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# Abe's Foreign Policy Fiasco on the Northern Territories Issue: Breaking with the Past and the National Movement

Akihiro Iwashita\*

## Introduction: Towards the Legacy of Other Great Leaders

Since December 2012, when he was inaugurated as Japan's premier for a second time, Shinzo Abe has prioritized a Russia-focused foreign policy, and has particularly focused his attention on the "Northern Territories" (Southern Kuril) issue. This he recognizes as central to his political mission for two reasons. First, his family legacy is in play. Abe follows in the footsteps of his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, the powerful Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister who was behind the revision of the security alliance with the United States in 1960, his granduncle, Eisaku Sato, also an LDP Prime Minister and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, who gained Okinawa from the U.S. in 1972, and his father Shintaro Abe, the foreign minister who sought to resolve the Northern Territorial dispute with Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader. It is obvious that Abe wants to personally establish his legacy as a great leader, like his distinguished predecessors, by solving the territorial issue and concluding a peace treaty with Russia. Second, China has been a key factor for Japan maintaining good relations with Russia. Although many credible researchers of Sino-Russian relations have raised doubts about Japan's success in creating a divide between Russia and China, Japan's foreign policy circles retain this hope, and the Abe administration, with its initially anti-China orientation, welcomed this idea. If Japan and Russia solve the territorial problem with a peace treaty, improved relations may work as a deterrence to China in Northeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea that followed the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi hindered Abe's plan to resolve the Northern Territories issue, however. Japan, as a

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<sup>1</sup> The general idea of involving Russia in the U.S.-Japan alliance as a counterweight to China has been floated since the mid-2000s. The "Japan-Russia-U.S. trilateral conference" initiated as a "second track" (factually "track 1.5") by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) publicized the idea as a sophisticated suggestion. Accessed July 25, 2019: <file:///G:/2019/201908/20120621e-JA-RUS-US.pdf> The idea of pitting Russia against China, based on Bobo Lo's "strategic tensions" between Russia and China, is said to be popular even now in Japan's MOFA. Former diplomats, such as Kunihiko Miyake, are leading proponents. See for example, Gilbert Rozman, "Japan's Debates on Russia and China: What is New in the Final Months of 2018?," The Asan Forum, December 30, 2018. Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://www.theasanforum.org/japans-debates-on-russia-and-china-what-is-new-in-the-final-months-of-2018/>

Regarding Russia's perception of its relations with Japan, see Anna Kireeva and Andrei Sushentsov, *The Russian-Japanese Rapprochement: Opportunities and Limitations* (Valdai Discussion Club Report: Moscow, 2017). Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://valdaiclub.com/files/15312/>; *Russia – Japan Relations: New Stage of Development* (Russian International Affairs Council: Moscow, 2019). Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-Japan-WP50-En.pdf> The Russian side is clearly aware of Japan's policy to decouple Russia from China.

U.S. ally, joined the G7 sanctions against Russia, although the Abe administration also wanted to avoid harming relations with Russia.

Abe had his opportunity to improve them in 2016. U.S. President Barack Obama, who had urged Abe not to get too close to Putin, was about to leave office, so the U.S. policy-community would not have their gaze on Japan diplomacy before the new presidential election. It was also around this time that Abe finally understood that there would be no progress in negotiations on the territorial dispute if Japan continued to maintain its claims to all of the four islands, e.g. Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and Habomai. Therefore, from early 2016 the Abe administration started to work on a “new approach” that could achieve a solution to the territorial issue.

In the summer of 2016, Japan’s media rushed to report a “scoop” on possible scenarios for a peace treaty, such as the “return of the two islands of Shikotan and Habomai first” and the “joint administration of Etorofu and Kunashiri,”<sup>2</sup> which had been leaked by the administration as a political trial balloon. In advance of the Abe-Putin summit in Yamaguchi and Tokyo planned for late 2016, many policy watchers expected that a “return of two islands plus alpha” agreement would be reached. On December 14, there was indeed a media circus celebrating Putin’s visit to Nagato City, Abe’s hometown in Yamaguchi prefecture and the summit between the two leaders. However, no agreement on the territorial dispute was reached there. Apparently, Putin refused to recognize the Tokyo Declaration of 1993, which refers to the four islands as the subject of negotiations, and refused to mention the territorial dispute at all. Many Japanese were disappointed, but the Abe administration, nonetheless, claimed the summit to be a “success” in moving towards a peace treaty, and emphasizing agreements made for “joint economic activities” to take place on the four islands.

Three years have passed since the 2016 summit, during which time Abe and Putin have held more than ten meetings, yet no progress has been made towards resolving the territorial dispute, nor did the “joint economic activities” agreement bear any fruit. Nevertheless, the Abe administration has continued to tell the public that negotiations are on track. This paper seeks to shed new light on the Abe administration’s plan to resolve the territorial dispute and the causes for its failure. The paper consists of five parts: 1) Abe’s summit with Putin in December of 2016, 2) the behind-the-scenes story both before and after the summit, 3) realities of the “joint economic activities” promised at the summit, 4) Abe’s foreign policy toward Russia in the context of Japanese politics, and 5) failure to conceal Northern Territories negotiations. The paper concludes by exploring Abe’s policy mismanagement and its impact on future relations with Russia. Written as a narrative, the paper primarily utilizes Japanese media reports, together with insights gleaned by the author from discussions with policy actors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 23, 2016; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 17, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For background to the current discussions, readers may wish to consult the following: Brad Williams, *Resolving the Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute: Hokkaido-Sakhalin Relations* (London: Routledge, 2007); Brad Williams, “Dissent on Japan’s Northern Periphery: Nemuro, the Northern Territories and the Limits of Change in a ‘Bureaucrat’s Movement’.” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 11:2 (2010): 221–244; Alexander Bukh, *Japan’s National Identity and Foreign Policy: Russia as Japan’s “Other”* (London: Routledge, 2011); Alexander Bukh, “Constructing Japan’s ‘Northern Territories’: Domestic Actors, Interests and the Symbolism of the Disputed Islands,” *International Relations of Asia-Pacific* 12:3 (2012): 483–509; Paul Richardson, *At the Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia’s National Identity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018).

## Abe's 2016 Summit Plan for "Shikotan and Habomai Plus"

The Abe administration's effort to induce more cooperation from Russia became apparent in May 2016, when Abe visited Sochi to meet Putin during his tour of Europe on the eve of the Isejima G7 summit in July. After the events in Crimea, Russia was out of the G7 and isolated from western countries. Abe was hoping to act as a bridge between Russia and G7 members. Doing so, he hoped, would lead to a political deal on the Northern Territories issue. Abe proposed to Russia a major economic cooperation plan, with its eight key points including the development of industries and export bases in the Russian Far East, the transfer of cutting-edge technology and people-to-people interactions.<sup>4</sup> Putin listened to all of this with interest.

The Abe administration also announced a "new approach" towards a peace treaty. At that point, the details of this "new approach" had not yet been revealed, but it was obvious that it included major economic incentives. As long as Japan stresses economic inducements, Putin's response is always favorable because sanctions have caused considerable damage to the Russian economy. The Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September of 2016 encouraged Abe to strengthen Japan's relations with Russia. The Russian Far East meeting seemed like a good chance to nudge Putin more toward Japan's side. The Abe administration thought this would work in Japan's favor because Russia wanted to avoid increased dependency on China. Putin, in turn, was very polite with Abe and accepted an invitation to visit Japan for the first time in ten years.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Abe administration became optimistic about a deal over the Northern Territories.

