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Basic Determinants of Soviet-Japanese Relations: Background, Framework, Perceptions, and Issues

Hiroshi Kimura

The visit of Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze to Tokyo in January 1986, and the return trip to Moscow by his Japanese counterpart Shintaro Abe in late May of the same year are regarded as epoch-making events in recent Soviet-Japanese relations. Will the resumption of the "dialogue" between Japan and the Soviet Union lead to a significant improvement in their bilateral relations? And if so, to what extent? These are questions worth raising, especially when one considers the increasing importance and influence with which these two neighboring countries have come to play not only in the power configuration in East Asia, but also in the international situations in the world. This paper, however, does not aim directly at answering these questions. Instead, by examining some important determining factors in Soviet-Japanese relations, it intends to provide some clues which might help answer such questions.

The number of factors that influence bilateral relations between Japan and the USSR is boundless. Any factor that exerts influence in one way or another on their relationship can be regarded as one of its determinants. It has thus become necessary for the author of this paper to limit himself to selecting only those which seem the most relevant, however arbitrary the selection might seem. For the sake of convenience, the factors selected by the author as the principal determinants of Soviet-Japanese relations have been classified into four groups: (1) background factors, such as geographic proximity, economic complementarity, cultural traditions, and historical heritage; (2) basic framework, such as politico-social systemic structures and military-strategic associations having mutually antagonizing alliances and diplomatic orientations; (3) perceptions, policies, and foreign behaviors; and (4) issue and disputes, the most important of which is the "Northern Territorial" question.

I. Background Factors

1. Geographic Proximity

Geographically, Japan and the USSR are neighbors. In my view, the customary proposition that geographic proximity leads, or ought to lead to good neighborly relations (a conclusion carelessly or deliberately drawn by many Soviet commentators and by some Japanese) warrants criticism. Japanese politicians and journalists frequently make the point that Japan has no choice but to be friendly toward and live peacefully with the Soviet Union, regardless of ideological differences and subjective preference. For example, Munenori Akagi, a former Japanese Minister of Agriculture and Forestry and the President of the Japan-USSR Society, stated: "The main factor in our [Japan-Soviet] relations is that Japan and the Soviet Union are neighbors. And we must live like good neighbors." The new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
Mikhail S. Gorbachev also underlined the importance of the geographical proximity between the Soviet Union and Japan in a speech before the USSR's Supreme Soviet on November 27, 1985. He stated: "We are in favor of improving our relations with Japan, and confident that this is a possibility. This possibility stems from the simple fact alone that both countries are immediate neighbors (priamye sosedy)." Soviet spokesmen have frequently quoted a statement allegedly made in 1973 by former Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka: "Though the distance between the capitals of Tokyo and Moscow may be great, the USSR and Japan nevertheless are close neighbors (blizkie sosedy)." Therefore, it is not surprising," Soviet spokesmen have continued, "that both Moscow and Tokyo attach much importance to the expansion of Soviet-Japanese relations." Elaborating further, Soviet spokesmen have drawn the bold conclusion that "geographic proximity" (geograficheskaya blizost') "necessitates" or provides "objective conditions" (N. Nikolaev and A. Pavlov), or the "objective necessity" (G. Krasin, V. Dal'nev, O. V. Vasil'ev) for developing good-neighborliness and mutual cooperation between the Soviet Union and Japan.

Unfortunately, however, our complex experiences in international relations have revealed that geographical propinquity does not necessarily lead to good-neighborly or friendly relations. Occasionally, such good relations do occur among neighbors (e.g. Canada and the United States) but this is not always the case. At times, even the exact opposite occurs. As close relatives sometimes hate each other most, neighboring countries sometimes conflict with one another more harshly than they conflict with more remote states. This occurs, in part, because they compete for the same objectives. Geographic contiguity tends to facilitate conflict. As demonstrated by history, territorial boundaries disputes between geographically adjacent nations have constituted one of the most significant sources of international conflicts. Some specialists of international affairs have gone so far as to regard conflicts over boundaries as "the most important single cause of war between states in the modern world." Research by Lewis F. Richardson revealed that the numbers of frontiers shared with other countries was positively related to participation in wars. This should not, of course, be taken to mean that the states sharing common territorial borders always tend to fight each other. As Bruce M. Russet, put it, they have "the opportunity to fight because they are close. Proximity becomes the catalyst."

