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On Trenin's Proposal for Russia to Return Four Disputed Islands to Japan

By HAKAMADA Shigeki

Recently, a note-worthy monograph was published in Russia on the issue of Northern Territories, a territorial issue that exists between Japan and Russia concerning the Northern Territories (the islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and Habomai). It is a monograph published by the Carnegie Moscow Center on its website on 11 December, 2012, entitled "Russia's Pacific Future: Solving the South Kuril Islands Dispute," which is a unique and bold proposal toward the solution of the issue of Northern Territories. To sum up its content in a few words, "Solving the issue requires a compromise made by both parties and a forward-looking approach instead of debates on the past." And the most remarkable point is a proposal to the effect that "Russia should immediately hand over Habomai and Shikotan. Russia should initially continue to exercise sovereignty over Kunashiri and Etorofu over the period of fifty years under a distinct economic cooperation system and a legal regime. After the fifty years, these two islands will transition to Japanese law and sovereignty. Furthermore, Russia will retain economic and other special interests for another fifty years."

The monograph is co-authored by Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, and Yuval Weber. Trenin is a top Russian political scientist with worldwide fame. Incidentally, his latest book, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Japanese edition: "Roshia-Daisenryaku: Yurashia No Daihendo Wo Yomitoku," translated by Kawato Akio, Yuasa Takeshi, Koizumi Yu, Sakuhin-sha, 2012.) was highly acclaimed in book reviews of major newspapers of Japan. Co-authored as it is, the very idea of the proposal (hereafter "Trenin paper (or proposal)") comes from Trenin himself, according to my direct inquiry to Trenin on the phone. Besides, I am quite familiar with his enthusiasm with which he intends to improve radically the Japan-Russia relations by managing to resolve tough and sensitive issues.

During the period between the last years of Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely from the late 1980's to 90s, there were not a few opinions openly arguing that the four islands should be returned to Japan among those in the democratic and reformist wing in Russia including Grigorii Yavlinskii. However in recent years, with the rise of nationalism and

great-power ideology within Russia, there is a growing tendency to view that even Habomai and Shikotan should not be returned to Japan. Under the circumstances, it is worthy of note that an influential intellectual of Russia makes a proposal for Russia to return four islands to Japan, though from a long-term perspective.

However, closer study of his proposal highlights several problems. Above all, it should be noted that this proposal is too far-reaching from the current atmosphere shared by the Russian presidential office, the parliament and the public at large. Before summarizing the main points of Trenin's proposal, let me stress that mass media should not deal with this proposal sensationally for reasons given later on. Trenin states as follows. Qualitative improvement of Japan-Russia relations requires resolving the issue of Northern Territories. The only conceivable solution is a compromise made by both parties between the official Japanese position of transferring the four islands to Japan and the offer made by Moscow to hand over only Habomai and Shikotan. Russia must give up more than many Russians think, and Japan needs to receive less than most Japanese believe it ought to. Leaders in both countries must have enough support to make these compromises. Solving the issue will not only settle the border between the two countries but also enhance their standing in the Asia-Pacific region.

Based on these views, Trenin stresses the importance of Russia being integrated into the Asia-Pacific region, importance of Japan as "a Germany in the east" for Russia, need of Japan-Russia relations being qualitatively improved, and, for all these ends, the need of the territorial issues being solved. In conclusion, he proposes the following steps to be taken for solving the territorial issue.

- (1) Russia should immediately and fully give up the two islands, Shikotan and Habomai, which Russia already agreed to hand over under the 1956 joint declaration. The reason formerly given to cancel that accord is no longer relevant as the U.S. military bases in Japan are not a direct threat to Russia.
- (2) Japan should begin supporting economic activity in the South Kuril Islands (the Northern Territories) and across Russia through public sector investment and direct private sector investment.
- (3) Russia and Japan should establish a "joint economic zone" covering the four islands that is run by a Russian-Japanese authority administering a distinct economic and legal regime. Japan and Russia must reach a political agreement that underlies this economic arrangement. From the beginning, the entire four islands will be demilitarized. Russia will continue to exercise sovereignty over Etorofu and Kunashiri for the period of fifty years. Russian civilian migration to these islands will not be restricted and Japanese people will be free to move to all four islands.
- (5) At the end of a

fifty-year period, Etorofu and Kunashiri will transition to Japanese law and sovereignty. But the joint economic regime will continue for another fifty years. And Russian permanent residents will be free to stay, enjoying the right to hold dual citizenship of Japan and Russia.