According to some media reports, the Abe administration thought that a deal would be possible if Japan would retract its demand for the "four islands at once." While disassembling this package, Japan still needed a symbolic concession related to Etorofu and Kunashiri islands. In short, on the condition of substantial economic assistance to Russia, Japan's position changed to asking for the return of only Shikotan and Habomai, together with some "privileges" on Etorofu and Kunashiri. The November 2016 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Peru was an ideal place for testing the big deal before the forthcoming December Abe-Putin summit in Japan. However, it was said that Japan's actions did not bring any results. After the meeting with Putin, Abe's face was pale, and he lamented that a solution would take much more time. This result was a far cry from Abe's previous repeated claims that he could personally solve the issue with Putin.<sup>6</sup>

An exclusive interview with Putin by Nihon TV and *Yomiuri Shimbun* revealed the reality of Putin's three NOs on the territorial dispute. Putin explicitly stated that: 1) Russia has no territorial

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<sup>4</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e\\_000427.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e_000427.html) This paper quotes many news items without clear titles online. To avoid complication, some sources are shown only with URL.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/page3e\\_000566.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/page3e_000566.html)

<sup>6</sup> *The Japan Times*, November 20, 2016. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/11/20/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-eyes-talks-putin-dec-16-tokyo/#.XNTduPZuJ9A> Concerning Putin's remarks about the four islands legally under Russian sovereignty and Abe's depression, see *Sankei Shimbun*, November 20, 2016. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.sankei.com/politics/news/161121/pl1611210020-n1.html>; *Hokkaido Shimbun*, November 20, 2016.

dispute with Japan (though he recognized Japan's claims), 2) There are no grounds for Japan's claims to Etorofu and Kunashiri, 3) There would be no unconditional transfer of Shikotan and Habomai to Japan, despite the 1956 Soviet-Japan Joint Declaration. Furthermore, China, and not Japan, would continue to be Russia's No.1 partner in the region.<sup>7</sup>

The Abe administration was forced to retreat from any hopes of a deal on the territorial dispute at the forthcoming summit. However, the Japanese media was already eagerly expecting a historic deal. The administration thus had to find a way to limit the damage and invent something new, in order to portray the summit as a "success."<sup>8</sup> They were concerned that Abe's foreign policy performance overall would lead to a decline in trust and support for Abe. In the next section, the author explores the administration's behind-the-scenes maneuvers, but first let us summarize the way the December summit unfolded.

Putin arrived in Nagato on December 15, 2016 and was three hours late. Such a delay is not unusual for Putin, but many Japanese journalists were a bit shocked. They were waiting from noon with local participants to welcome Putin near the conference hotel. Due to Putin's arrival occurring in the late evening, some well-wishers, including children, were sent home for safety reasons, but others waited and were at last able to wave Russian flags for Putin at the end of a long cold day. Most of them were happy to say, "Our Prime-Minister has invited a great guest to our small town!" Abe, his wife, and some Diet members from the Yamaguchi electorate participated in Putin's welcoming ceremony at the entrance of the hotel. The television played up the scene in anticipation of talks between two great leaders.<sup>9</sup>

The Nagato summit night was calm and short. The two leaders talked face-to-face for 90 minutes with only the interpreters present. Just after the meeting, Abe briefed the media on the following three points: 1) measures would be put in place to make it easier for Japanese former islanders to visit the islands; 2) agreement on a plan for "joint economic activities" on the islands, which would not impinge on the sovereignty claims of either side; and 3) the need for frank talks on the peace treaty issue. The last point was the critical one. "Frank talks" in diplomatic language means a lack of progress and serious disagreement on the issue. This suggested that nothing related to the territorial issue had been achieved.<sup>10</sup>

The next day, on December 16, the two leaders travelled separately to Tokyo to continue talks. Meanwhile, details of the Nagato talks were leaked to the press. The leaders had failed to issue an official joint statement, like at the disastrous Koizumi-Putin meeting in 2005. According to the leaks, the reason for this was Putin's hard line on the territorial issue. Some said that Putin refused to recognize

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<sup>7</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://www.news24.jp/articles/2016/12/14/04349055.html>

<sup>8</sup> Masami Ono, "Nichiro Kaidan: Hopporyodo Mondaino Kaiketsuho Nozomiusu [Japan-Russian Summit: Little Hope for Solving the Northern Territories Issue]," *web Ronza*, December 17, 2016. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://webronza.asahi.com/politics/articles/2016120900001.html>

<sup>9</sup> The author joined as an on-the-site special commentator for a special program by Hokkaido's local STV. All of the key national TV teams with local Yamaguchi and Hokkaido ones were scrambling to prepare for Putin's visit. This evening news featured the hotel entrance scene of Putin's shaking hands with Abe, his wife and Abe's LDP colleagues.

<sup>10</sup> See *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* (morning edition), December 16, 2016.

the Tokyo Declaration of 1993, which referred to the four islands as subject to bilateral negotiations. Additionally, he again rejected the unconditional transfer of Shikotan and Habomai, despite his recognition of the 1956 Joint Declaration.<sup>11</sup> Second, Abe prepared a “surprise letter” from a former Etorofu islander which stated that, “I want to be able to visit the island more often. I wish to sleep and wake up there in the morning.” Putin was said to have been moved by it and agreed to simplify the visa-free regime for former islanders to visit the islands. Third, Japan and Russia agreed to make plans for “joint economic activities” on the four islands, on the condition that these activities would not prejudice either side’s sovereignty claims or national interests. When one of Putin’s aides stated that these economic activities should be governed by Russian law, the Japanese side protested this remark.<sup>12</sup>

The joint press conference in Tokyo that concluded the meetings clearly showed the stagnation of negotiations over the territorial dispute. During the conference, both leaders made little mention of “solving the territorial dispute,” and referred only to the peace treaty. The differences between them were also apparent. Abe emphasized the treaty while Putin concentrated on the economy and business.<sup>13</sup> Putin, evidently, did not like to use the term territorial problem at all, but the Japanese side convinced itself that as long as Putin briefly mentioned the peace treaty issue, this was fine and equivalent to resolving the territorial issue in the Japanese context.

During the Q&A session, one scene shocked those who knew well the history of the Russo-Japanese border. A reporter from *Sankei Shimbun* asked Putin whether Russia is also prepared for concessions, as he demanded quite a lot from Japan. Putin cautiously listened and started an amazing story. Here is a rough summary: Before answering you, we should reflect on history... The Kuril Islands were originally Russian, but Japan acquired the South Kurils through Admiral Putyatin’s decision. But Japan was not satisfied and acquired Sakhalin by force as the result of the 1905 war. At the end of World War II, we just took them back. However, I want to stop such a historical ping-pong game... The reporter focused on the last words, “ending the game,” but many Japanese historians of Russia were taken aback by Putin’s emphasis on the Kurils as Russia’s “inherent territory.” Shinzo Abe stood at Putin’s side with a slight smile, gently nodding. This made it seem that the Japanese leader accepted Putin’s view of the history of the Kurils.<sup>14</sup>

There was again no official joint statement, so the Abe administration instead distributed two media releases. The first one was on “joint economic activities.” The second one was an explanation of the simplification of the former islanders’ visits, which included reviving the entry regime close to Nemuro, which had formerly been used on an ad hoc basis, and suspended since 2013. None of this was new and the released papers did not mention the territorial dispute at all.<sup>15</sup> The LDP General

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with a senior official in the Abe administration (closed).

<sup>12</sup> *Hokkaido Shimbun*, December 16, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> See the PM Office website. Accessed July 25, 2019: [http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/97\\_abe/statement/2016/1216kaiken.html](http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/97_abe/statement/2016/1216kaiken.html)

<sup>14</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.sankei.com/premium/news/161216/prm1612160017-n2.html>

<sup>15</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20161217/ddm/010/010/042000c>

Secretary Toshihiro Nikai immediately commented that the results of the summit were disappointing.<sup>16</sup> It is not often that Nikai has shown such dissatisfaction with Abe's policy.

### **A Behind-the-Scene Story: “Surprise Letters from Former Islanders”**

Who has actually managed the negotiations with Putin? The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has been left out in the cold. The Russian school of the MOFA certainly knew well Putin's hard position on the Northern Territories issue and was hesitant to negotiate. MOFA basically thought it better to shelve the territorial issue. They understood that Putin's stance toward the territorial issue had hardened since 2005, though he still recognized the validity of the 1956 Soviet-Japan Joint Declaration. They certainly remembered that Putin, rejecting the Tokyo Declaration, had stated that further discussion regarding the status of Shikotan and Habomai was a must, even if those negotiations were to be based on the Joint Declaration.<sup>17</sup>

For Shinzo Abe, the “unwillingness” of MOFA to cooperate looked like “sabotage.” As a result, he decided to bypass MOFA and to rely on Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industries (METI) officials, and primarily its chief secretary, Takaya Imai. Imai contributed to the development of energy policy, particularly the export of nuclear plants overseas, during the first term of the Abe government and personally supported Abe when the latter was threatened with political obscurity after dissolving his first cabinet in 2007. Some say that Takaya Imai is a “shadow Prime-Minister,” making key policy behind the scenes. He conducted negotiations with Russia by relying exclusively on economic clout to draw Putin back to the negotiation table.<sup>18</sup>