Dmitrii V. Petrov, one of the top Soviet Japanologists at the Japan Section of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies, the USSR Academy of Sciences, astutely recognizes the dual function played by geographic proximity. While admitting that the close geographic location of Japan and the Soviet Union, together with their cultural affinity, encourages the two countries to agree on many complicated issues, he does not fail to emphasize that this very closeness simultaneously creates a potential source of conflict:

Geographic proximity between the USSR and Japan not only makes exchange of information between the two countries prompt and convenient, but also gives rise to a number of difficult problems that must be solved by their joint efforts. (italic-H. Kimura)
Although Petrov himself does not say anything further, we can easily enumerate the following as concrete examples of “difficult problems” requiring special consideration: demarcation of the frontiers, territorial waters, economic and fishing zones, distribution of underwater resources, emigration, and military security—just to name the most pressing. And almost all causes that have in practice contributed to the worsening relations between Japan and the Soviet Union are to be ascribable to these problems which stem from their geographic proximity, such illustrated incidents and events as the MiG-25 incident, the 200 nautical mile fishing zone negotiations, the awakening on “Soviet threat” among Japanese, not to mention, “the Northern Territories” dispute.

2. Economic Complementarity

Soviet specialists of Japanese affairs and some Japanese—especially business community members—are never tired of emphasizing the existence of a “mutual economic complementarity” (ekonomicheskaia vzaimodopolniaemost') between Japan and the USSR as a ground for expanding their relations. According to D. Petrov, this kind of complementarity stems from “differences in natural conditions and the specific state of each country’s national economy.” Japan lacks almost all raw materials, but, due to advanced technology and capital, she enjoys the status of an industrial superpower, second only to the United States. In marked contrast, the Soviet Union may be the world’s richest nation in terms of potential natural energy resources, and yet, space and military fields excepted, the Soviet economy has remained sluggish and operates at the level of a “developing” country. Viktor B. Spandar’ian, chief Soviet representative of trade and commerce in Japan, notes clearly the existence of an economic complementarity between the two countries:

Soviet exports to Japan consist largely of such commodities as timber, petroleum products, cotton, coal, non-ferrous metals, platina, potassium salts, whale meat and fish products, all of which are essential for the Japanese economy. For its part, the Soviet Union imports from Japan goods that are necessary for its own economy...ferrous metal goods, including steel pipes, rolled ferrous metals, tinplate, engineering equipment and chemical textile goods.

In view of such economically complementary relations, the prospects for joint Soviet-Japanese development efforts—in Siberia and the Soviet Far East, for example—sound intriguing with a potential for enormous benefits to both countries. In their strenuous efforts to woo individuals in Japanese business and government, and convince them of the benefits to be drawn from closer commercial interactions, Soviet commentators on Soviet-Japanese relations have made exceedingly optimistic and even exaggerated arguments. For example: “the mutual economic complementarity between Japan and the Soviet Union is a kind very rare in the world” (V. N. Berezin); “Such mutually supplementary relations provide an objective condition for the successful development of Soviet-Japanese ties over a long term and on an extensive scale” (Spander’ian). Because of this complementarity, “the Soviet Union and Japan have transformed themselves into important trade partners, and can no longer regard one
another in a secondary or reserve capacity” (P. D. Dolgorukov)\(^\text{17}\); and “the mutual complementarity between these two economies creates *extraordinarily favorable prospects* [for the future]” (D. Petorv).\(^\text{18}\) (all italics by H. K.)

As proponents (mostly Soviet) of active trade and economic relations between Japan and the USSR have emphasized, there indeed exists an economic complementarity between the two countries. For Japan, a country poor in natural resources yet highly industrialized, however, *any* resource-rich country is economically complementary and in a position to develop an economic partnership. From the Japanese vantage point, then, the USSR is merely *one* candidate with the potential to become a good trading partner. In other words, economic complementarity constitutes but *one* of the necessary conditions for economic partnership. Those who conclude that the Soviet Union and Japan are logical or reliable trading partners\(^\text{19}\) simply because of their geographic proximity and economic complementarity, wittingly or unwittingly, overlock and underestimate other equally important factors which make states good commercial partners.

