

Japan, Russia and Their Territorial Dispute: The Northern Delusion

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In his presentation, Professor Brown introduced his forthcoming book *Japan, Russia and Their Territorial Dispute: The Northern Delusion*, which is to be published in March 2016 by Routledge

(<http://www.amazon.co.jp/Japan-Russia-their-Territorial-Dispute/dp/113819414X>). As

he explained at the beginning of his talk, the main purpose of the book is to present a detailed explanation of contemporary Russian thinking on the territorial dispute to an international (and especially Japanese) audience. In this regard, Professor Brown expressed his hope that, since he is neither Japanese nor Russian, he has been able to produce a neutral and objective assessment of the prospects of resolving this emotionally charged territorial dispute.

In the first section of the presentation, Professor Brown concentrated on Prime Minister Abe's determined efforts to strengthen relations with Russia. The Japanese leader has pursued this agenda enthusiastically since being returned to power in December 2012 and his ultimate goal is clearly to achieve a resolution to the territorial dispute before the end of his time in office. Significant progress appeared to have been

made in 2013 and early 2014 as Prime Minister Abe travelled to Russia twice, contributing to a significant improvement in the atmosphere in bilateral relations. Most importantly, this period also saw the commencement of talks between the countries' deputy foreign ministers on overcoming the problem of the territorial dispute and finally signing a peace treaty.

The rapprochement in Japanese-Russian relations was seriously disrupted by the Ukraine crisis. This saw Japan follow its G7 partners in introducing sanctions against Russia (albeit weak ones). The negotiations at deputy foreign minister level were also suspended, while President Putin's expected official visit to Japan was indefinitely postponed. Despite this major setback, Professor Brown argued that Prime Minister Abe has remained committed to his policy of improving relations with Russia as soon as the international environment makes this possible. What is more, now that the Ukraine crisis has entered a lull, it was claimed that there are strong indications that the Japanese leader will use 2016 to make a determined push to achieve the long-awaited breakthrough on the territorial issue.

In terms of Abe's specific plan for 2016, Professor Brown highlighted the Japanese leader's recently expressed desire to soon hold a summit with President Putin. This meeting is expected to take place in the spring (prior to Japan's hosting of the G7

summit) and will be held outside of the Russian capital. In Professor Brown's view, the most likely location is Vladivostok. At this more informal summit, Prime Minister Abe will seek to persuade the Russian leader one-on-one of the merits of making territorial concessions. The Japanese leader's exact aim will be to secure Russia's recognition of Japan's sovereignty over all four of the disputed islands. In exchange, he can be expected to offer maximum flexibility over the timing of their actual transfer to Japanese administration. Further to this, the Japanese leader will offer his country's economic assistance in the development of the Russian Far East. A further incentive can be anticipated to be Japan's promise to drop its current economic sanctions. Prime Minister Abe will also float the possibility that, if the territorial dispute is resolved, Japan will be able to speak up for Russia's interests within the G7 and to henceforth function as a bridge between the West and Russia. While this can be assumed to be the Japanese leader's main proposal, Professor Brown speculated that, if Russia rejected this four-island deal, Prime Minister Abe might be tempted to settle for a 50-50 territorial split, an arrangement which would see the majority of Iturup/Etorofu remain with Russia. Such a deal, while controversial in Japan, has previously been suggested by other members of the present Abe administration. If any resolution were to be privately agreed upon at the informal summit, Prime Minister Abe could then proceed to outline and justify Japan's concessions to the other G7 members at the Mie summit in

May. The territorial agreement could then be finalised during a subsequent official visit by President Putin to Japan later in 2016.

Having outlined Japan's continuing hopes with regard to the territorial dispute, in the remainder of the presentation Professor Brown turned to assessing the prospects of success. To do this, he provided a detailed explanation of Russia's contemporary perspective on the territorial conflict with Japan, outlining not only the attitudes of government officials but also those of ordinary Russian citizens. In this regard, he began by explaining Russian perspectives on history and international law, emphasising that many Russian historians do not share the view that the islands were originally Japanese land. Instead, many in Russia believe that the islands and their Ainu inhabitants were first "discovered" by the Russians and were only subsequently colonised by Japan. It was further elaborated that it is commonly believed within Russia that the seizure of the islands in 1945 was legitimate since it had been approved by the Yalta Protocol in February of that year. The Russian side were also said to find support for their position in the UN Charter's article 107. Lastly, Professor Brown stressed the almost sacred way in which the Soviet Union's involvement in the Second World War continues to be regarded within Russia. This means that many Russians would fiercely oppose any territorial concessions to Japan because it would be regarded as a betrayal of the

memory of the approximately 12,000 Soviet soldiers who died fighting the Japanese in August 1945.

Professor Brown also spoke about why the offer of Japanese economic assistance is unlikely to succeed in prising a compromise from the Russian side. This is because, while the Russian authorities would welcome increased Japanese investment, they do not believe that they need to make any major concessions in order to receive this. Firstly, there is a common belief that Japan has a strong desire to purchase Russia's energy resources and that it is therefore not in a position to withhold trade with Russia until the latter offers territorial concessions. Further to this, it was explained that Japan is no longer widely regarded within Russia as a dynamic economy with which a country must urgently strive to do business. This being so, rather than Japan having significant economic leverage over Russia, it is instead considered that the countries are more or less equals and that each would benefit from increased economic exchange. Therefore, by concentrating on creating an attractive business climate in the Russian Far East, the Russian side anticipates being able to attract Japanese investment, even if it maintains an uncompromising stance on the territorial issue. Lastly in terms of economic issues, Professor Brown detailed the significant increases in federal spending that have recently been directed towards the Kuril chain. It was explained that, having spent large sums on

building new infrastructure on the disputed islands, the Russian government will be only more reluctant to transfer them to Japan.

In the final section of the talk, Professor Brown turned to security issues. Here, it was explained that some in Japan believe that the Russian elite are secretly alarmed by China's rise and may therefore be eager for closer relations with Japan. This too has been suggested as a potential source of Japanese leverage with regard to the territorial dispute. In reality, however, Professor Brown explained that the Russian elite see little threat from China and that many leading figures have spoken of their desire to develop even closer ties with Beijing. This pro-Chinese attitude has been significantly strengthened by the Ukraine crisis, which has simultaneously led to a souring of attitudes towards Japan. Indeed, it was noted that, following Japan's introduction of sanctions, some Russian parliamentarians began to describe Japan as an actual "enemy" of Russia. Finally, Professor Brown reminded the audience of the islands' potential strategic importance to Russia. This relates to the Russian military's potential use of the Sea of Okhotsk as a bastion for Russia's nuclear-armed submarines in the event of a major international conflict. The security of this strategic sanctuary would be disturbed if the islands of Kunashir/i and Iturup/Etorofu were to be transferred to Japan. Professor Brown also highlighted the increased importance recently attributed to the Kuril chain

by the Russian government in connection with its efforts to project power into the Arctic and to develop the Northern Sea Route.

In conclusion, Professor Brown offered a downbeat assessment of the Japanese government's prospects of recovering sovereignty over all four (or even three) of the islands. What is more, according to his analysis, Japan's chances of regaining any territory whatsoever will only fade further with time. This is because, while President Putin may still at present be willing to transfer the small islands of Shikotan and Habomai in return for the signing of a peace treaty (as stipulated by the Joint Declaration of 1956), this offer is not expected to last beyond the end of his presidency. Indeed, Professor Brown predicted that, in the longer term, the Russian side will withdraw the offer of transferring even the two smaller islands, and will instead revert to a position of denying the existence of any territorial dispute whatsoever.