

Is Russia hardening its policy towards Japan?

On 31 October, President Dmitri Medvedev became the first Russian leader since 1945 to visit one of the Kuril Islands. In response Japan, which considers the southern part of the islands as occupied territory (no peace treaty was signed between these nations after World War II) temporarily recalled its ambassador from Moscow. The hardening of Moscow's policy towards Tokyo seems to result from disappointment with the lack of response from Japan to Russia's offer in 2009 to tighten economic relations.

Despite Japan's protests, Russia suggested the possibility of further visits by the president to the Kurils. At the same time, Moscow called off a visit by a deputy premier, Igor Shuvalov, to a Russian-Japanese investment forum which is supposed to take place in two weeks' time (it was officially denied that this had anything to do with the current tensions). However, the meeting between President Medvedev and the Japanese prime minister Naoto Kan during the APEC summit in Yokohama in a fortnight has not been called off, which suggests that each side wants to limit the extent of the tension.

In its policy towards Japan, Russia has consistently tried to separate the question of the territorial dispute from closer economic relations. In 2009, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin suggested the possibility of a 'political' as opposed to a legal resolution to the dispute, and this year Moscow presented Tokyo with an offer of joint economic enterprises in the Russian Far East, which was meant to counterbalance the Chinese presence there. It seems that the reason for the Kremlin's current actions is the lack of a Japanese response to the Russian proposals, and Tokyo's making broadening economic co-operation conditional on a solution to the territorial question. <MaK>