

Russia–Japan: No breakthrough on the Kuril Islands

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On 15–16 December, the Russian President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Japan, which had originally been scheduled for 2014. The main issue discussed with the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the development of methods for the implementation of a formula long ago proposed by Russia for resolving the territorial dispute over the Southern Kuril Islands (the Northern Territories, according to Japanese terminology). The results of the visit include the signing of a declaration on joint economic activity on the disputed islands and on visa facilitations for their former Japanese residents. In addition to this, around ninety intergovernmental and business agreements were signed worth a total of around US\$2.5 billion. Prime Minister Abe already in 2013 accepted

the Russian approach to the resolution of the dispute in principle. According to this, the development of economic co-operation and the establishment of closer contacts should precede and create a favourable atmosphere for striking a territorial compromise.. After Abe had announced the economic co-operation plan during his visit to Sochi in May this year, Tokyo hoped that Putin's visit would bring a breakthrough in this territorial dispute.

Commentary

- Moscow initially suggested that it did not rule out a deal that would envisage territorial concessions in exchange for investment, thus giving hope to Japan that the territorial dispute would be resolved. The Kremlin used Tokyo's desire to resolve the Kuril Islands issue to cause a further disassembly of the West's common front on Ukraine. However, Putin's visit did not break the deadlock in the dispute over the islands. Moscow expected that the Japanese side would be willing to make large-scale investments in exchange for a vague promise of a future compromise solution to the territorial dispute. Tokyo was ready to engage more strongly in economic co-operation but in return expected specific undertakings as regards territorial issues. Finally, the two parties were unable to develop a formula that would be acceptable to both of them.
- Only a handful of the ninety agreements signed are binding contracts. Thus, contrary to Moscow's expectations, Japan's economic engagement in Russia has not increased significantly. Similarly, the declaration on the commencement of joint economic activity on the disputed islands provides only that consultations regarding this issue will begin. This means that the fundamental disagreements concerning the legal grounds of co-

operation have not been removed.

- Given China's increasing clout and Russia's economic stagnation, Japan had hoped that the Kremlin would be ready to make territorial concessions in exchange for Japanese investment. This hope turned out to be unfounded. President Putin suggested that the main obstacle to a compromise resolution of the territorial dispute (returning at least two of the islands to Japan in compliance with the signed and still formally binding Russian-Japanese declaration of 1956) is Japan's military alliance with the United States. This revealed the fundamental difference between the geopolitical assumptions of Tokyo and Moscow. Russia still believes that its main political adversary is Washington, not Beijing. Given this situation, the Russian policy of tempting Japan with the vision of territorial disputes in order to loosen Tokyo's military bonds with Washington has no chance of success.