

# Chilly Japan-Russia ties unlikely to thaw

Putin's renewed mandate means territorial dispute with Tokyo may not see any breakthroughs in 2018

A cold spell with snow put spring on hold in Tokyo on March 21, the day Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov landed in Japan on a visit. His Japanese counterpart Taro Kono ascribed the snow to the Russian visitor. "Since we did not interfere in your elections, we decided to intervene in the weather," Lavrov replied in a lighter vein. Jest aside, a chill has indeed descended upon Japan-Russia relations.



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Talking about Japan's Aegis Ashore system, Lavrov said it is effectively becoming part of the US missile defense network and will have a direct effect on Russia's security.

Despite Russia's opposition, Japan has decided to buy two land-based Aegis Ashore systems to add to its current two-tier missile defense system consisting of Patriot missiles and Aegis-equipped destroyers, ostensibly to enhance its ability to intercept ballistic missiles from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Distrust runs deep in Russia-Japan relations, notwithstanding a flurry of diplomatic activities.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seems eager to impress Russian President Vladimir Putin — they have held 20 meetings in recent years. Abe believes a good personal relationship with Putin can help Japan get back the four islands that the Soviet Union and then Russia has held since the end of World War II.

The islets, off Japan's Hokkaido, are called the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kurils in Russia. The territorial dispute has prevented the two countries from signing a peace treaty.

In December 2016, Abe invited Putin to a hot spring resort in his hometown of Nagato. They agreed to begin discussing joint economic projects on the islands. This year the two countries have a public diplomacy initiative, "Japan Year in Russia" and "Russia Year in Japan", aimed at boosting cross-cultural links.

But there has been no progress beyond the diplomatic bonhomie.

The discussions on joint economic development projects on the disputed islands have barely advanced because of the sovereignty issue.

Japan wants the projects to be conducted under a special legal framework rather than Russian law. This, Japan hopes, will provide a bridgehead enabling the subsequent expansion of Japanese influence on the islands, an attempt

Russian critics have termed Japan's "Trojan Horse".

Japan's alliance with the United States has alienated Tokyo from Moscow. Japan yielded to the US' pressure and imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014. For Russia, Japan is, first and foremost, a US ally and cannot be trusted to act independently.

So Japan has to walk a tightrope to manage its relations with the US and Russia.

In November in Da Nang, Vietnam, during their meeting on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum's Economic Leaders' Meeting, Putin told Abe that there are lots of questions regarding the peace treaty.

"It's not a secret that we also need to look at what commitments Japan has toward its partners in the areas of defense and security, and how that will influence the progress of the negotiating process on the peace treaty," he said.

Moscow, Putin said, needed to examine what commitments Tokyo has and what it can and cannot do independently. He reminded Abe that the many questions cannot be addressed in just one year.

The Abe administration's desire to move closer to Russia faces new challenges, too.

Along with countries across Europe and beyond, the Trump administration announced it was

expelling 60 Russian diplomats and closing the Russian consulate in Seattle, due to Moscow's alleged involvement in a nerve agent attack on a former spy and his daughter living in Britain. US Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman called it "the largest expulsion of Russian intelligence officers in United States history".

The coordinated actions taken by the US, its NATO allies and other partners raise the question of whether the world is veering back to where it was during the Cold War.

Although isolated in the international community, Putin received 76 percent of votes cast in Russia's March 18 presidential election, more than anyone in the post-Soviet era and easily winning another six-year term as leader.

Putin told his supporters after the election that he saw his victory as a recognition for what he did in the past year under very complicated circumstances.

For Putin, this popular support is the mandate for his domestic and foreign policies. He is expected to be tougher when dealing with Russia's volatile relations with the outside world. At this time, then, it is impossible for Putin to compromise in his country's territorial dispute with Japan.

For Japan, it is time to choose sides. It cannot have it both ways.

Despite being the US' most important ally in Asia, Japan has not been exempted from the Trump administration's new tariffs on steel and aluminum imports that took effect on March 23. Tokyo has a lot of work to do to persuade Trump to exclude Japan, and Abe has hastily scheduled a visit to Washington in the middle of this month.

Lavrov was in Tokyo to discuss preparations for Abe's visit to Russia in May. For Abe, every meeting with Putin offers a chance to break the deadlock in the negotiations on the disputed islands and a peace treaty.

The signal from Russia is already clear. Moscow announced in January that the civilian airport on Iturup, or Etorofu as the Japanese call it, would be shared by the Russian air force, thereby enabling the deployment of combat jets there.

The day before Feb 7 — Japan's Northern Territories Day on which the country officially campaigns for the return of the Russian-held islands — Russia launched a military exercise on the disputed islets.

As Japan has no way to drive away the chill in its relations with Russia, the major breakthroughs that Abe expects are unlikely to happen this year.

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## Australia has no reason to doubt China

Canberra's misunderstandings about Beijing's peaceful rise should be addressed through better communication

By XU SHANPIN

With the promotion of highly complementary structures in trade, relations between China and Australia made great progress in the 21st century and, until last year, China had been Australia's largest trade partner for eight straight years.

But the close economic cooperation and the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries helped little in developing bilateral political trust. Due to a lack of deeper understanding of their different situations in different fields, Australia has maintained strict vigilance against China.

Australia's identity recognition influences its politics. As part of the British Commonwealth of Nations, the culture of Australia has been deeply influenced by European

immigrants — British immigrants in particular.

No wonder Australia defines itself as a Western country in the Asia-Pacific region, for which it toes the line of Western political institutions and treats the differences with other cultures, including Chinese, from the perspective of a Western country.

A Western country adhering to a multi-party political system often has difficulties in understanding socialism with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. And Australia's identity recognition makes it support the interests of the West, in addition to its own benefits.

Therefore, Australia may not agree with China's efforts to improve the current world order that was established by the West. When the United States rose in

power and status in the 20th century, especially after World War II, Australia became one of its important partners.

The long distance from countries with a similar culture in the West notwithstanding, Australia became more sensitive to other Asia-Pacific countries with different cultures. It has viewed China's rapid development over the past four decades with both amazement and concern.

Beijing's actions in recent years to assert its sovereignty and territorial integrity have been misunderstood by Canberra as expansion. As a result Australia now wrongly thinks that China's peaceful rise will have a negative impact on the world order and compromise Canberra's interests.

China's large share in Australia's foreign trade made Australia enhance its vigilance against China, based on the unwarranted fear

that Beijing would take advantage of its economic strength to derive political benefits from Canberra. Thus, Canberra attaches more importance to the US-Australia alliance not only because of identity recognition but also to strengthen its security.

To some extent, thanks to the effects of Western culture and the Cold-War mentality, Australians have misunderstood China and thus prefer excluding China from their equation. As for the Australian government, its attitude toward China has been swinging. For example, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said China posed no threat, though it is capable of doing so.

China is committed to peaceful development, for which it seeks win-win cooperation. So Australia has no reason to have such doubts. But if Australia refuses to

understand China and accept the development of non-Western countries, the underlying doubts could become insurmountable obstacles for further cooperation between Australia and many other countries, not just China.

So China should improve communication with Australia, striking a balance between trade cooperation and political trust by better presenting China's commitment to peace and the great contributions China-Australia cooperation has made to their respective development. And more attention should be paid to civil and academic communication, which can help Australians to better understand Chinese people and policies.

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