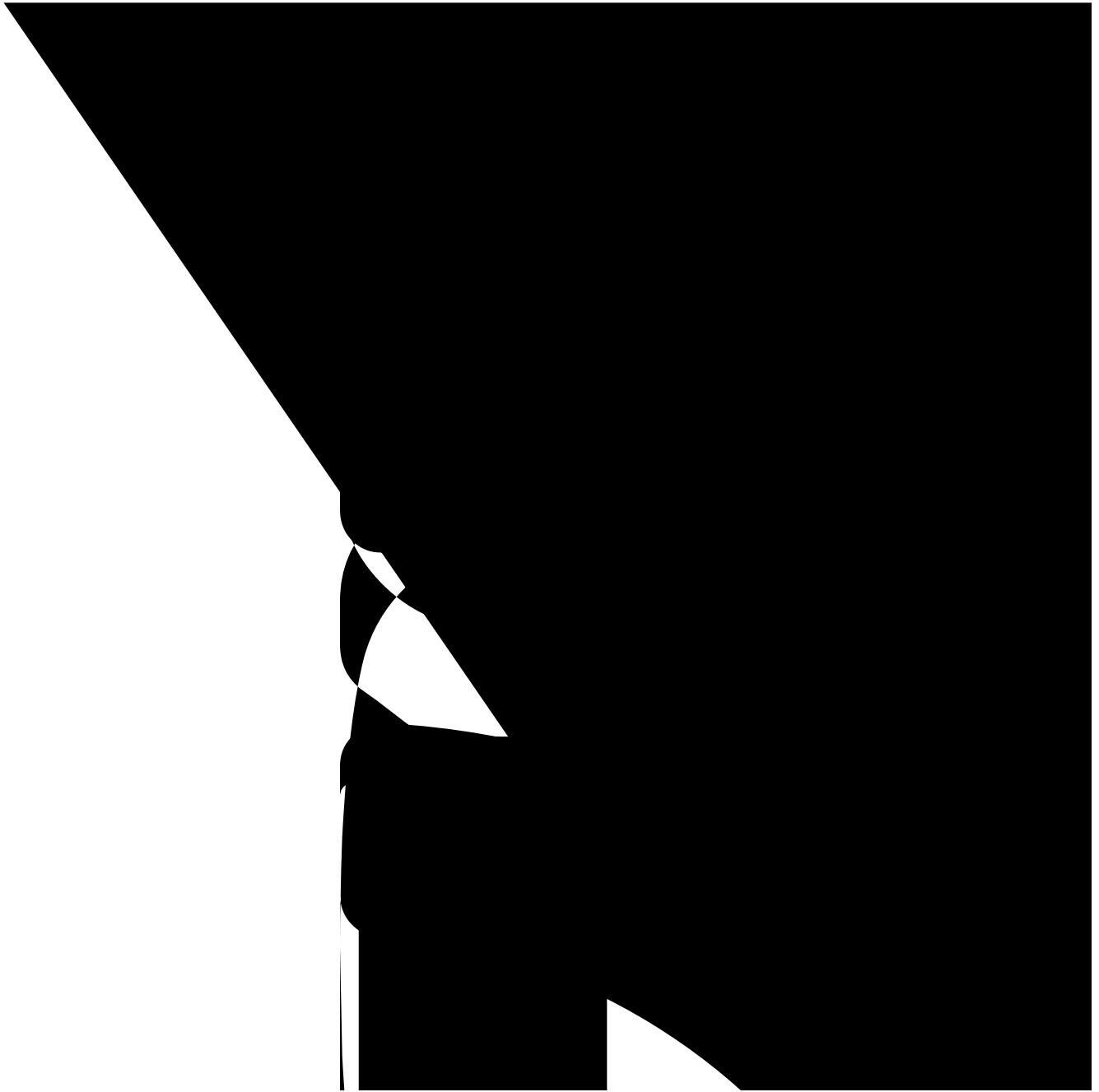


Russia's Revised Constitution Shows Putin is No Friend of Japan



The constitutional referendum in Russia has closed the door to a potential territorial compromise with Japan.

Russia's revised constitution is bad news for Japan. It includes a new clause that bans territorial concessions, thereby further trampling Japanese hopes of ever regaining the Russian-held Southern Kuril Islands. Additionally, although Russian President Vladimir Putin is sometimes thought to be Japan-friendly, the potential

extension of his rule to 2036 as a result of the removal on restrictions to his re-election reinforces the arc of autocracies in Northeast Asia that threatens Japanese security.

From the Japanese government's point of view, the most pertinent aspect of Russia's revised constitution, which was approved in a referendum that concluded last week, is Article 67. This now includes the line that 'Actions ... directed towards the alienation of part of the territory of the Russian Federation, and also calls for such actions, are not allowed'.

This addition seems a hammer blow to Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, who has repeatedly committed to resolving the territorial dispute over the Southern Kuril Islands, which were occupied by the Soviet Union in August 1945 and continue to be claimed by Japan as its Northern Territories.

A LOOPHOLE?

Yet, Japan's response has been remarkably muted, with the government's chief spokesman refusing to make any comment. The reason for this sang-froid is that the revised article includes an exception for 'delimitation, demarcation, and redemarcation of the state border'.