On the day of the summit, the Prime Minister's Office went into damage control mode by swiftly playing up the summit's results. That same evening, just after Putin's departure, Shinzo Abe rushed to appear on numerous TV news programs, such as NHK News 9, Asahi Hodo Station and TBS News 23. He explained his great mission to improve relations with Russia and expressed hopes for the signing of a peace treaty in the near future. It is rare that the PM himself trumpets the results of a meeting with a foreign leader to the media on the same day. The TV stations gave him a long time to talk without any tough questions. The PM's presence also hindered critics appearing during the news show. The news programs encouraged ordinary people to be impressed by Abe's “success” in the summit with Russia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.sankei.com/politics/news/161216/pl1612160047-n1.html>

<sup>17</sup> Minoru Tamba, Ambassador and MOFA negotiator with Russia during the Kawana Summit of 1998, emphasized that Putin's shift regarding the Northern Territories, including rejection of the Tokyo Declaration, began in September of 2005. See, Minoru Tamba, *Waga Jinsei* [My Life] (Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Exclusive interview with Takaya Imai, *Bungei Syunjyu*, pp.104–108, June, 2018. See also other web essay. Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/52740>

<sup>19</sup> On Nihon TV *News Zero*, the author commented and then criticized the results of the summit in the evening because of the time overlap with the News 23. Shinzo Abe sometimes uses TV monopoly tactics to kill counter-arguments such as on December 20, 2013, for justifying the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and on September 25, 2017, for dissolving the Lower House. It is said that the PM Office managed the media

A campaign for “summit success” developed, with NHK airing “good stories” of the 2016 summit. A famous Russia expert, Professor Nobuo Shimotomai of Hosei University, stated on NHK national news that Japan-Russia relations have entered a new era, and that the introduction of the concept of “joint economic activities” can help to overcome the problem of sovereignty in the disputed islands. A “beautiful story” appeared two days later. NHK national news on December 16 featured the moving tale of the former islanders’ letter to Putin conveyed by Abe. In this tale, Taiko Kodama, a former Habomai islander and well-known activist in the movement for the return of all four islands, explained the initiative to compile the letter to Putin. NHK provided exclusive footage of parts of the letter, and introduced Kodama drafting the letter with six other former islanders. The six varied in terms of their place of birth, age, gender, careers and age, and included the president of the former islanders association, and a Shikotan islander whose story is well-known for being a model for the movie *Giovanni’s Island*. The letter stated, “We want to be able to visit the islands more easily than at present and to be able to wake up there in the morning.” This is the same phrase that Abe often used when pitching his achievements to the general public. However, the letter shown on the screen mentioned nothing about returning the islands to Japan.<sup>20</sup>

Two days later, an NHK Special Program on the summit was aired. Akiko Iwata, a senior reporter for NHK and a de facto Abe foreign policy spokesperson, reported the inside story of the summit, showing the conflict between MOFA-based aides and those from Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). The former focused on to the sovereignty issue while the latter emphasized that the economy, that is, “joint economic activities,” should have priority. A more interesting scene followed at the end of the program, which showed the seven former islanders signing the letter. Taiko Kodama circulated the letter and the other six listened to her explanation.<sup>21</sup> Observers noted that the letter made no reference to the return of the islands.

More complicated findings soon came to light. Newspaper reporters discovered that the “letter” was actually a composite of three letters: the first, original, one was a one page letter written by Sakiko Suzuki, a former islander from Etorofu; the second was a Russian translation from the first by an NHK senior reporter with extensive experience of working in Russia. Suzuki was said to have learned Russian by herself and wrote the letter, but other sources have shown that this NHK Russia expert assisted her. It was this second version that was handed to Putin by Abe. The third version was the seven islanders’ letter shown on the NHK program. At the time, it was difficult to understand why the three different letters were necessary for the summit.<sup>22</sup>

The NHK campaign pushing the summit’s “success” was excessive. Some journalists felt that the letter of the seven islanders was somewhat strange and tried to get the original in order to check whether it included the phrase “return the islands” in the remaining unpublished parts. However,

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control. See, the following book, Hiroyoshi Sunagawa, *Abe Kantei to TV [Abe PM Office and TV]*, (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *NHK Morning News 7*, December 18, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> *NHK Special, Scoop Documentary Hopporyodo Kosho*, December 18, 2016. See the following site. Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://www.nhk.or.jp/kaisetsu-blog/100/259340.html>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with newspaper reporters covering the Northern Territories issue.



Kodama refused to show the letter, while the other six did not have copies, although they had signed it. NHK did not release the letter, but *Kyodo* and *Hokkaido Shimbun* successfully obtained and published the letter in its entirety, which showed that it made no clear reference to “returning the islands to Japan.”<sup>23</sup>

This was a rather shocking revelation because Kodama has been one of the strongest advocates of the “four islands at once” position. Why would she contribute to a letter that mentions nothing about any islands being returned to Japan? In addition, the author conducted an analysis of the results of opinion polls and questionnaires on the Northern Territories from the summer to winter of 2016, including those from *Hokkaido Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun* and NHK. They show similar results: that many respondents nationwide, including Nemuro citizens and former islanders support the initial return of two islands, Shikotan and Habomai (A majority would not back the “only two islands” option which would leave Etorofu and Kunashiri to Russia though). This meant that if Abe had negotiated with Putin on the basis of the return of two islands at the summit, the Japanese people, at both the national and local levels, and including former islanders, would have supported this historic decision.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, most of the former islanders never gave up the hope for the return of all of the islands. The idea of getting the islands back is still valid for them. This is the reason why the author harbored strong doubts about the seven islanders’ letter produced by Kodama and NHK.

One of the seven former residents involved in preparing the letter recently spoke out about what actually happened. Hiroshi Tokunou, who was invited to the letter meeting, angrily reports that he was plotted against and betrayed. He alleges that the preparation of the letter was conducted by representatives from the Prime Minister’s Office in cooperation with NHK and Kodama. His explanation suggests that the reason they needed the seven islanders’ letter was to authorize the first letter by Suzuki. If the first letter worked for Putin, the media and public probably would have countered that it was just an expression of one person’s feelings and an individual request. Getting various former islanders, including the president of the association, made the story more persuasive.<sup>25</sup>

The letter opened a Pandora’s box with the former islanders’ association. Some leaders heavily criticized the letter because of the absence of prior consultation with the association and lack of references to the “return of the Northern Territories.” As a result, the formal unity of the association has been increasingly undermined since. The association consists of former residents of four different islands, who do not necessarily share slogans such as “four islands at once.” The political agenda is now shifting from the four islands deal to one for the two islands first. Thus it is natural that the former residents of Shikotan and Habomai are envied by the others. In addition, the Abe administration has stopped using the term “return.” On the eve of the December summit of 2016, the annual demonstration in Tokyo on December 1 also refrained from calling for Russia to “return the islands.” The crisis

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<sup>23</sup> *Hokkaido Shimbun*, December 21, 2016; *Sankei Web*, January 4, 2017

<sup>24</sup> *Hokkaido Shimbun*, October 17, 2016; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 11, 2016; *NHK* December 13, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Masao Awano had an exclusive interview with one of the letter signees, Hiroshi Tokunou, *Shukan Kinyoubi*, February 8, 2019.

threatening the unity of the association is apparent and probably signals the imminent disappearance of the “return of the four islands” movement.<sup>26</sup>

### **A Rhapsody for the Aftermath: “Joint Economic Activities”**

Why did Prime-Minister Abe’s Office need such a letter? It seems that this is related to the “joint economic activities” proposal. The Japanese government wanted to encourage Putin to accept the plan on all four of the islands, but it was unclear whether Putin would agree to include Etorofu and Kunashiri. Therefore, if the letter emphasized the “return” of the islands, Putin could have connected this to the “joint economic activities” proposal. The following evidence supports this thesis: during the summit, Abe asked Putin to allow the former residents to conduct visits to the islands by airplane, to which Putin agreed. When it was to materialize in June 2017, the vice-minister of MOFA, Nobuo Kishi, Abe’s younger brother, stated that the government really wanted to develop this visit into a “joint economic activities” mission. In short, the Abe administration presumably utilized the “voice of former residents” as a stepping-stone for economic activities.<sup>27</sup>

However, the improvised mission did not work well from the beginning. The first visit of former islanders was cancelled because of heavy fog. Actually, many locals warned of such a possibility beforehand, because May and June is the foggy season there. One former islander frankly said, “We could have gone by ship today. Why did the government plan it in the worst season? Why not in the best season, September?”<sup>28</sup>

Many improvised preparations followed. The Abe administration rushed to organize an ad hoc investigative mission for “joint economic activities” on the islands. But it was not easy to find a good ship for the mission. While they had a 1,000-ton ship called Etopirika, for the exclusive use of “non-passport and non-visa exchange of people” between Japan and Russia,<sup>29</sup> its operational plan was already fixed to carry “non-visa passengers” from Nemuro and back. The administration then tried to

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with former islanders close to the association (March 14, 2019; Nemuro).

