries' explicitly stated concerns, Kanemaru has strongly objected to the Kaifu government plan of sending troops to the Persian Gulf, and helped scuttle it in the lower house of Parliament.

What we are witnessing in the case of Kanemaru's diplomatic and political moves, which are just barely coordinated with the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry, and designed to nudge them into new policy directions, is a growing factional position in the LDP, determined to chart a Japanese foreign (and economic) policy course more independent of the United States.

This still rather loosely defined LDP grouping's policy stance, cutting across the party's traditional factional alignments and even reaching into opposition parties' layers, is not to be confused with the Socialist Party-dominated pacifist and "small Japan-ism" (*sho nihonshugi*) orientation. Rather, it has its original in the (failed) early-1970 Tanaka government attempts to loosen exclusive Japanese reliance internationally on U.S. policy leads. This policy orientation was in part carried forward by Prime Minister Nakasone, and now has become the creed—albeit still ill defined—of many members of the former Tanaka faction, who were first elected to Parliament in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

They regard the upcoming Gorbachov visit as a unique opportunity for changing Japan's image of an economically overgrown, but politically impotent player in the international arena, being dragged about hither and yon by the almighty United States. Taking the lead in changing the political constellation on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia, leading to early cross-recognition of the two Koreas by the Soviet Union, China Japan, and the United States, would clear the way for more far-reaching Japanese initiatives regarding the Soviet Union, China, and also the Indochinese countries.

Kanemaru and his factional allies see a de facto re-purchase by Japan of the southern Kuriles as something the Soviets might agree to in the context of a broader overall regional development package, though, as this writer was told, "such a deal would obviously have to be painted with a pretty color." In the meantime, cross-factional consensus in the LDP, and even largely cross-party consensus in Parliament conforms with the position stated in the Foreign Minis-

try's just-issued *Diplomatic Bluebook 1990:*

While acknowledging that there has been an easing of East-West tensions and that Soviet President Gorbachov has been a "major initiator of these changes," the report cautions: "The Soviet Union maintains a huge military capability, and the uncertainty surrounding the situation within the Soviet Union (including Gorbachov's own position) is a cause of uncertainty in the outlook of the future of international relations." The Soviet Union, the report adds, has shown no change in principle in its position regarding the Northern Territories, though "this issue has recently been debated in the Soviet Union with a flexibility that would have been inconceivable before, and it appears that the Soviet understanding of this . . . problem, while still inadequate, is slowly advancing."

The message is clear: Japan is willing and able to assist the Soviet Union in "developing a better understanding of the Kuriles issue." Mr. Shevardnadze was told as much in Tokyo in early September. His proposal in a Vladivostok speech a few days earlier, that Asian security issues be collectively dealt with in an Asian and Pacific foreign ministers meeting in 1993, however, received only polite, but cool attention. The Northern Territories issue is a bilateral Japan-Soviet problem and must be gotten out of the way before other matters are put on the agenda.

Japan and Russia's stormy relationship

by Uwe Parpart

In the late 18th and early 19th century, Czarist Russia became the first of the Western powers attempting to "open up" Japan. In 1792, a Russian envoy, Adam Laxman, landed at Nemuro in northeast Hokkaido (Ezo) and requested trade relations, only to be rebuffed by the *bakufu*—the government of the shogun—which in response drew up plans for a coastal defense system. A second Russian envoy, N.P. Rezanov, arrived in Nagasaki in 1804 with the same request, and upon being refused, ordered his men to attack the island of Etorofu. Again in 1811, Russian Navy Lt. V.M. Golovnin landed on Kunashiri Island and was arrested by the Japanese; all these incidents occurred some 40 years before other foreign nations' attempts to force their way into Japan, and all targeted Hokkaido and the Northern Territories.

After the 1900 Boxer Rebellion in China, during which Japanese troops participated in the allied expedition to rescue foreign nationals in Peking, Russia moved into southern Manchuria and began to encroach upon Korea, a country Japan had traditionally regarded as a buffer state between itself and China. With China weakened internally and battered by the Western powers' "open door" policy, Meiji Japan consequently came to regard Russian Far East expansionism as the major external security threat. In 1904, Japanese ships attacked the Russian Fleet at Port Arthur to stem further Russian advances. In the ensuing Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese Fleet under Adm. Togo Heihachiro destroyed the Russian Baltic Fleet in the Tsushima Strait between Korea and southern Japan, and as a result of the Sept. 5, 1905 peace treaty signed at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Russia was pushed back out of southern Manchuria, surrendered its economic interests there to Japan, ceded the southern half of Sakhalin Island, and recognized Japanese primacy in Korea.

From this point onward, Japanese influence in Korea and Manchuria continually increased at Chinese and Russian expense, leading to the formal annexation of Korea in 1910, and culminating in 1932, subsequent to the "Manchurian Incident," in the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchuko, formally ruled—since 1934—by the last emperor of the Ch'ing dynasty, but in reality fully controlled by Japan's Kwantung Army.

In line with a League of Nations committee report of October 1932, the early 1930s de facto annexation of Manchuria by Japan has generally been classified in the West as the initial move of Japanese aggression against China. However, in reality, as a consequence of China's weakness, and as understood by Japan, the alternative to Japanese power in Manchuria—and in Korea—until after World War II was never Chinese power—or Korean sovereignty—but domination of the region by the Soviet Union. This finally became clear to all no later than June 25, 1950, with the Soviet-backed and -inspired North Korean attack on South Korea, which had as its strategic aim not only the incorporation of all Korea into the communist realm, but also the subsequent subversion of Japan.

Had American war and immediate postwar policy and policy aims, as enshrined in the Yalta agreements, not been governed by astonishing delusions about the good-natured "Uncle Joe" Stalin, various and sundry world-federalist schemes, etc., such Soviet intentions in Northeast Asia as laid bare by the North Korean attack could readily have been inferred from the circumstances of Soviet entry into the war in the Pacific less than a week before it ended: In April 1941, at a time when the Hitler-Stalin Pact was in force, and after Soviet and Japanese armies had tested each other in two full-scale battles in 1938-39 along the Manchurian border, the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact with Japan. In spite of urgent American and British appeals for the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan, for months after Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945, Stalin, claiming logistical difficulties, did nothing. These difficulties were sud-