3. Culture and Historical Heritage

Among what I call “the background factors” there are other important factors which exert a great influence upon Soviet-Japanese relations; these include, for instance, the ethnic, cultural and historical heritages of the two neighboring nations. An America Asia specialist at George Washington University, Harold C. Hinton, once made the following bold statement concerning the Japanese and the Russians:

> The Japanese and the Russians are highly *culture*-bound peoples cordially disliked by most of their neighbors, including one another. It would be hard to name any [other] pair of peoples less well suited by temperament and culture to get along with each other.\(^\text{20}\) (italic by H. K.)

If his observation proves close to reality, we would be forced to accept the situation regardless of how hopeless it might seem. After careful examination of this highly controversial statement, however, we are hesitant to accept it without major reservations. Among other things, Professor Hinton presents a rather simplified, one-sided answer to a complex question: Can a pair of nations who are close to each other in race, culture, temperament, attitude and behavior get along better politically and diplomatically than nations who are culturally and racially remote? This is indeed a broad and complex question to which no single authoritative answer has been found (nor is likely to be found). We have already observed the two ways in which geographic proximity influences politico-diplomatic relations—either distancing a pair of neighboring countries (e.g., China and Russia), or promoting closer ties (e.g., Canada and the United States). The same rule probably can be applied to racial, cultural, and other (e.g., ideological) types of affinities. To further complicate the issue, there are *both* similarities and differences between the Soviets and the Japanese with regard to race, culture, attitude and behavior. And these similarities and differences in race, culture, attitude and behavior between the Soviets and the Japanese work in two directions: both to alienate the two countries and to attract them. Due to this *dual* nature, neither
similarities nor differences in these domains are to be viewed as direct determining factors of Soviet-Japanese relations. Rather, they are to be regarded as indirect or potential determinants in the sense that they accelerate, reinforce, and amplify the direction determined by other variables.

Probably a more direct, and hence a more important, determining factor of present Soviet-Japanese relations may be history and its legacy. The distinct historical experience of each of these neighboring countries has exerted a profound impact upon their current bilateral relations. History is an integral part of the present because it has formed and predetermined the present possibilities and limitations. (Recall, for example, the "Northern Territories" issue, a major stumbling block between the two countries, according to many observers, is yet nothing other than a "result" of World War II.)

Anyone reviewing the historical record is, indeed, struck to realize that relations between Japan and Russia, tsarist or "communist", have been dominated by conflict rather than cooperation. A partial list of these conflicts includes: the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05); Japanese intervention in the Civil War, in which Japan sent troops into the Soviet Far East (1918–22); Japanese participation in the anti-Comintern Pact (1936); recurrent military clashes along the Soviet border (late 1930s and early 1940s), including the Changkufeng Incident (1938) and the Nomonhan Incident (1939); the Red Army Blitzkrieg which violated the Japan-Soviet Neutrality Pact (1945); the illegal Soviet occupation of the "Northern Territories" (1945); and the Soviet internment of half a million Japanese in Siberian camps (1945–52). The periods of cooperation and alliance between Japan and Russia have been contrastingly brief (1909–16 and 1941–45).

The question, "To what extent do past experiences determine present relations?" is difficult to answer. Concerning this connection, however, two things can be said. In general, images formulated tend to last for quite some time. A strong psychological mechanism works to present cognitive consistency with one's pre-existing beliefs, even in the face of information repudiating these beliefs (Ole Holsti and Robert Jervis). Only when very powerful evidence to the contrary is presented does one begin to doubt or modify the prevailing perceptions. Needless to say, less frequent exchanges of personnel and information between Japan and the Soviet Union will not encourage any profound and drastic change in the historically conditioned images each holds of the other.

On the other hand, however, it is important, as Alexander Dallin correctly warns, not to overestimate the validity of historical legacy. To be sure, we are all captives of our past, real or imaginary. Yet, the past does not always predetermine the future. The present and future can never be assumed to be a simple repetition or extension of the past. To the earlier saying that "history does not repeat itself; historians do," Dallin has added the remark of Sidney Hook that "those who always remember the past often don't know when it's over." In short, here again one must be aware of both the uses and limit of historical legacy and analogy.