<sup>27</sup> The author finally understood why Kodama organized the letter so enthusiastically, even if it appears to kill the possibility of demanding the return of all four islands. This puzzle was solved when the author received an open question from her at a special event celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the association in Sapporo. She shouted, after hearing my criticism on the Abe administration’s approach, how else can we counter the presence of foreign economic entities on the island, except through “joint economic activities.” She seemed willing to support the “former residents’ letters” prepared by the Prime-Minister’s Office in order to encourage Putin to agree to the “economic activities.”

<sup>28</sup> *Hokkaido Local TV UHB*, June 18, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> The Japanese government prohibited citizens from getting a visa to visit the disputed islands. The only way to visit has been through a special regime called “no passport, no visa,” which was introduced as a limited group tour in 1991, during the Gorbachev era. Participants, such as former islanders and their family, politicians, journalists, professors and so on, were selected by government-related associations, and the tours were not open to ordinary people. Japanese guests were issued a special ID card by the MOFA and a MOFA agent escorted them. The Russian side checked the IDs and stamped an entry seal in a separate room. For the participants, the tour appeared as an extension of a domestic trip, though Russia thought of it as an official immigration procedure. Beginning as a tentative experiment, the tours have continued for over 25 years.

hire a much larger ferry, of around 10,000-tons, operating between Hakodate and Aomori. However, the barges in Kunashiri port, the entry point of the islands, were not suitable for a ship that size. Although Nemuro locals alerted the Abe administration beforehand, the administration did not listen to them at all.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Abe's administration wanted to announce that it would begin visits in May 2017, and that month dispatched a Prime-Ministerial Aide, Eiichi Hasegawa, to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, to meet then-Governor Oleg Kozhemyako and mobilize support for the Japanese mission. NHK announced that the "joint economic activities" investigation plan had been executed as planned by the government. It also added that "after that" the team moved to the disputed islands. However, it was impossible for the delegation to move directly from Sakhalin to the Kurils because of the passport and visa issue. The Japanese are prohibited from entering the islands with the passport and a Russian visa (see, footnote 29). This claim of "after that" was just a story for the Japanese audience.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, involving Sakhalin in the activities meant a setback for Japan's former approach, and, essentially, a major change in Japan's former policy towards the islands. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, basic policy towards the islands has sought to decouple them from Sakhalin. MOFA referred to this policy as "Japanizing the islands," encouraging Russian islanders to rely directly on Japan for resources, goods and technology. Attracting them would create a situation, MOFA officials believed, in which they would eventually agree to Japanese sovereignty and cohabitation with Japanese if needed. This policy indeed made sense in the early 1990s, as the Russian residents of the islands felt abandoned by both Russia and Sakhalin. Some islanders were inclined to accept Japanese sovereignty, while many more welcomed Japan's economic presence. However, from the late 2000s, the recovery of Russian power and the Sakhalin energy renaissance changed the situation in favor of Russia. "Sakhalinization of the islands" began. Nowadays, the Sakhalin local government administers the islands efficiently and transportation between them works effectively. Thus, ironically, Japan's decision to rely on the Sakhalin government for promoting "joint economic activities" led to the islands becoming more integrated into Russia. For Sakhalin, this must be a welcome development. Clearly, the effect of the "joint economic activities" plan is more beneficial for Russia and Sakhalin than for Japan.

Local investigative teams were dispatched three times. The first and second investigations were conducted June 27–July 1 and October 26–31 of 2017, respectively, and the third was planned for August 16–22 of 2018. These missions also faced certain challenges. The first was a farce because the Nemuro mayor, Shunsuke Hasegawa, was not permitted to join it due to Russian counter-sanctions against Japan. The third one was suddenly organized by officials and forced the cancellation of a younger generation's visit plan on almost the same dates. Some have criticized the Abe administration for disregarding the interests of the concerned parties. In addition, the actual trip was cancelled on account of the bad weather. The rearranged trip beginning October 1 was then also delayed because of

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<sup>30</sup> Fieldwork and hearings with former residents and locals in Nemuro City (March 13–14, 2019: Nemuro).

<sup>31</sup> *NHK Radio News* at noon, May 30, 2017.

bad weather, and skipped staying on Shikotan. The only good news was that the last mission included a new mayor of Nemuro, Masatoshi Ishigaki.<sup>32</sup>

The investigative missions also lacked a clear purpose. Governor Kozhemyako, flying from Sakhalin, escorted Japan's delegation chief Hasegawa and members of the investigation team to facilities on the islands. Who were the participants? The Japanese government prioritized five areas: "Sea farming, Greenhouses, Tourism, Waste and Wind Power generation." Emphasis was put on the first three. The government called on businesses from all over Hokkaido and Japan to join, which they did, but details of the survey have not been released. The administration tightly controlled the information and required participants to sign an oath of nondisclosure.<sup>33</sup>

The business participants generally emphasized future potential, but publicized no concrete plans. Some complained about the mission privately; that the administration asked businesses to participate at their own risk, even as part of a governmental mission. The gap between the administration and businesses gradually widened. Some businesses dropped out and disappeared, while others continue to participate in the mission as a display of loyalty to the government. Despite the deadlock, the Abe administration wanted to show progress and announced at the Abe-Putin Vladivostok meeting in September 2018 that Russia and Japan had agreed to create a road map.<sup>34</sup> In reality, the administration was said to be worried about the lack of progress in the mission.

Why did its plans fail? It is not that there is no possibility of cooperation. One local Hokkaido company was prepared to build a greenhouse for growing strawberries near the airport on Kunashiri. Sea farming for sea urchin was an obvious possibility. And so on. However, the problem was how to proceed without damaging either side's sovereignty claims to the islands. Any activities require flexibility with regard to people and goods (equipment) moving to the islands. Russia did not welcome the use of a special economic regime, along the lines of the "no passport and no visa" exchange tentatively conducted from 1992, that could weaken its sovereignty claims. Russia urged Japan to accept Russian jurisdiction. However, once Japan recognizes Russia's institutional control over the mobility of people and goods, it must undoubtedly renounce any pretense to sovereignty over the islands.

In addition, the Russian side is disappointed with the small scale of the Japanese businesses. Strawberries and sea urchins will only provide local benefits, rather than transformative ones. Yet Japanese businesses do not want to shoulder the risk themselves, because of the potential hurdles and small returns. This means that island businesses are not feasible without Japanese government financial support, but the government is unwilling to take this step.

For Japan's part, Nemuro locals have also been embarrassed by the situation. Inviting big businesses for survey missions had little relevance for locals. Depending on the airplane visit for "joint economic activities" would change the transportation route from the current Nakashibetsu/Nemuro local airport to New Chitose/Sapporo, Hokkaido's central airport. It means a local economic loss

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<sup>32</sup> See *Hokkaido Shimbun's* related news on the next day's activities.

<sup>33</sup> Heard from participants in the mission on condition of anonymity.

<sup>34</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/8636.html>

because of bypassing Nemuro on the way to the islands. During the first mission, the refusal to allow the mayor to participate was a blow, as he had been a supporter of such efforts. Eventually, the Abe administration decided to reconstruct an old sea urchin seed center in Nemuro to show progress in “joint economic activities” and encourage the locals. However, the reconstruction itself had been planned for another reason, as compensation for a decline in fishing in the Russian EEZ. More importantly, there is no possibility of this sea urchin business serving as a “joint economic activity” with Russia. There are no concrete plans to transplant the urchin’s seeds to Russia for farming.<sup>35</sup> In other words, no one intends to dance to the Abe administration’s tune.

### **Making a “Success”: Realities of Abe’s Foreign Policy**

Despite the stagnation, some media, particularly NHK, continued to sell Abe’s foreign policy success. They repeatedly emphasized the intimacy of Abe-Putin relations and stressed the fact that the leaders met more than 25 times. Akiko Iwata continued to play up Abe’s foreign policy aim and how it works well in the world.<sup>36</sup>

The attempt to create a success story of Abe’s foreign policy was not limited to Russia. To understand the nature of Abe’s policy making process, including foreign policy, in a broader and comparative context, this section employs a narrative analysis on the current state of Japan’s relations with key Asian partners in order to shed light on domestic political debates. Finally, the description focuses back on Abe’s rapid change of the Northern Territories issue triggered by his visit to Vladivostok in September of 2018.

