



## THE SHINZO AND VLADIMIR SHOW IS SET TO CONTINUE

BY JAMES D.J. BROWN

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In one of the least surprising political events of the year, Vladimir Putin announced Dec. 6 that he would seek reelection as Russia's president in March 2018. With Alexei Navalny, the anti-corruption campaigner, barred from running due to a dubious criminal conviction, Putin faces no real opposition and is all but assured of remaining Russian leader until 2024.

In a more democratic but similarly uncompetitive election in October 2017, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party scored a decisive victory that could enable Abe Shinzo to stay on as prime minister until late 2021. Were he to achieve this, Abe would become the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history.

That these two powerful leaders may continue in office together for the next four years is viewed as a historic opportunity by some observers. It is hoped that Abe and Putin can use their domestic dominance and well-established personal ties to achieve a breakthrough in the countries' longstanding territorial dispute. This relates to the status of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories in Japan), four islands that were occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II and whose contested status has prevented the signing of a peace treaty.

### **Bringing Abe's 'new approach' to a successful conclusion?**

Since returning to power in December 2012, Prime Minister Abe has made relations with Russia a priority. Speaking in Vladivostok in September 2017, he [reaffirmed](#) his ambitions, saying "we must put an

end to the unnatural state of affairs of not having a peace treaty even now. Vladimir, let the two of us fulfill that responsibility, shall we not?"

Abe's plan for transforming the bilateral relationship has two main features. The first is to cultivate trust with Putin. To this end, Abe has sought to meet his Russian counterpart as frequently as possible, racking up a total of 20 encounters by the end of 2017. He has also tried to give the relationship a personal touch by hosting Putin in his hometown in Yamaguchi in December 2016 and by requesting that they refer to each other by their given names.

The second tactic has been to inject economic dynamism into bilateral ties. Abe has sought to achieve this by announcing a "[new approach](#)" to relations. The central component of this is an 8-point economic cooperation plan, which includes health care, the urban environment, and energy. The underlying aim is to incentivize Russian concessions on the territorial dispute by providing an indication of the potential value of economic relations with Japan, if only a peace treaty could be signed.

Abe has also been working to secure Russia's agreement to conduct joint economic activities on the disputed islands. His proposal is that these projects will be conducted under a special legal framework that will not contradict Japan's claim to sovereignty. If implemented, this will enable a Japanese presence to return to the islands for the first time since the immediate postwar period. Some in Japan hope that the realization of these joint economic activities, which would imply a degree of Russian flexibility on the question of sovereignty, could lead to a form of [condominium](#), whereby Tokyo and Moscow share governance of the islands.

Viewed this way, Japan's position appears favorable. Having prepared the groundwork over the last five years, Abe is ready to reap his reward. In particular, after Putin has faced the electorate for the last time, it is hoped he will adopt a more conciliatory approach to the territorial issue. The expectation is that progress may become possible after March 2018. This conveniently coincides with the countries' bilateral year of culture. To celebrate this event and to push for a post-election breakthrough, Abe is expected to visit Russia again in May 2018.

### Geostrategic obstacles to a deal

While convincing in theory, this plan has little real prospect of success. To begin with, despite their frequent meetings, there is no indication that Putin and Abe have developed a genuinely close relationship. For instance, while Abe often calls Putin "Vladimir," Putin rarely reciprocates. Additionally, the Russian leader has appeared to deliberately reject some friendly gestures from Abe. In December 2016, he refused the offer of a dog as a present and arrived in Yamaguchi over two hours late. He also declined the invitation to join Abe for a dip in the resort's hot springs. This has been [interpreted](#) as Putin's effort to demonstrate to Chinese President Xi Jinping that, while relations with Japan remain exclusively formal, Russia attributes special significance to its partnership with China.

More importantly, there is no indication that the relatively minor economic incentives on offer could lead Russia to make concessions on anything so fundamental as territorial sovereignty. This is especially so given the strategic significance of the islands in question. Iturup and Kunashir, which account for 93 percent of the disputed territory, are a gateway to the Sea of Okhotsk, a vital area of operations for Russia's ballistic missile submarines. For this reason, in November 2016 the Russian military announced the deployment of the [Bastion and Bal anti-ship missile systems](#) to these two islands. Additionally, in a move that demonstrates the significance of the broader island chain, it was [reported](#) in November 2017 that Russia will establish

a military presence on Matua and Paramushir, two islands of the central and northern Kurils.

It is unlikely that Russia would give up such strategically important territory to any country, but this is all the more true of a close US ally. While Tokyo periodically seems to forget that it joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia in 2014, Moscow has not. What is more, Japan's enthusiastic participation in the US missile defense system, including its plans to purchase Aegis Ashore, ensures that Russia cannot consider Japan in isolation from its security alliance with the United States.

This is a point that has been stressed repeatedly in recent comments by the Russian leadership. In June 2017, Putin warned that any transfer of territory to Japan could mean that "tomorrow some [US] [bases or elements of missile defense](#) will appear there, for us this is absolutely unacceptable." In the same vein, Foreign Minister Lavrov warned his counterpart Kono Taro that "Japan, along with South Korea, is becoming a territory for the [deployment of elements of the US global missile defense system](#), which is being rolled out in that region under the pretext of the North Korea threat". Most discouraging of all, just one day after meeting Abe at APEC in November, Putin explicitly identified [Japan's security relationship with the United States as an obstacle](#) to a peace treaty. He also poured cold water on Abe's call for the two leaders to resolve the issue themselves, saying "some things probably will take a long time. ... It does not depend on who is in office; Abe, Putin, or someone else".

There may be other motivations for Japan to pursue better relations with Russia, including energy and security concerns about China and North Korea. When it comes to the most fundamental issue, however, it seems that even several more years of Abe and Putin, and perhaps a dozen more meetings, will do little to force a breakthrough in the territorial dispute.

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