II. Basic Framework: Politico-Diplomatic Factors

1. Systemic Differences

The ideological and systemic (political, economic, and social) differences between
Japan and the USSR ought not be overestimated nor underestimated. On the one hand, the USSR is a country claiming to be the founding father, and even the prototype, of “socialism”—a country allegedly exercising the teachings of Marxist-Leninist ideology. In contrast, Japan exemplifies a skillful and successful model of the capitalist system and Western-style democracy—a model which, despite its brief experience, has become one of the most powerful “locomotives” of the Western camp.

“Ideology” remains an ambiguous and elusive term. If, however, it is narrowly interpreted to mean Marxism-Leninism, then there is considerable consensus that over the years “ideology” has played a less important role in Soviet foreign policymaking. Particularly, Marxist-Leninist ideology has functioned less and less as a guide to action; and increasingly it has fulfilled the function of legitimizing the regime, and rationalizing or justifying actions taken or changes made in existing policy. One of the major goals of Marxism-Leninism is transformation of the world along socialist lines. Though this ultimate goal may still remain in the long-range Soviet scheme, it has long since ceased to play a major role in the daily conduct of Soviet foreign policy. Instead of the philosophical commitment of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, it is Soviet national interests, as perceived by Soviet decision-makers on particular issues at given moments, that may play a more significant role in Soviet foreign policy formation. However, there is no such thing as “pure” national interest, as Seweryn Bialer, has correctly observed. In Soviet society it is inevitably imprinted and defined by the will, the predispositions, aspirations of the policy-makers, whose “socialization” process is in turn conducted by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In short, ideology and national interests are not two completely separate, different things, but rather inseparably intertwined with each other.

Soviet foreign policy toward Japan is no exception to this general rule. It is true that the Soviet leadership has regarded Japan as a capitalist nation with which socialism has not only little in common, but many antagonistic and irreconcilable features. But it is quite conceivable at the same time that “pragmatic” Soviet leaders such as Gorbachev even prefer in a certain respect a “capitalist” Japan to a “socialist” Japan. Politically, “socialist” Japan might even become a source of trouble to Moscow, in the light of the Soviet experiences with China, Yugoslavia, Albania, and “Euro-communism.” Under a socialized economy, Japan would be far less efficient and less productive. This would make her notably less useful to the Soviets, and even more burdensome than “capitalist” Japan, evidenced to a certain extent by the Soviet experiences with Vietnam, Afghanistan, Poland, and other socialist “brethren” countries. Indeed it may be more desirable and beneficial for the Soviet Union to continue peaceful coexistence, or détente, and economic cooperation with “capitalist” Japan. In an article commemorating fifty years of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Japan, N. Nikolaev, a Soviet commentator on Soviet-Japanese relations, clearly stated: “True to the Leninist principles of developing and strengthening relations with all countries regardless of their social system, the Soviet Government is doing its utmost to insure that relations with Japan become sound and friendly.” After revealing that his foreign policy will generally consist of a continuation of that of his predecessors, Gorbachev specifically emphasized in his maiden speech on March 11, 1984, in which he accepted his nomination as the new Party
General Secretary, that his policy line toward the West (including Japan) will be one of peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation: "As to relations with the capitalist states, we will firmly follow the Leninist course of peace and peaceful coexistence." When the General Secretary stressed in his well-known speech at Vladivostok on July 28, 1986, that "the objective position of our two countries [Japan and the USSR] in the world demands profound cooperation on a sound basis," it is clear that what he means by "objective position" is geographic proximity and/or economic complementarity, but not the systemic political differences between the two countries.

For its part, Japan in the post-war period has made clear its intention to pursue the so-called "omni-directional or all-dimensional" (zengōki) diplomacy. Explaining this, successive Japanese Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers have repeatedly stated that the basic foreign policy principle of Japan is to maintain and develop friendly relations with all countries, regardless of their political systems, although giving priority to Japan-United States relations, which remains at the center of its foreign relations.