Many polls indicated that the strongest point of the Abe administration was foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> From 2017 to 2018, domestic affairs terrified the administration because of certain scandals, such as the Moritomo and Kakei affairs as well as gaffes by certain ministers. Diplomacy has been seen as an asset of the Abe administration.<sup>38</sup> NHK has often showed live conferences of Abe’s visits to foreign countries. So many scenes of Abe with various world leaders have been posted with explanations about how the Japanese Prime Minister is active, respected and influential. A famous speech writer for Abe, Tomohiko Taniguchi, commented, “Abe sits in the center of the world.”<sup>39</sup> Close relations with Putin have been one of the best examples of this.

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<sup>35</sup> Fieldwork and interview with former residents and locals in Nemuro City (May 30–31 and October 23–24, 2018; Nemuro).

<sup>36</sup> See the MOFA list of Abe’s foreign visits. Accessed November 3, 2019: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page24\\_000037.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/kaidan/page24_000037.html)

<sup>37</sup> For example, Abe’s foreign policy was appreciated by more than 50% of respondents even in 2019, according to Asahi Simbun Digital Web (June 23–24, 2019). Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASM6R3W2TM6RUZPS007.html>

<sup>38</sup> For example, see “Shinzo Abe’s Ratings are Tumbling amid Allegations of Wrongdoing,” *The Economist*, June 27, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> See Tomohiko Taniguchi, *Abe Shinzo no Shinjitsu [Truth of Abe Shinzo]* (Tokyo: Goku Shuppan, 2018) and his other essays.

Contrasting with this rosy picture, Abe's foreign policy has not been so productive. It is true that he has met with Putin many times. It was also a boost for him to meet with Trump as the President-elect before any other world leader and to be recognized as one of his best friends since then. Indeed, Abe appears to love foreign trips so much, particularly long distance, preferring them to sitting and answering hard questions from opposition parties in the Diet. A beautiful slogan of his administration is "diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map."<sup>40</sup> Thanks to his long premiership, he is able to take trips to places where his predecessors have never been. He had travelled to Mongolia and India in Asia (three times each). However, he has struggled with forming close ties with neighboring countries in Asia.<sup>41</sup>

For South Korea, it initially developed well, but he has met the South Korean President only twice and has never visited Seoul. Since 2018 relations have deteriorated rapidly. Challenges emerged with the territorial issue related to Takeshima/Dokto and historical issues such as the so-called comfort women. Nevertheless, both countries have maintained contact and coordination on big political issues such as those concerning North Korea. When President Moon Jae-In activated relations with North Korea, Abe asked him to raise the Japanese abductees issue during a meeting with Kim Jong-Un. In late 2018, two incidents led to a sudden freeze in bilateral relations. One was a Korean warship's use of fire-control radar against a Japan SDF plane on the high seas. Another was the Korean government's inaction toward the Supreme Court's ruling that recognized a compensation demand for "forced labor" against a Japanese company during Japan's colonial rule. The Abe administration criticized the former as lacking commonsense from a military point of view and demanded an apology while asking the Korean government to take responsibility for the compensation claims because the 1965 Japan-Korean Treaty gives Japan immunity from legal responsibility towards individual claims. Korea, in turn, criticized Japan for interference of the SDF action against a Korean ship in the first case and did not show the will to do anything in the second case. Some Japanese politicians warned that Japan could break off diplomatic relations with Korea and the Abe administration recently imposed strategic control on certain export items that Korea heavily depends on. Regardless of the reason, it is noted that Japan-Korea relations have hit rock bottom under the Abe administration.<sup>42</sup>

Concerning China, the Abe administration had a kind of an "enemy" policy approach at the beginning. They heavily criticized China's "One Belt One Road Initiative" and tried to offset China's influence in the world through Japanese economic assistance. The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept<sup>43</sup> was invented to counter China by some neighbors sharing the maritime zone surrounding China. Japan's foreign policy recognized China as a "threat," and aimed at having the U.S. and other Asian countries close to Japan. This is the reason why Abe has focused on establishing good ties with

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<sup>40</sup> Concerning the self-promotion of diplomacy, see the web. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/feature/gaikou/index.html>

<sup>41</sup> The list of Abe's foreign visits on the MOFA site shows how the Abe administration did not collaborate with China and South Korea, at least officially.

<sup>42</sup> See Yukio Okamoto's recent essay about Japan-Korean relations. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://business.nikkei.com/atcl/gen/19/00023/031200007/>

<sup>43</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e\\_000278.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html)

China's neighbors, for example, Mongolia and India. Recently, relations with China have improved, although bilateral issues such as the Senkaku issue remain without any progress. This has largely been caused by the ongoing U.S.-China economic conflict. Another cause is the opportunistic shift in Japan's approach. Considering the security and political affairs vis-à-vis China, the situation is still complicated but China is indispensable for Japan's economy—thus it cannot be ignored. Here Takaya Imai's initiative worked. He rewrote Abe's letter without the consent of the administration when the LDP General Secretary, Nikai, visited China and delivered it to Xi. It appreciated the "One Belt One Road Initiative" and expressed Japan's interest in contributing to it. The U.S.-China trade war accelerated China's rapprochement with Japan and Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Japan in 2018 and Abe's visit to Beijing to see Xi Jinping for the first time in his second term led to a reconciliatory mood for relations. On the other hand, Japan still maintains a hard position toward China and the approach to China has swung between political and economic interests.<sup>44</sup>

However, no situation is worse than relations with North Korea. Abe himself was the LDP's Deputy-Secretary General during the Koizumi government and is said to have proposed that the abductees should not return to North Korea. Then Japan and North Korea had a deal, which five abductees, temporarily brought to Japan by the Koizumi delegation, had to return to North Korea, but this promise was broken by the Japanese side. And the abduction issue added fuel to the worsening of relations with Japan, though Kim Jong-Il planned to make a breakthrough for improving ties. Abe was the man to stop any attempts to improve bilateral relations and has been the hardest politician blocking the U.S. flexible approach toward North Korea. He persuaded Trump not to make any concessions to Kim Jong-Un. However, Abe recently expressed a change in his stance: he suddenly stated that he would meet Kim without any conditions. Some observers worried that this could send the wrong signal to Kim that Japan would not put a higher priority on the abduction issue. Others suggested that Abe is a bit annoyed because he is now the only leader not to have met Kim after Putin met with him in Vladivostok in May 2019.<sup>45</sup> Abe's foreign policy approach is fickle here as well.<sup>46</sup>

In that sense, Russia has been the only neighboring country in Northeast Asia that continued to have good ties with Abe's Japan even if this relationship lacked substance. In fact, even when Russia conducted unilateral actions on the Northern Territories, such as military exercises and economic cooperation with third countries such as China and North Korea, Japan did not make any serious protests. The Abe administration's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga publicly stated that Japan protested through diplomatic channels; in reality, however, only low-ranking officials at Japan's embassy in Moscow made a phone call to low-ranking Russian Foreign Ministry counterparts. Russia

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<sup>44</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://vdata.nikkei.com/newsgraphics/cj-postwar-history/>

<sup>45</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20190227\\_876151.html](https://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20190227_876151.html)

<sup>46</sup> Even for the U.S., Abe's foreign policy is not as good as the government pitches. It may appear that the security alliance functions, and relations seem deep at first glance. However, nobody knows what Trump will do next. Trump wants Japan to take on more burdens and pay money for security and maintains a harder position on economic points of view even toward Japan. He also reveals private information like Abe's recommendation of Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize, not caring about the counterpart's face and interests. The Abe administration often emphasizes good relations with Trump, but it seems not so workable for key national interests.

did not take it as an official protest. Again, the Japanese government pretended to do the right thing for the Japanese audience but in reality did little to protest, trying not to provoke Russia and not to damage its interests.<sup>47</sup>

Japan's PM Office often emphasizes to the public Abe's personal achievements and relations, particularly his face-to-face encounters with world leaders. However, doubt has been raised. Remember the 2018 September LDP Presidential election? Abe, seeking a third term, sought to steer serious debate away from his rival, Shigeru Ishiba. Ishiba was in the minority among the LDP Diet members but more popular among the regional level LDP members. In 2012, when he challenged Abe as a candidate, he won over Abe at the regional vote and Abe won thanks to LDP Diet members' votes.

