

June 1, 2022

Do not be disturbed by the “suspension” of peace treaty negotiations with Russia

Ideal opportunity for completely breaking away from the policy of Russian appeasement

By TOKIWA Shin

The government of Russia, which is currently invading Ukraine, announced a “suspension” of peace treaty negotiations late last month. Needless to say, this was in retaliation for Japan’s sanctions against Russia. This is a predictable response that warrants no surprise. What has been shocking, however, is the erroneous coverage by the Japanese media, which mostly reported intentionally adding “including the Northern Territories dispute.” this is a serious problem that cannot be overlooked. Hence, as an individual working in media, I would like to provide my personal opinion on the issue.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the statement: “Under current conditions, Russia does not intend to continue negotiations on a peace treaty with Japan.” What should be confirmed here once again is that the Putin administration has drawn a clear distinction between peace treaty negotiations and territorial negotiations. This Russian statement takes the hardline position that the territorial disputes between Japan and Russia have already been settled, and although peace treaty negotiations are ongoing, no territorial negotiations are being conducted. Therefore, according to the Japanese media, Russia has seemingly accepted the Northern Territories negotiations. Such a basic misunderstanding of facts will result in many Japanese fundamentally misreading the reality of Japan-Russia relations.

Most importantly, the “peace treaty” as stated by Russia is the basic treaty between Russia and Japan, which does not include the Northern Territories dispute. There cannot be a more selfish claim. This is because the only problem remaining between Japan and Russia, under international law, is the resolution

of the problem regarding the affiliation of the four disputed islands. The 1956 Japan-Soviet negotiations for normalization of diplomatic relations failed to conclude a peace treaty due to a failure to reach a consensus on the territorial dispute.

In other words, the “peace treaty” proposed by Putin and his coterie is, in essence, not a peace treaty. In that case, what kind of “treaty” are they envisioning? This would be a treaty without reference to territory, such as a “good neighbor treaty” or “good neighbor and friendship treaty” that Russia has set as a major goal regarding its strategy toward Japan since the Soviet era during the Cold War.

It goes without saying that in the unlikely event that such a “treaty” is concluded, then constant interference in internal affairs intended to weaken the Japan-U.S. alliance will become possible.

In accordance with this policy, the Putin administration has distorted and falsified all the basic historical facts about Japan-Russia (Japan-Soviet) relations as the basis for not responding to the Northern Territories dispute, while actively spreading propaganda both domestically and abroad. I am reminded of Putin’s strange remarks at a joint press conference with (then) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo in December 2016. Putin gave a “commentary” on the history of Japan-Russia relations rife with disinformation to the Japanese government and media. Nothing more eloquently embodies the mood of appeasement negotiations with Russia during the Abe administration.

I would stress again that Japan is burdened with an immense negative legacy due to the Abe administration’s diplomacy with Russia.

The 2018 Singapore Agreement proposed by Prime Minister Abe returned the basis of negotiations from the Tokyo Declaration(1993) to the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration(1956). This was a “regression” from a framework of negotiations regarding the affiliation of the four disputed islands to a framework where up to two islands would be returned. The “new approach” also effectively severed the link between economic cooperation and territorial negotiations. These two points were decisive in negotiations.

Abe placed his highest priority on building a relationship of trust with Putin. However, looking back at previous cases of Japan-Russia negotiations, the internal factors of Russia (Soviet Union) have been crucial, and good domestic affairs and a favorable international environment were prerequisites for an effective relationship of trust between leaders. It is still a mystery why Prime

Minister Abe trusted Putin so much that he followed such a path of appeasement with Russia. It is highly likely that Russia used psychological manipulation techniques to influence the decision-making of the other party through its specialty of reflexive control, that is, disinformation and information control. Comprehensive verification is also necessary for anti-Japanese operations.

What should be emphasized again is that the Putin administration made overtures to Japan from the latter half of 2012 to the beginning of 2013. This was an opportunity to return to a foundation of four-island negotiations based on the Tokyo Declaration. Doing so would have avoided the situation in which Russia brazenly distinguishes between peace treaty negotiations and territorial negotiations. Japan needed to reaffirm to Russia the issue of the affiliation of the four disputed islands as a red line, but ultimately, Japan yielded to Russia, missing a valuable opportunity.

Today, however, Russia is waging a war of naked aggression against Ukraine. In some corners of Japan, a peculiar interpretation of the statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that “Under the current conditions” has implications of a consideration of Japan’s position, but this is nonsense. The Putin administration simply wants to leave the door open to return to traditional deceptive negotiations with Japan if circumstances change. However, there is no longer room for such a return. The Japanese government has indicated that peace treaty negotiations with the Putin administration, which has disrupted international order, have become impossible.

Immediately after the invasion, the Japanese government imposed full-scale sanctions against Russia in line with the G7. Expelling a total of eight Russian diplomats and trade representatives who were believed to have been engaged in information collection and sabotage, Japan’s diplomacy with Russia has significantly changed from its conventional policy. The 2022 edition of the “Diplomatic Bluebook” released on April 22 also harshly criticized the invasion of Ukraine as “an outrageous action that disturbs the foundation of the international order that humankind has built over the past century,” and that “unilateral changes in the status quo by force must not be allowed in any region.” Regarding the Northern Territories, it clearly stated that “they are the sovereign

islands of Japan and territories that are unique to Japan, but which are currently under illegal occupation by Russia,” and its revival of the term “illegal occupation” for the first time since 2003, 19 years ago, was an appropriate response.

The suspension of negotiations should be seen as an opportunity to reset the negative legacy of Abe-Putin negotiations such as the Singapore agreement. I think it will be possible to completely restructure Japan's strategy for Russia.

A policy of appeasement in diplomacy with the autocracy of Russia is equivalent to digging our own grave. We should keep this in mind as we witness the invasion of Ukraine. There is absolutely no need to be discouraged by the suspension of negotiations.

(This is the English translation of an article written by TOKIWA Shin, Academic Member, GFJ / Distinguished Research Fellow, JFIR / Senior staff writer, Tokyo Shimbun, which originally appeared on the e-Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on May 19, 2022.)