Thus, Marxist-Leninist ideology per se appears unlikely to constitute an insurmountable obstacle to any deals between Kremlin leaders and Tokyo. If an obstacle to agreement were to exist it would not be Marxist-Leninist ideology in itself, but rather the embodiment of the ideology—that is, the Soviet system and the mind-set of the Soviet leadership and elites. The Soviet political and socio-economic system has had, and continues to have, adverse effects upon the USSR's relations with Japan. For instance, the so-called "totalitarian" nature of political regime which the USSR has still preserved will continue to pose a serious enough threat to prevent most Japanese from establishing closer ties with the USSR. The command economy, still excessively centralized despite some possibility of "radical reform" under Gorbachev, poses another clear obstacle. Even though the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's leadership has shown eagerness toward amending their domestic laws and regulations so that it could start to conduct joint economic ventures with Japan, the Japanese businessmen have not been particularly impressed by such efforts. The completely state-monopolized trade system, coupled with bureaucratic inefficiency and data secrecy, also constitute serious obstacles. All of these factors discourage Japanese businessmen and government officials from seeking closer trade and economic intercourse with the Soviet Union, except as a last choice for sources of raw materials and energy resources, or as a desperate measure, to cope with a severe economic depression.

2. U. S.-Soviet Relations

Bilateral relations between Japan and the Soviet Union are influenced and determined by international circumstances in general and particular political situations. In general, the single most important political international environments influencing bilateral relations is the relationship between the two nuclear superpowers, the United States and the USSR. In so far as Soviet policy is concerned, the USSR quite often makes its foreign policy decisions to a given country in the context of a global confrontation with the West led by the United States, and not on the basis of bilateral considerations. Once in 1959, the hayday of the cold war, Nikita S. Khrushchev remarked: "The case of international tension is like a cabbage. If you tear off the leaves one by one, you come to
the heart. And the heart of this matter is relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.33 Even less than one year before his “promotion” to president of the Supreme Soviet, Andrei A. Gromyko, the veteran Soviet Foreign Minister for twenty eight years, held a similar bipolar perception of the world, when he stated: “International situations depend in large part upon Soviet-U. S. relations.”34 The Gromyko-type of a bipolar interpretation of international relations received endorsement from Soviet spokesmen, particularly during the Gromyko era. Yuri Bandura, former Tokyo correspondent and currently deputy director of the international department of Izvestia, for example, writes the following in his article contributed to the Japanese periodical, Jiyu:

“The title prepared for my article by the Japanese editor, i. e., ‘What Does the Soviet Union Want from Japan,’ is misleading and somewhat perplexes me, because there is nothing that can be specifically called a Soviet policy aimed solely at Japan among Soviet foreign policy goals.... Even when concrete questions regarding Japan are being considered, they are based on the general line of foreign policy adopted for the party and government.”35

Changes in U. S.-Soviet relations, changes in Washington’s policy toward Moscow, and Moscow’s policy toward Washington all influence Soviet-Japanese relations. According to this bipolar concept Soviet-Japanese relations are ultimately a function of U. S.-Soviet relations, and Soviet policy toward Japan is merely a spinoff of Soviet global strategy toward the United States.36 The deterioration in Soviet-Japanese relations, most notable in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the sign of a “thaw” in the wake of Gorbachev’s rise to power, have been closely linked with, and even a faithful reflection of, the global shift from detente to the “new cold war,” and “new thaw” between the two military superpowers.

It is a well known fact that, starting from the beginning of the 1960s, the Soviet government began to argue that the territorial issue had already been resolved and that it did not exist. The Soviets have thus refused to hand over to Japan even the two islands (i. e., the Habomais and Shikotan), which they agreed to return in the joint Soviet-Japanese communique of 1957. Explaining the reason for such a shift in Soviet policy toward Japan, the Soviet government mentioned the fact that the Japanese government had renewed the Japan-U. S. Security Treaty in 1960. Apart from the question as to whether or not such grounds can be accepted as reasonable, the fact remains that the Soviet Union appears to take the U. S.-Japan political-military alliance quite seriously — probably more seriously than we might imagine. One of the most important reasons why the Soviet Union is reluctant to return the “Northern Islands” to Japan at the expense of the overall relationship is ascribable to global confrontation between the USSR and the United States.