As a result, Abe came out traumatized from this "defeat" at the grassroots level. In general, the incumbent candidate is stronger and does not want a direct debate against rivals because an opponent can easily criticize the incumbent's achievements at no risk to her/himself. Abe seemed to have a reason for not wanting to debate with Ishiba. Abe is a talented speaker on TV show programs as far as the topic remains within his field. However, he is not good at responding to spontaneous questions and unexpected comments. He is famous for sidestepping direct questions and engaging in lengthy speeches on unrelated topics as a kind of filibuster, taking time away from the opposition parties in the Diet. Some say that he has difficulties answering well without the support of aides. The evidence seems to suggest that Abe did not want to debate with Ishiba in face-to-face talks. The Abe camp tried to decrease the number of direct debates from five to two against the request of the Ishiba side. The reason given was that he was too busy going abroad to meet with world leaders.

Pro-Abe netizens rushed to pitch Abe's predominance over Ishiba in the debates, but this was not so persuasive for the public because Ishiba's arguments were more coherent on many issues including the constitutional revision plan.<sup>48</sup> One piece of good news during the LDP presidential campaign was Putin's invitation to Abe to attend the Eastern Economic Forum on September 10–13, 2018. He chose not to participate in the debate because of this important visit. If Abe wanted to, he could have managed the one-day trip and short stay between Tokyo and Vladivostok. In fact, he spent three nights without a tight schedule. Such a long stay without necessity is unusual for a busy country leader. Seemingly he used this trip as a pretext to skip the debate with Ishiba. How can such a leader, who is afraid to engage in a debate with a domestic opponent, manage well in face-to-face talks with a seasoned politician like Putin? Are the one on one talks, in which Abe administration often takes pride, beneficial for Japan?

Putin's sneak attack came in Vladivostok just when Abe escaped from Tokyo. On September 12, two days after the Abe-Putin summit, Abe joined a special session of the Eastern Economic Forum with Xi Jinping, Putin, the Mongolian President Khaltmaa Battulga and South Korean PM Lee

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with anonymous official (closed). The Russian news backed the fact up. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO43365390V00C19A4000000/>

<sup>48</sup> For example, Ishiba's argument for Constitution Renewal, good or bad, is comprehensive. In contrast, Abe's discussion is simply putting one clause of the existence of the "SDF" in Article 9. He avoided the hard reaction and difficulties. Concerning the results of the competition, Abe won but Ishiba received more local votes than expected. Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.asahi.com/articles/DA3S13688548.html>



Nakyeon. Abe's speech writer prepared a strong message for Putin, through an American way of involving the audience present. Abe, appealing to the Russian audience and asking for a big applause, publicly called Putin to sign a peace treaty soon. Putin, in his usual way, countered with a proposal for a peace treaty without any conditions. He noted that this is something that he thought about just now. However, Putin's thesis was probably well-prepared beforehand. He must have believed that the time has come to put forward his idea. The Japanese side was upset because the plan decoupled the territorial dispute from the peace treaty. Japan's approach of focusing on the peace treaty (saying nothing directly about the territorial dispute) almost failed. Abe's speech, which provoked Putin, had a counter effect. Putin has much more experience with audiences such as at the Valdai Club and other venues as well as great skills in face-to-face talks. Putin added that his proposal resulted in spontaneous big applause. The scene was déjà vu of the joint media conference of the 2016 December summit. Again, Abe did not react immediately, only with a slight smile.<sup>49</sup> Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga stated that Japan's position did not change, and Abe also reiterated to Putin Japan's position after the event had ended.<sup>50</sup> However, Japan's "new approach" from 2016 was a proof that it did not work with Putin.

### **Failure of the "Return to 1956 Joint Declaration"**

It seems that for over a month, the PM Office deliberated on how to respond to Putin's proposal. If Japan kept the same line, negotiations would remain deadlocked, which could damage the image of the "success" of Abe's foreign policy toward Russia and, as a consequence, toward other countries. The domestic political agenda encroached again with the Upper House election in July 2019, shortly after the June G20 summit. The LDP's next big victory was not necessarily guaranteed because of economic problems and political scandals. In addition, the increase of consumption tax from 8% to 10% in October also looked ominous for the Abe administration. One expected solution was to dissolve the Lower House and to have combined elections of both of the Houses. In the past two cases, in 1980 and 1986, the ruling LDP secured a sweeping victory partly because it weakened the opposition parties' cooperation against the ruling party. Abe would follow these past double election precedents, to dissolve the Lower House and to keep a two-thirds majority in the Upper House, which is necessary to push constitutional revision proposals through the Diet, and builds on his great victories after the sudden dissolution of the Lower House in November 2014 and September 2017. However, doing this required a catchy slogan like "Abenomics" in 2014 and 2017's "overcoming the national crises," referring to the North Korean threat and Japan's declining population.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The transcripts and the video of Abe are available at the following pages. Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e\\_000898.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e_000898.html); Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://nettv.gov-online.go.jp/prg/prg17668.html> Concerning Putin's response, see the following. Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://news.tv-asahi.co.jp/news\\_international/articles/000136076.html](https://news.tv-asahi.co.jp/news_international/articles/000136076.html)

<sup>50</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.sankei.com/politics/news/180912/plt1809120014-n1.html>

<sup>51</sup> On the details of the 2017 affairs, see the following. Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2017/09/25/pm-abe\\_a\\_23221745/](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2017/09/25/pm-abe_a_23221745/)

Three possible alternatives were available. The first was postponement of the consumption tax increase. However, the administration has already done this twice in November 2014 due to the timing of the Lower House dissolving and in June 2016 with the excuse of low domestic consumption. This time it was not so easy to postpone the increase again: the accounting system change in the government and businesses has been prepared for taxation. If the tax hike was postponed again, social disturbances could occur, though postponing was naturally an advantage for the government to gain popularity among voters.<sup>52</sup> Another was Constitution Revision. However, the public was still not fully receptive to this idea and there was a risk of bringing about a massive reactive movement against the administration. This was the reason why Abe often avoided putting the issue at the center of the agenda during the elections campaign to lessen the risk of losing seats in the Diet. The LDP held the two-thirds majority of the Lower and Upper Houses which enabled it to submit a draft for constitutional renewal. Keeping the status-quo for the election was a priority. Another reason why he did not put it as a top priority for the election was out of concern for Komeito, his coalition partner party. The LDP held a two-thirds majority in the Diet without the seats of Komeito. However, the election results heavily depend on Komeito's support for LDP candidates. Komeito is a unique party, having tight supporter networks backed by Sokagakkai, a nationwide Buddhist religious group. For these reasons, its support base is consistent and Komeito basically collects solid voters for the candidates they assist. Komeito was, on the one hand, an essential coalition partner for maintaining the LDP rule in the Diet.

On the other hand, Komeito's support network shares its pacifist ideology and it is a political movement. They have been cautious of military actions and particularly, the amendment of the Constitution's Article Nine Peace Clause that Abe wants to revise. For Abe, a nightmare governor's election in Okinawa prefecture happened in September 2018. A Diet member, Denny Tamaki, was elected as the governor of Okinawa, winning against the LDP candidate backed by Komeito after taking an opposition position against the base relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps (from Futenma to Henoko). The unity of local Komeito supporters broke down with some Sokkagai members rushing to support Tamaki and disregarding the instructions of Komeito headquarters. This has caused a big shock for Komeito. Komeito would not support Abe's focus on constitutional issues for the election and without this support, the LDP's big victory would not be certain.<sup>53</sup>

Only the third alternative might work – a peace treaty with Russia. “The return of two islands first” could be an acceptable idea to the general public, according to a 2016 opinion poll on the Northern Territories issue. And Komeito would support it based on the party's past behavior.<sup>54</sup> This was a good reason to dissolve the Lower House to conduct a general election with the regular one of the Upper House.<sup>55</sup> Many policy observers suggested that Abe was preparing for a double election by making a deal with Putin during the G20 period.

Against this background, Abe's PM Office worked on the peace treaty issue. They interpreted Putin's Vladivostok address in a positive way: Putin, referring to the peace treaty itself, suggested that

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<sup>52</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.jiji.com/jc/graphics?p=ve\\_pol\\_zeisei20160601j-04-w440](https://www.jiji.com/jc/graphics?p=ve_pol_zeisei20160601j-04-w440)

<sup>53</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://ironna.jp/article/2221>

<sup>54</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.komei.or.jp/news/detail/20170917\\_25642](https://www.komei.or.jp/news/detail/20170917_25642)

<sup>55</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://president.jp/articles/-/28216>

he personally wants to have a peace treaty and Japan should not miss this chance. Japan finally decided to ride along with Putin's proposal since his inauguration that the 1956 Joint Declaration was the only basis for further negotiations for a peace treaty. It might have a visible risk for Japan to give up Etorofu and Kunashiri at the end but taking the two islands would be in the interests of Japan.<sup>56</sup> They decided to gamble.

