

Following Beijing's lead, the Kremlin hardens its stance towards Tokyo

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In the first half of August, the Kremlin sent Tokyo a strong political signal regarding the dispute over the Southern Kuril Islands (Japan's Northern Territories). Between 4 and 12 August, Russia's Pacific Fleet conducted large-scale exercises involving more than 60 vessels, including live-fire drills in the disputed waters. On 12 August, the Kremlin released remarks by Vladimir Putin, who was attending the exercises, and by the commander of the Pacific Fleet, both accusing Japan of taking unprovoked hostile actions against Russia, notably by imposing sanctions, and of becoming increasingly aggressive in the region. Putin also expressed regret that Tokyo had abandoned the Russia-friendly policy pursued by Shinzō Abe, Japan's prime minister from 2012 to 2020, and announced plans to strengthen the Pacific Fleet.

On 13 August, for the first time in his career, Putin visited one of the islands at the centre of the territorial dispute with Japan (Iturup, known in Japan as Etorofu), prompting protests from the Japanese government, including Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi warned that Putin's visit to the Kurils would have 'an extremely negative impact' on bilateral relations. His Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, accused Tokyo of pursuing an 'openly aggressive, militaristic course' that is causing 'serious concern' in Russia.

By escalating bilateral tensions, Russia wants to demonstrate to Japan that without a shift in policy, Tokyo cannot expect either a peace treaty between the two countries or a compromise settlement of the Northern Territories issue. Moscow hopes that by sending misleading signals about its supposed willingness to compromise, it can persuade Tokyo to return to the Russia-friendly policy pursued during the early years of Prime Minister Abe's tenure. The Kremlin seeks to compel Japan to lift its sanctions, abandon its large-scale military build-up and, more broadly, adopt a neutral stance in both Russia's conflict with the West and China's rivalry with the United States.

Commentary

- **The tougher stance towards Tokyo represents a further hardening of the policy Russia adopted towards Japan in response to the latter joining Western sanctions in 2022 and providing diplomatic and financial support to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression.** As early as 21 March 2022, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs suspended talks on a peace treaty, halted visa-free visits by Japanese citizens (former

residents of the islands) to the disputed territories and broke off dialogue on joint economic activities in the Southern Kurils. It also blocked the extension of Japan's status as a partner of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.

- **The deterioration in relations with Japan, provoked by the Kremlin, comes amid renewed tensions in Sino-Japanese relations, driven by Beijing's increasingly aggressive behaviour in the region, reciprocal economic restrictions and China's irritation at Japan's efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities.** Russian and Chinese narratives about Japan are also strikingly similar. Both accuse Tokyo of revanchism and revisionism, invoke the history of Japanese expansionism, criticise Japan's military build-up and allege that Tokyo intends to acquire nuclear weapons. Russia is steadily intensifying military cooperation with China, particularly at sea and in the air, through joint exercises and air and naval patrols around the Japanese archipelago.
- **Russia is stepping up its criticism of all forms of military cooperation between NATO and its partners in East and Southeast Asia, warning of the risk of conflict breaking out in the region.** By hardening its stance towards Tokyo, Moscow is reciprocating Beijing's support in Russia's confrontation with the West. It is also signalling to both Tokyo and Beijing that it has the capacity to pose a military threat to Japan in the future, particularly if Japan becomes involved in an armed conflict with China over Taiwan or the South China Sea.
- **Russia's provocative actions are intended to foster divisions within Japan's political elite and encourage it to return to Prime Minister Abe's early policy towards Russia.** This approach was based on the assumption that cultivating friendly relations and deepening economic cooperation with Russia were necessary to secure a compromise settlement of the territorial dispute, conclude a peace treaty and draw Russia away from its alliance with China. Although Abe later came to regard this approach towards Russia as unrealistic, the Kremlin appears to believe that there are still political forces in Japan willing to pursue it.