A serious question to be raised here is: whether or not there is a possibility for improvement of Soviet-Japanese relations as long as Japan remains a close ally of the United States. In general, the Soviet Union has pursued peaceful coexistence and the promotion of close economic cooperation with advanced capitalist countries, most of which have more or less close diplomatic and even military-strategic relations with the United States, including the NATO member West European countries. As indicated by the Gorbachev speech cited above, Japan does not constitute an exception to this general
rule. Advocating improved relations with the Soviet Union as Japan's alternative road to increased "authority and influence in international affairs", D. V. Petrov, for instance, stated: "This road will not harm those U. S.-Japan ties, which both sides regard as necessary and mutually advantageous at the given stage."37 (italics-H. K.) This statement by a relatively "dovish" Soviet specialist on Japan might be taken to indicate that, taking the close US-Japan ties as a fait accompli, the Soviets are ready to improve their relations as much as possible within the framework of Japan's close relations with the U. S.

The next question to be addressed here is to what extent Soviet-Japanese relations can be improved within the framework of Japan's close ties with the U. S. In other words, what are the limitation in improvement of Soviet-Japanese relations? One of the more concrete, key questions is: whether or not there still exists room for an improvement in Japan-Soviet relations as long as the U. S.-Japanese security alliance continues to exist. As long as we continue to read Soviet official writings in their literal sense, we cannot easily find the right answer to this. A Soviet diplomat stationed in Tokyo recently told the author during a private conversation that: "We are realistic enough to believe that even with the existence and continuation of the U. S.-Japan security treaty there still exists considerable room for improvement in our relations with your country." According to some astute Western Soviet observers, it is not utterly inconceivable to speculate that the Soviet government does not necessarily oppose, but is ready to tolerate the U. S.-Japan security treaty. In other words, the Soviets may even prefer a Japan controlled within the U. S. military-strategic system to a completely free, independent, and militarily strong Japan, which may be more harmful to Soviet interests. Lilita Dzirkals, a senior researcher at the Rand Corporation, has noticed that "some Soviet spokesmen" do not necessarily advocate abolishing the U. S.-Japan security treaty or taking Japan out of the U. S. military-strategic system."38 Their basic assumption seems to her that "U. S. control over Japan would be guided by the primacy assigned by the United States to its relationship with the Soviet Union and hence could constitute a restraining influence on Japan."39 Instead, they [some Soviet spokesmen] suggest possibilities for enhancing Japan's autonomy within the framework of her alliance with the U. S."40

3. Sino-U. S. and Sino-Japanese Relations

Bilateral relations between Japan and the Soviet Union are also shaped by quadrilateral power configurations in East Asia: relations among the USSR—USA—PRC and Japan.41 With the aim of proving this, let us take, for example, the impact that either Sino-U. S. relations or Sino-Japanese relations have exerted upon Soviet-Japanese relations.

The first example took place with the Sino-U. S. rapprochement of the early 1970s. President Richard Nixon's announcement that he would visit Beijing in March 1972, ending two decades of American conflict with the Peoples's Republic of China shocked Moscow as much as it did Tokyo. Faced with a change in the power configuration of Asia and the world, Moscow appeared to regard a new approach toward Tokyo as a necessary countermove. In January 1972 Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko
canceled a scheduled visit to the Warsaw Pact summit talks in Prague in order to visit Tokyo—his first visit since 1966. During his stay in Japan, Gromyko took, or at least appeared to take, a very conciliatory posture, which was at the time referred to in Tokyo as “Mr. Nyet’s smile diplomacy.” Japan has always held that it could not sign a peace treaty with the Soviet Union without the return of the Northern Territories, the four islands off the coast of Hokkaido—Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai group—that have been seized by the USSR since 1945. Before leaving Tokyo for Moscow, Foreign Minister Gromyko told Japanese reporters that the Soviet Union had agreed to negotiate “a peace treaty and discuss related problems.” At the time, Western and some Japanese Kremlin watchers predicted that the Kremlin would agree to return two, three, or even all four of the islands to Japan. The joint communiqué issued at the end of the Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to Moscow in October 1973 also mentioned the importance of settling the “outstanding questions left over from World War II.”

