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Russia and Japan: Can Two-Plus-Two Equal More Than Four?

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Stephen Blank, Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, explains that “Whether or not there will actually be increased Russia-Japan economic engagement, it is clear that the rapprochement is partly being driven forward by a growing mutual apprehension regarding China’s increasingly aggressive stance in the region.”

Russo-Japanese rapprochement continues to move forward steadily even as agreement on the disputed Kurile Islands between the two countries remains unresolved. The 2+2 talks held in Tokyo in early November 2013 demonstrated that both sides are searching together for common ground, not only to normalize their relationship but also to come to terms with a dynamically transforming Asia. Both sides agreed to coordinate anti-terrorism and anti-piracy activities including conducting a joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Aden. Other issues covered included the possibility of joint air exercises and joint exchanges of information on countering cyber attacks.

Not all differences on defense issues were resolved; Russia still fears that the joint US-Japan missile defense system could undermine the regional strategic military balance. Moscow argued for the construction of a new Asian security architecture that will protect everyone, but both the Russian and Japanese ministers know full well that the joint US-Japan missile defense system is Tokyo’s insurance policy—if not Russia’s as well—against growing Chinese threats. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s policy is not to ally with any one party against a second party, therefore it is extremely unlikely that Russia will support China against Japan. Likewise, it is highly unlikely that Russia will formally ally with China against any other party.

Indeed, Nikolai Patrushev, head of Russia’s Security Council, told Japanese officials that Russia will not take sides in the Japan-China dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. Russia’s clear preference is for Japan and China to solve their disagreements through bilateral dialogue. Furthermore, Japan and Russia agreed to “strengthen the bilateral dialogue in a bid to expand cooperation in the fields of security and defense amid the rapidly changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific region.” Clearly Moscow is not interested in supporting China’s territorial claims with Japan in the East China Sea. This stance was reinforced by Russian President Vladimir Putin when he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Sochi Olympics.

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Thus Japan and Russia, finding ample reason for moving forward, scheduled another round of 2+2 talks for spring 2014 in Moscow and did so without discussing the vexed bilateral issue of the Kurile Islands. Not only did both sides agree to improve their mutual understanding of each other’s positions, they also made it clear that they will facilitate this ongoing rapprochement. According to the Russian *Kommersant* newspaper, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with the four ministers and “lifted the barriers to Japanese business activities in Russia,” potentially clearing the way for sharp increases in Japanese investment into Russia. As the *Kommersant* reported “Thus Tokyo seemingly agreed with Moscow’s call for the development of economic ties, disregarding problematical [Kurile Islands] issues.” This does not mean that the Kurile Islands are completely off the table. It

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is fully expected that discussions about them will resume in 2014. For now, however, they do not occupy center stage in the bilateral Russia-Japan relationship and this creates space for the exploration of other areas for mutual accommodation.

Whether or not there will actually be increased Russia-Japan economic engagement, it is clear that the rapprochement is partly being driven forward by a growing mutual apprehension regarding China’s increasingly aggressive stance in the region, the latest example being China’s unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. While this move clearly strikes at Japan, it also creates a baleful precedent for Russia. Japan may also be using this opportunity to get Washington to pay more attention to its regional security concerns. Nevertheless, the fact that both sides have agreed to extend the 2+2 mechanism and further develop cooperation together without directly addressing the issue of the Kurile Islands issue not only represents a concession to Russia, it does seem to confirm that both parties are concerned about Chinese intentions towards the region.

Japan, according to many Japanese and Chinese observers, may be trying to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow. While Chinese experts claim that this will not happen, the official Chinese response is much more cautious highlighting the fact that Russia-Japan cooperation will only enhance and strengthen regional peace and security. However, it is highly unlikely that China is happy with this apparent Russia-Japan rapprochement, even though it only has itself to blame.

If one looks at Russia’s other diplomatic and military outreach in Asia—towards Vietnam and South Korea—along with its own military buildup, it is clear that while Russia values bilateral cooperation with China, it is most unwilling to accept China as an Asian hegemon. Neither is it likely to view aggressive and belligerent Chinese probes like the new air identification defense zone with equanimity. According to Jeffrey Mankoff of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., “Russian military commanders acknowledge that they see China as a potential enemy, even as official statements continue to focus on the alleged threat from the United States and NATO.”

Other experts have noted that Japanese experts now discern a growing apprehension about China in Russian circles, particularly after the Chinese Navy brazenly circumnavigated the La Perouse Strait around Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk after the joint Russo-Chinese exercises last summer and Chinese commercial vessels successfully sailed through the Arctic Circle. Such displays of power around Russia’s Pacific Rim not only antagonized Japanese policy makers, but they also alarmed Russian elites. The recent UN decision to ratify Russia’s claims concerning the Sea of Okhotsk probably heightens Moscow’s apprehensions about Chinese naval ambitions and capabilities.

American policymakers have, wrongly in this author’s view, utterly discounted Russia as an Asian player. In the past, Russia has aligned with China to bring Russian differences with Washington to the fore. Russian self-interests, however, along with its quest for recognition both in Asia and on the broader international stage are bound up in a profound self-identification as a global great power and with the quest for maximum autonomy and independence in foreign policy. While Russian elites profess an alignment of interests with China, this is more talk than reality when Asian regional security is at issue as the actual conduct of their bilateral relationship suggests.

Meanwhile Japan, with good reason, regards China as its main threat and has every incentive to foster distance between Moscow and Beijing. Properly interpreted, Lavrov’s remarks imply that this is indeed possible should China become too aggressive. Recent Chinese unilateral provocative actions in both the South and East China Seas do little to allay these concerns. The question is can Japan and Russia put aside their own bilateral disagreements to jointly focus on a potentially larger concern that both share.

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