Therefore, instead of regretting that the Russian leadership used a constitutional ban on territorial transfers to drum up support for resetting Putin's term limits, the Abe government has been congratulating itself on securing this loophole. Much of the credit has been given to Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu, whose hopes of replacing Abe have risen in recent weeks.

However, Tokyo's assessment that nothing has changed is too optimistic. It is true that the Kremlin could sidestep the legal provisions by classifying any change as a delimitation, but this overlooks the fact that the atmosphere in Russia has been seriously hardened against even minor territorial concessions. In the words of Russian senator Aleksei Pushkov, 'the prospects of Moscow renouncing sovereignty over the Southern Kurils is now, in my opinion, equal to zero'.

Pushkov's colleague Frants Klintsevich concurs that 'all discussion is over'. He also notes the role of Russian public opinion, saying that, following the constitutional revision, no matter who is in power in the next 10 or even 100

years, they will not be able to return to this topic because the ‘people won’t allow it’. As if to confirm this assessment, a plaque was immediately unveiled on Kunashir – the most populous of the disputed islands – to commemorate 1 July 2020 as the day on which territorial concessions were conclusively outlawed.

All of this demonstrates that Putin has been negotiating with Japan in bad faith. In November 2018, he agreed with Abe that talks would advance on the basis of the 1956 Joint Declaration, which promises the transfer to Japan of two of the four disputed islands after the conclusion of a peace treaty. However, with the revision of the constitution, Putin has made it politically impossible for these islands to be handed over.

These machinations connect with the second reason why Russia’s constitutional revision is negative for Japan. That is, that it could keep Putin in power for another 16 years.

JAPAN’S FRIEND?

Surprising as it may seem, there has been a widespread view in Tokyo that Putin’s leadership is beneficial for Japan. This was based on the judgment that only a strong leader could force through a territorial deal, as Putin did when ceding a small amount of territory to China in 2008. There is also the belief that Putin is personally fond of Japan, as demonstrated by his passion for judo, friendship with judo champion Yamashita Yasuhiro, and the fact that one of his daughters studied Japanese at university. Putin has been careful to maintain this image by refraining from visiting the disputed islands and sending subordinates such as Dmitri Medvedev instead.

Abe clearly bought into this idea and invested heavily in his relationship with Putin. This entailed Abe meeting the Russian leader a total of 27 times, and praising him as someone who ‘is dear to me as a partner’. In 2018, Abe even tried to give Putin a puppy but was rebuffed.

Such fawning might be excusable if it were in the national interest yet, over two decades, Putin’s supposed affection for Japan has never led to anything of substance. It is true that Putin was the first Soviet/Russian leader since Khrushchev to acknowledge the applicability of the 1956 Joint Declaration. It is also the case that he has spoken of his desire to resolve the territorial dispute by

means of a 'hikiwake', using the Japanese term for a draw.

Yet, these steps were designed merely to keep Tokyo's hopes alive so that Japanese leaders would continue to engage politically and economically. As demonstrated by the constitutional revision, Putin has no real intention of relinquishing even the smaller two disputed islands.

In truth, any other Russian leader would be unlikely to be any more accommodating on the territorial issue. However, Putin is also injurious to Japan's interests from a strategic perspective.

AN AWKWARD POSITION

Japan's main challenge is that it faces simultaneous threats from China, North Korea, and (to a lesser extent) Russia at a time when the US security guarantee is looking less reliable. In this context, the strategic nightmare for Tokyo is a quasi-alliance between Moscow and Beijing, leaving Japan facing a united front to both the north and east. This is precisely what has been occurring under Putin's leadership as Russia has increasingly adopted the role of China's junior partner.

A wiser Russian leader would have taken a different approach. In the escalating confrontation between the US and China, the logical course for a non-ideological, midranking actor, such as Russia, is to maintain equidistance between the superpowers. Such flexibility would enable Moscow to play the rivals off against each other and to sell its support for the highest price.

Instead, burdened by his Cold War mindset, a deep sense of grievance, and predilection for spycraft - including the clumsy interference in the US presidential elections in 2016 and botched assassination of Sergei Skripal in 2018 - Putin has rendered Russia *terra non grata* in the West. This leaves Moscow with little option but to fall in line behind Beijing.

Viewed from Tokyo, worrying examples of this trend include growing cooperation between the Russian and Chinese militaries, including their first joint strategic bomber patrol over the Sea of Japan in July 2019. More symbolically, in April 2020, Russia moved the official end of the Second World War from 2 to 3 September, making it the same day on which China celebrates victory over Japan.

As the disadvantages of playing second fiddle to China become apparent, Putin may still try to realign Russia towards a middle path and to rebuild relations with the US. However, given Putin's extremely negative image in the West, this will be harder for him to achieve than had he been willing to step aside for a new leader.

During the last two decades, several Japanese leaders – and none more so than Abe Shinzō – have shown faith in Putin as the Russian leader who could deliver an end to the countries' territorial dispute and sign a peace treaty. The constitutional revision conclusively demonstrates that this hope has been misplaced. As the third decade of Putin's rule rumbles on, Japanese leaders should belatedly accept that the Russian autocrat is no friend of Japan.

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BANNER IMAGE: A meeting between Vladimir Putin and Abe Shinzō. Courtesy of Kremlin.ru.

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