The Singapore meeting of the APEC conference in November 2018 also began with face-to-face talks between Abe and Putin. Abe publicly announced that Japan and Russia have agreed to continue negotiations based on the 1956 declaration. The expression was not so new. However, there was no mention of the four islands, which was striking. The Japanese media interpreted this as a big change in progress on Northern Territories — related policy. Officially, the Japanese government did not recognize the change, but it was backed by evidence: Abe did not mention the return of four islands and did not refer to the Northern Territories as Japan's "inherent territory." Foreign Minister Taro Kono followed the line in a more unsophisticated way: He ignored and skipped critical questions about the territorial dispute at the Diet without providing any details. Finally, the government stated that no explanation can be provided because it was in the midst of negotiations.<sup>57</sup>

A couple of analysts supported Abe's "new" initiative. Shimotomai again appreciated it as a strange "hop, step and jump" theory. He described the "hop" as the 2015 December summit, the "step" as the "joint economic activities" and the "jump" toward a peace treaty on the basis of the Singapore agreement.<sup>58</sup> The "joint economic activities" were just a nominal slogan, as mentioned above, and negotiations have made little progress since the Vladivostok forum. The former head of the Foreign Ministry's "Russia School," Kazuhiko Togo, and Muneo Suzuki, a former Diet member still influential in Russian affairs, as well as others, highlighted a great turn in Japan's Russia policy. Suzuki emphasized that the return of one or two islands first is the best option. Only Abe, he stated, could realize the solution of the territorial dispute by concluding a peace treaty with Putin.<sup>59</sup> Once Japan decided that the return of two islands (leaving out Etorofu and Kunashiri), is the best option for Japan, the deal was thought to be imminent. Abe stated in an opening address at the start of 2019 with a happy tone that Russia would prepare for a coming deal which would consider the current residents on the islands. This suggests that Japan would take care of the 3,000 Russian residents of Shikotan.

However, Russia did not move at all, instead making it clear that even the transfer of the two islands was difficult. A backlash against Abe's remarks came immediately. "How can a foreign (Japanese) leader make decisions regarding Russian territories!" Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized Abe's remarks. The Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow in January 2019 dealt another blow to Japan. At the beginning of the ceremonial meeting, which was open to the media, Lavrov criticized Kono with strong words. After the meeting, Lavrov again said, "No talks about the transfer of the islands. Japan should recognize first that all of the four islands have rightfully belonged to Russia

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<sup>56</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASLCG74Z7LCGUTFK01M.html>

<sup>57</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2018/12/11/taro-kono-press-conference\\_a\\_23614995/](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2018/12/11/taro-kono-press-conference_a_23614995/)

<sup>58</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://o-ishin.jp/news/2019/images/723b9990ef76195ddc7b086b851260682d04b054.pdf> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.j-cast.com/2019/02/03349467.html?p=all>

<sup>59</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: [https://www.bs-asahi.co.jp/sunday\\_scoop/interview-02/](https://www.bs-asahi.co.jp/sunday_scoop/interview-02/)

since the end of WWII.” He added that the Japanese term “Northern Territories” was uncomfortable for Russia. In the same night, the Russian media featured the Japan issue in a special program and aired a roundtable discussion about Russia’s relations with Japan, including the problem of the peace treaty. In a couple of places, street demonstrations were organized against any territorial concession to Japan. This suggests that Putin allowed the activities against the transfer of the islands and rather supported the public’s negative attitude toward Japan on the territorial issue. In turn, Japan could not respond at all and just remained silent while repeating that negotiations are in process.<sup>60</sup> Ambassador Alexander Panov, who supported the Singapore agreement, suggested that the end of the negotiations and Japan’s recognition of the results of WWII for the Kurils was the only way to save the situation.<sup>61</sup>

Russia’s Ambassador to Japan Mikhail Galuzin seemed to have played an important role in the process. Usually, Russia does not respond to Japan’s domestic debates so rapidly. However, in Russia, one after another, the details of the Japanese debates were criticized. This is a very unusual scene in Russo-Japanese relations. Galuzin, a Japan specialist, probably conducted a kind of operation to provoke Japan. He stated, “the textbooks still mention the Northern Territories as Japan’s ‘inherent territory,’” the “Soviet Union’s illegal occupation” and so on. At a talk to Nemuro citizens he stated that the slogan of “returning four islands” on the streets should be discarded soon, and in Tokyo he criticized Japanese perceptions of the “Northern Territories.”<sup>62</sup>

Looking at the situation, Japan’s opposition parties began criticizing Abe’s policy toward Russia.<sup>63</sup> Some media joined the criticism and demanded an end to negotiations with Putin. The Abe administration has yet to recognize the failure of its approach since 2016, and has tried to return to the negotiations for inactive two “joint activities,” focusing on five “new” items, that is tourism and rubbish disposal facilities.<sup>64</sup> However, tourism was already discussed in early 2017. Russia rejected Japan’s proposal for making tours to the disputed islands because of Japan’s demand for a special regime differing from Russia’s ordinary immigration rules. The administration also urged Japanese travel companies to plan it as a kind of “domestic tour” at their own risk. It is unlikely that Russia accepts the special regime even if Russia agrees to host Japanese sightseeing tours under the “no passport, no visa” regime. These would not be the “joint economic activities” as the tours are heavily dependent on governmental management.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, the rubbish disposal facilities will be difficult due to restrictions on the movement of people and goods. And it is said that Russia wants a simple garbage incineration facility while Japan wants to sell a waste recycling plant. The needs of the two sides are different.

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<sup>60</sup> *Hokkaido Shimbun*, January 16, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> *Kommersant*, January 15, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20190323-OYT1T50162/> [https://www.bs-asahi.co.jp/sunday\\_scoop/interview/08/](https://www.bs-asahi.co.jp/sunday_scoop/interview/08/)

<sup>63</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://www.eda-k.net/activity/kokkai/201902/20190220a.html>

<sup>64</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.nishinippon.co.jp/nnp/politics/article/504777/>

<sup>65</sup> The first Japanese “sightseeing” tour was realized as a test from October 30 to November 2 of 2019 by use of “no passport, no visa” procedure. Among 44 participants were eleven connected to government, including three from Foreign Ministry and two from the Japan Tourism Agency. Several tourist company executives also joined the “tour” as “ordinary citizens.” See, *Hokkaido Shimbun*, November 4, 2019.

## **Conclusion: An Epitaph for the Northern Territories**

Why did Abe's PM Office misinterpret the situation? Here three points should be considered: First, Abe's strong interest in relations with Russia; Second, his mistaken understanding of MOFA's approach toward the Northern Territories; Third, the high concentration of power in the PM Office and leverage over the promotion of high-ranking officials.

Japan's elites, in general, tend to think that they are better informed than others. The concentration of power in the PM Office has resulted in the secretaries feeling omnipotent under Abe's premiership.<sup>66</sup> This kind of power might be absolute in a domestic sense, but this is not always workable in the international arena. The failure of the Russian case appears to be the result of Abe's PM Office mostly ignoring foreign experts and local voices on the ground. If the PM Office's officials studied Putin's beliefs and strategies since 2005, including the Koizumi-Putin meeting, they would not have made the decisions they made. The myth of the "return of four islands" also constrained their thinking as it held significance for Japan but not Russia. They thought Russia would be happy if Japan retracted the four islands claim, but this was a romantic idea. Historians know Russia is hardly prepared to accept the return of the four islands argument and there has been few discussions regarding the transfer of Etorofu and Kunashiri to Japan since the first negotiations in the 1950s. Rather, Russian foreign policy makers hated Nikita Khrushchev's concession on the transfer of Shikotan and Habomai to Japan in the Joint Declaration of 1956. All Soviet and Russian foreign policy initiatives, except those in the early period of the 1990s during the Yeltsin era, sought to recover Khrushchev's losses. Even if Putin recognized the effectiveness of the Joint Declaration, he would have sought a chance to keep the two islands. Putin could become a national hero if he saved Shikotan where 3,000 Russians live. In turn, Abe's PM Office naïvely thought that a great national leader would give up 3,000 people living on its country's territory for a foreign country's interests.