Trenin argues that the United States, in contrast to the Cold War period, has no reason to oppose rapprochement between Japan and Russia, nor interest that could be served by the continuing dispute. And he even sees that a closer Japan-Russia relationship will help stabilize the Asia-Pacific region and be beneficial for the U.S. strategy in the region. Besides, by improving the Japan-Russia relations, investment climates of the Russian Far East will be dramatically improved and Russia is not so much giving up the islands as gaining the long-term benefits for the entire Pacific coast of Russia. Vladivostok would become a "Russian Shanghai."

Furthermore, while stressing that a strengthened cooperative ties between Japan and Russia does not constitute a safeguard against China, he says that Japan, having a complicated relation with a rising China, would see a peaceful relationship with Russia as a geopolitical reassurance. Naturally, he claims that a peaceful settlement of the decades-old territorial dispute between Japan and Russia will also positively affect other contested island territories in the Sea of Japan and the East and South China Seas. Trenin consciously stresses that his proposals are not "against China." However, against the background of his argument as well as the recent rise in the interest in Japan in Russia, there is, needless to say, a China factor.

As for the evaluation of this proposal, it is worthy of note that a world-renowned Russian political scientist proposes an eventual return of the four islands, while encouraging Japan to make a compromise. However, there are several problems as well. First of all, as stated at the front, this proposal is too far-reaching from the current atmosphere shared by the Russian presidential office, the parliament and the public at large, and is highly susceptible to severe criticism and oppositions within Russia rather than from Japan. Secondly, Trenin calls for Japan to engage in public sector investment and direct private sector investment in the Northern Territories and other areas, before Japan and Russia reach a political agreement. But this idea is no different from the conventional proposal of joint economic activities in the Northern Territories long offered by Russia or so-called "exit strategies." In this case, there is a concern that, without any firm commitment to the political solution, economic cooperation will only be exploited by Russia. With regard to a distinct legal regime under the sovereignty of Russia, what could possibly be done in a concrete manner is a quite tough question.

Besides, there is a question over the evaluation of Putin's intention and competence.

Trenin says that Putin, who is pragmatic enough to have concluded a "land-for-peace" deal with China, is not averse to concluding a "land-for-development" deal with Japan. This implies a compromise to be made by Russia over the territorial issue in return for the development of Russian Far East. However, most Russians do not believe that solving the territorial issue with Japan will promptly boost investments in the Far East nor Vladivostok will become a "Russian San Francisco."

Also, while Putin positively shows a willingness to improve Russia's relations with Japan, the question are how flexible he could be on the issue of the Northern Territories or whether he could ever be competent enough to be flexible on the issue. In March 2012, Putin verbally expressed a seemingly "compromising" stance toward the solution of the territorial issue, by using such judo terms as "Hikiwake (draw)" and "Hajime (begin)." However, on that occasion, Putin bluntly ruled out negotiations over Kunashiri and Etorofu and even implied that the "handover" of Habomai and Shikotan under the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration of 1956 does not mean "return" of them and Russia would thereafter continue to exercise sovereignty over these islands. In short, Putin takes a quite hardline stance on the territorial issue. Interpreting Trenin's proposal in the following manner would be too optimistic a fantasy. That is, as Putin has of late newly put forward an "Asia-focused" policy, this proposal should be viewed as a realistic proposal or a trial balloon devised in this context.

At any rate, there are certain signs of change in the current Japan-Russia relations driven by such entangled factors as "China," "energy," "focus on Siberia and Far East," and "integration of the Asia-Pacific region." Under the circumstances, Trenin's proposal is worthy of thorough examination to grasp its significance. Meanwhile, as I stated at the front, mass media should not deal with this proposal sensationally. It is because, firstly, this proposal is unlikely to be seriously regarded or supported in terms of reality. And secondly, such an institute as the Carnegie Moscow Center is officially regarded as a foreign agent in Russia.

(This is the English translation of an article written by Prof. HAKAMADA Shigeki, Professor, University of Niigata Prefecture, which originally appeared on the BBS "Giron - Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on January 13, 2013.)