In fact, however, the Soviet Union has not returned a single island. By 1976 in his speech to the 25th Party Congress, Leonid I. Brezhnev stated unequivocally that Japan’s demand for the return of the northern islands was “unlawful and unfounded,” making it crystal clear that the USSR did not intend to return any of the islands. What accounts for this shift in the Soviet position, from slightly conciliatory to uncompromising? First, the Soviet Union was greatly disappointed that Japan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, had promptly moved closer to the People’s Republic of China. It was also disappointed by political developments in Japan when powerful Tanaka was suddenly replaced by weaker Takeo Miki. Moreover, by that time the Soviet Union had already obtained half of what it wanted from Japan: Japanese government’s participation in economic development projects in Siberia. The Soviet leadership under Brezhnev may have concluded that it was unnecessary, particularly after the oil crisis in 1973–74, to make any political concessions to Tokyo.

The second example took place when Japan and the PRC decided to conclude a peace treaty in the late 1970s. It is quite clear that the USSR wanted to block, or at least delay as long as possible, the conclusion of a treaty that included the so-called anti-hegemony clause, which was perceived by both China and the USSR as directed against the Soviet Union. Soviet actions both before and after conclusion of the treaty were extremely counterproductive. For example, in January 1978 Gromyko insisted that his Japanese counterpart, Sunao Sonoda, agree to receive a Soviet draft proposal for a Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Cooperation between the USSR and Japan, which included, among other things, the shelving of the question of the Northern Territories. This Soviet action strengthened the Japanese view that, no matter how long and patiently Japan might wait, the Soviet leadership had no intention whatsoever of negotiating a peace treaty with Japan. The USSR also threatened Japan, saying that it would take “countermeasures” against Japan if Tokyo concluded a treaty with Beijing. The Soviet buildup of military bases on the Northern Islands, which first became public knowledge in Japan in 1979, appears to have been such a countermeasure.

III. Perceptions, Policies, and Foreign Behaviors

In the previous section I have examined the significant influence that international
circumstances, particularly the global confrontation between the USA and the USSR, exert upon the relationship between Japan and the Soviet Union. I have also stressed that bilateral relations between the PRC and the USA and between the PRC and Japan, for example, have also greatly influenced Soviet-Japanese relations. Finally, in this section, I would like to point out that the policies of individual countries like the United States, the PRC, Japan, and the USSR also play a large role in shaping the bilateral relations between Japan and the Soviet Union.

Japan's domestic and foreign policies are an important determining factor in Japan-Soviet relations. Domestically, for example, Japan's recent successful shift in its economic structure from one that was smokestacked to one which consumes less energy has greatly decreased her need to cooperate with the Soviet Union in Siberian and other economic development projects. This has contributed to an improvement in Tokyo's political bargaining position vis-à-vis Moscow. Due to the recent "high yen-cheap dollar" phenomenon, Japan has already surpassed not only the USSR in terms of GNP but also the United States in terms of per capita income. Though very few Japanese feel themselves richer than Americans, it is true that the majority of Japanese have started to look down upon the materially poor living standard of the Soviet Union, thus increasing their self-confidence over the Soviet type of inefficient socialist economy. Increasingly more Japanese have begun to feel that Japan can get along well without the Soviet Union whereas the Soviet Union will need Japan even more.

In Japan's foreign policy fields, what I call Japan's "globalization" trend, with Japan beginning to assume a more positive role in the Western community, is perhaps the single most important determinant of Soviet-japanese relations. Many factors have contributed to this trend and subsequent policies in Japan. They include, for example: Japan's perception of a relative decline in American supremacy in political, military, and economic spheres; increasing recognition that Japan's security is inseparable from that of the rest of the Western world, hence the need to share the defense burden with Western nations, as best illustrated by Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's endorsement of the Joint Communiqué issued at the Williamsburg summit in 1983, which stated "the security is indivisible," and a growing sense of self-confidence and even some elements of nationalism brought about and buttressed by economic achievements and other successes. But the most important single factor leading to, or at least accelerating, Japan's "globalization" is none other than the Soviet world-wide military build-up and particularly in the vicinity of Japan. 45 It is difficult and perhaps impossible to say precisely how much the enhancement of Soviet military forces has contributed to this transition in Japan, but there is no question that, without the rapid, massive Soviet armament effort, the shifts in Japan would not have occurred. Recent Soviet allegations of "a resurgence of militarist tendencies" in Japan merely criticize a situation for which the USSR is at least partly responsible.