Miscalculations of the international situation were also critical. First, there was the U.S. factor. A historical lesson here can tell us a similar story. In the period of 1955–1956, the main reason that Khrushchev proposed the two islands transfer was to counter U.S. influence in Japan. At that time, Japan had some anti-U.S. sentiment and a more independent orientation distinct from any military bloc even under strong pressure from the U.S. The Ogasawara and Okinawa islands were still under U.S. control and local people wanted to return to Japan. Khrushchev then thought Japan could be neutralized and moved closer to the Soviet Union by the transfer of the two islands. Therefore, Shigeru Yoshida and the pro-U.S. political faction of the LDP, with U.S. backing, categorically turned the negotiation down. This is when the slogan regarding the "return of four islands" was created as a measure to kill the two-islands option. In short, the Northern Territories issue has been shaped by U.S. pressure and, as a consequence, Japan-Soviet (Russian) relations were a variable of U.S.-Soviet (Russian) and U.S.-

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<sup>66</sup> The following recent book comprehensively and thoroughly analyzes the role and responsibility of the PM Office headed by Takaya Imai for Japanese Politics. See, Atsushi Mori, *Kantei Kanryo: Abe Ikkyo wo Sasaeta Sokkin Seiji no Tsumi* [*The Premier Office Bureaucrats: Crimes of Advisors Supporting Abe*] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2019).

Japan relations.<sup>67</sup> The 1990s was a flexible period for Japan-Russia negotiations on the territorial dispute because of the Clinton administration's substantial support both for Russia and Japan.<sup>68</sup>

In this context, it is natural that Putin would target the U.S.-Japan alliance and Japan's subordination to the U.S. as a pretext for a non-transfer of the two islands. Abe told Putin that Japan would not let the U.S. establish a military base on the islands, but Putin did not believe this and asked for a U.S. guarantee. Some Japanese commentators have tried to explain that a U.S. base would be established on Japanese soil only by Japan's consent, according to the treaty.

However, the U.S. strategy, namely "using any space any time" cannot exclude the possibility of the two islands being used by the U.S. military in case of an emergency. Few Japanese think that Japan can reject a U.S. demand in such a situation. A country which could not deny the pressure of the U.S. to apply sanctions against Russia can never be a reliable partner for Putin.<sup>69</sup>

Second, Japan relied on the "China threat" argument to persuade Russia to concede in the territorial dispute. Japan once had a success with this strategy by moving closer to the United States.<sup>70</sup> Russia is not the U.S., however Russia has faced China as a neighbor for centuries and faced tremendous challenges on the border. In particular, the military tensions in the 1960–1970s were a nightmare for national interests. Even if Russia had certain reservations about China, current stability and cooperation with China is an important political asset. Japan's leaders, enjoying long-term peace thanks to the nation's maritime borders, do not understand the realities of Russian thinking on the importance of China. China cannot be comparable to Japan nor compatible with Japan. However, some key members of the Japanese elite have been prisoners of a "balance of power" theory that does not apply to the Russia-China-Japan triangle.<sup>71</sup> Japanese foreign policy makers have tried to get Russia in its own camp but with little results to show. Nevertheless, Japan still thinks of Russia's fears, and hopes of dividing the two countries give Japan an optimistic but unrealistic scenario to get some of the islands back. The reality is the opposite: Russia does not need Japan as Japan hopes.<sup>72</sup>

What is going to happen from now on? What kind of balance sheet is going to remain after Abe's policy toward Russia ends in failure? Japan's plan of "the joint economic activities" will not work, most likely repeating the same outcomes as before, or making it even worse because of Japan's suggestion of giving up Etorofu and Kunashiri in Singapore; the temporary arrangement since the 1990s would pose a big challenge because of Russian rollback. Why should the "non-passport entry

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<sup>67</sup> See, Akihiro Iwashita, *Japan's Border Issues: Pitfalls and Prospect* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> See, Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Random House Trade Paperback: Washington D.C., 2003).

<sup>69</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASM3J53CSM3JUHB101V.html>

<sup>70</sup> When the Senkakus issue became prominent in the U.S.-Japan Alliance at the beginning period of the Obama administration (in August, 2010), Japan strongly persuaded the U.S. commitment to defend the islands according to the treaty clause 5. The China issue has been working for cementing the U.S.-Japan alliance in favor of Japan's interests.

<sup>71</sup> Akihiro Iwashita, *New Geopolitics and Rediscovery of the U.S.-Japan Alliance: Reshaping "Northeast Asia" beyond the Border*, The Brookings Institution (on line). Accessed July 25, 2019: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-geopolitics-and-rediscovery-of-the-u-s-japan-alliance-reshaping-northeast-asia-beyond-the-border/>

<sup>72</sup> Accessed July 25, 2019: <http://www2.jiia.or.jp/pdf/report/20120621e-JA-RUS-US.pdf>

regime” continue on Kunashiri and Etorofu? Why should the current special fisheries regime within 12 miles around Kunashiri continue to let Japanese boats use Russian “territorial waters”? As Japan prepares to retract its claims to Etorofu and Kunashiri, Russia sees it essential to demand that Japanese activities there remain under Russian law and jurisdiction. This irregular and beneficial regime for Japan could end soon. If Japan allows the entry of Japanese with a passport to the islands, Japan’s claim over Etorofu and Kunashiri would end in a juridical sense.

With Putin taking a tough position against Japan, there is little hope of Shikotan and Habomai returning to Japan. If Japan gives up on Shikotan and concentrates the negotiations only on Habomai, they would have a better chance of getting it because there are no civilians on the small islets (100 square kilometers) near Nemuro.<sup>73</sup> It seems difficult for the Abe administration to give up Shikotan all together. Maintaining a discourse of success for only the Habomais is an uphill battle. On the other hand, taking more time to discuss the two islands mostly benefits Russia. While Japan is unable to break its alliance with the U.S., the two islands are likely to remain under Russian control forever. Even if (a big “if” though), Japan departs from its alliance with the U.S. and depends on Russia for security issues, Russia would likely not concede the territorial issue much more favorably. Japan will face the reality of having lost these two islands in the near future.

Concerning the national movement for the Northern Territories, the slogan demanding the “return of two islands” hardly unites the former islanders. The former residents on Etorofu and Kunashiri will be excluded, and any attempt to redefine Japan’s “inherent territory” as not including the two larger islands appears futile. The movement is already on its deathbed. Ordinary people may forget the movement itself sooner or later.

Therefore, in conclusion, Abe’s “hope diplomacy” toward Russia has gone beyond the point of no return. Abe’s Prime Ministerial Office changed the orientation of the former islander’s movement, debunked the myth of four islands through media manipulation, and made great concessions toward Russia in negotiations, but has nothing to show as a result. The failure of the Abe administration’s diplomacy is apparent to anyone after the July summit with Putin at the G20 and following the visit to Etorofu by Premier Dmitry Medvedev. This is a breaking away from the LDP’s historical achievements in territorial negotiations. Shinzo Abe’s name must be written in history as a leader who ended the Northern Territories issue.

If there is any good news, it is that Japan retains its “hope” of continuing negotiations over a territorial dispute that Russia already refuses to recognize. Another positive is that the Japanese former residents’ grave visit to Etorofu and Kunashiri by special chartered aircraft, and to Habomai through on-board special procedure on the sea off Nemuro, continued in the summer of 2019. But Russia argues that this was only as humanitarian gesture, and not relevant to further negotiations over the territorial dispute.

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<sup>73</sup> Habomai is a less than 100 kilometer square-size small islets group but had a population of 5,000 under Nemuro city jurisdiction in the days of Japanese control before the WWII. In contrast, no Russian residents except border guards are there now. Nemuro city fisheries need the Habomai sea resources for their economy. Therefore, Nemuro City has been eager to get Habomai back as a top priority while it would give up the other islands. For details, see Akihiro Iwashita, *Japan’s Border Issues*, 30–45.

The game is still not over. Retracting the theory of “inherent territory” over the Northern Territories to the Japanese public would potentially damage claims on other disputed territories. How could Japan maintain its claims on Takeshima and the Senkakus? The theory may be abolished in any case by the government’s arbitrary moves. The Japanese people may develop a suspicion towards Japan’s territorial discourse from now on. This would destroy the legitimacy of Japanese sovereign territories. How long can Abe hide this foreign policy fiasco?