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Unfathomable Japanese Policy toward Russia

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There are fundamental problems in Japanese policy toward Russia. It would be a different story if Japan should abandon the Northern Territories, or settle for the return of only Habomai and Shikotan Islands or if Japan should be content with enhancing only economic relationships with Russia. What follows is the discussion presupposing that Japan, as a nation state, should resolve the territorial issues at any cost, while pursuing concurrently economic relationships and negotiations for the Peace Treaty with Russia.

Japan once took the stand of "inseparability of political and economic relations," which advocated the importance of resolving territorial issues thereby making a friendly relationship with Russia in order to enhance economic cooperation. However, under strong criticism of Russia, Japan shifted its policy at the end of 1980s to what was called the "expanded balance," in which territorial negotiation and economic cooperation should be balanced and promoted at the same time. The expression "multi-level approach" was also used then. Japan, since 1990s, has basically taken the stand of "expanded balance." However, during these periods, there were serious problems and mistakes about Japanese policy to Russia.

One was the approach that Japan took around the year 2000 when then President Putin first visited Japan, which emphasized the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956, which advocated the return of Habomai and Shikotan Islands after conclusion of a peace treaty. At this point, especially after 1996, Russia had officially announced that they interpreted the Declaration that the territorial issues would be completely resolved by returning Habomai and Shikotan Islands. This is the point essentially different from the situation when then President Gorbachev visited Japan in 1991. Consequently, Japan sent a wrong signal to Russia by emphasizing Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956. Today, Russia takes a hard-line attitude to Japan and admits only the Declaration of 1956 by taking Japan's approach as an underhanded way. This is truly reflected in the recent summit meeting between then Prime Minister Aso and President Medvedev in Italy. There are some who claim that Japan was closest to the resolution of the territorial issue around 2000, but this is sheer nonsense.

Another was the Japanese policy to Russia heavily inclined to the economic cooperation, which is symbolized in the "Japan-Russia Action Plan." The "Action Plan" involves various ways of cooperation including economic one. However, the peace-treaty negotiation was degraded to one of the six pillars, and Russia recognized that Japan put higher priority on the economic interests by shelving the negotiation. Until then, the negotiation had been one of the three pillars along with economic cooperation and cooperation in strategies in international affairs. Apparently, this approach undermined by itself the very principle of "Expanded Balance"

Japan had advocated.

In recent years, Russia has come to put forward a stand of "inseparability of political and economic relations," though from a totally different perspective. In other words, Russia has come to assert that it is necessary to enhance cooperation in the economy and other fields to resolve the territorial issues. This is formerly the exit theory of the issues and "inseparability of political and economic relations," as Japan's starting point of the issues, put in reverse. It is true that Japan promoted economic cooperation based on this exist theory of Russia, and Japanese-Russia relationship has made rapid progress for these years. However, Russia has taken a more hard-line attitude on the territorial issues.

Then Prime Minister Aso strongly complained at Japanese – Russian Summit in Lima, Peru, in November 2008, that only economic relation progressed, while the peace treaty negotiation stalled. What is unfathomable was the approach the Japanese government took towards Russia. While Japan complained about imbalance between the economic relation and the peace-treaty negotiation, Japan put priority to the former. When Putin visited Japan this May, Japan concluded the various economic agreements including the nuclear cooperation agreement. It could be said that Japan has exhausted any means for the peace-treaty negotiation with Russia. By the Japanese approach, Russia has reached a clear conclusion that Japanese claim on the territorial issues is an official voice to Japanese people, while its real intention is to foster economic cooperation with Russia.

After Putin visited Japan, the Russian mass media in chorus reported that the territorial issues had already been faded out between Russia and Japan. Although I said "unfathomable," the background of the actions of Japanese government which seemed contradictory and incomprehensible was actually explicit. The Japanese government expected that the President Medvedev, who stated “the government should take an unconventional approach”, would make a new proposal beyond the Declaration of 1956 at the Summit meeting in Italy in this July. However, this was a whimsical speculation of the Japanese government. When Russia stated “the government should take an unconventional approach”, they actually expected that Japan should take one, and had no intention at all to go beyond the Putin’s proposal of laying emphasis on the Declaration of 1956.

Russian President or Prime Minister did not appear at all to study concrete measures to take an unconventional approach. It is a whimsical speculation of the Japanese government to say that "now is the good opportunity to resolve the territorial issues." The Japanese government has intentionally spread information on Russia which is consistent with its optimistic speculation. It is quite erroneous to say that the Japan-Russia Summit Meeting in Italy failed because Russia was offended by such facts that a proposal to revise Act on Special Measures concerning Advancement of Resolution of Northern Territories Issues, etc, has been adopted as Diet resolution, which claims the Northern Territories as Japan's inherent territory, or Prime Minister Aso stated at the Diet that the Northern Territories are illegally occupied by Russia. It

is because these statement and resolutions are consistent with what Japan has officially announced in the past.

In fact, Russia had made no signs of offering a new solution, even before these statement and resolutions were made. Act on Special Measures was used only as an excuse. If Japan-Russia relations are unbalanced, what Japan should do is not to worsen that balance but to come up with an approach to adjust the balance for the better. What is important about the Northern Territory issues is that we must make Russia understand fully that Japan is seriously facing the issues as infringement of Japan's national sovereignty. It is high time for Japanese government to know that seductive statements from Russian side are nothing but a carrot in front of a running horse to enhance economic cooperation.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Dr. HAKAMADA Shigeki, Professor of Aoyama Gakuin University, which originally appeared on the BBS “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on August 3, 2009.)