As demonstrated by the last part of the above paragraph, Soviet policies and behavior are certainly a principal determinant of Japan's foreign policy and Japan-Soviet relations. The number of internal and external variables of the Soviet Union that must be considered when analyzing Soviet-Japanese relations is limitless. They include ideology, geographic conditions, history, culture, religion, military-strategic elements, economics,
politics, the decision-making structure, national characteristics, the Soviet world view (Weltanschauung), and so forth. Therefore, we must restrain ourselves in discussing only a few of them. One important variable is the Soviet perception and behavior toward Japan.

To put it simply, the Soviet perception of Japan consists of a combination of two somewhat opposing images—the Soviets perceive Japan as a dwarf in military terms and a giant in economic and technological fields. Although the Soviets have recently been very vigorous in their criticism of “the revival of Japanese militarist tendencies,” the Soviets’ actual assessment of Japan in the military field still remains low. In an article entitled the “Militarization of Japan—Threat to Peace in Asia,” for example, D. Petrov remarked in 1981: “Today and in the near future Japan will be unable to independently resolve strategic problems and offensive large-scale operations. Japan’s military doctrine envisages the use of the American ‘nuclear umbrella’ and complete cooperation with the military forces of the United States and its Asian allies.” As long as Soviet foreign policy makers continue to regard military strength as the most important component in their concept of a “correlation of forces,” Japan does not rank high in the Soviet Union’s list of foreign policy priorities.

In contrast, however, the more weight Soviet leaders attach to economic technological elements, the higher position Japan occupies in their list of priorities. The remark made by Vitalii Kobysh, chief of the U.S. section, International Department of the CPSU’s Central Committee, provides a good example. In a report on his visit to Japan in 1982, Kobysh wrote:

Although Japan does not belong to the category of a great power, her weight in the contemporary world is very significant and is constantly growing. Toward the end of this century Japan’s GNP will constitute 12 percent of that of the whole world. It is unrealistic not to take this into consideration when analyzing the correlation of forces in the whole arena. As demonstrated by the experience of this country, today the influence of a state is not determined by its military potential.

Of course, it is premature to emphasize this remark as indicating any significant change in the Soviet assessment of the relative weight of variables. Yet it is worth keeping in mind that a change in the relative weight of variables is slowly taking place. In place of the traditional assessment of Japan, derived from a heavy dependency upon military factors, a new mix with more emphasis upon non-military components, above all economic and technological factors, may be gradually emerging.

Furthermore, the realization of the dawning of a new era in the Asia-Pacific region has contributed to the change in Soviet perceptions of Japan. The Soviet Union has been called a Eurasian country, but essentially a European power. This European-oriented attitude has begun to change as the weight of world economic activities has shifted from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. How much significance the Soviet Union has attached to this region can be illustrated best by the fact that in recent years the Soviet Pacific Fleet with its headquarters at Vladivostok has suddenly grown into the largest of the
Soviet Union's four fleets (Northern, Baltic, Black Sea and Pacific Fleets). Despite its strong desires and claims to be a major Asia-Pacific power, however, the Soviet Union has not yet acquired either the prestige nor the influence to be a full-fledged member in the Asia-Pacific community. There may be multiple reasons for this failure, but no one can deny that one of the obvious ones is the poor record of Soviet foreign policy toward Japan, one of the most important countries in the region. Geopolitically, the bow-shaped Japanese archipelago lies in the way of Soviet access to the Pacific Ocean. From a diplomatic perspective, not to mention from an economic point of view, Japan also occupies a significant position, and its voice has become more and more audible and influential in the region. It may be no exaggeration to consider that without improving relations with Japan the USSR will not be able to become a full-fledged member of the Asia-Pacific community. In spite of the vital role that Japan plays in Soviet strategy in the region, what Moscow has in fact been doing diplomatically toward Japan has amounted to almost a total disaster. There is a marked contrast between the apparent significance of Japan for Moscow's objectives in the Asia-Pacific region and Moscow's conduct toward Tokyo. One can thus not completely rule out the possibility that Soviet leaders will come to realize the foolishness of their past policies toward Japan and the need to redress them from a tactical point of view. Regarding Japan as "a power of paramount importance," Gorbachev underlined in his important Vladivostok speech his Government's willingness to improve relations with Japan.

In sum, the Kremlin's recent foreign policy toward Japan is based on a mix of the two perceptions described above: the traditional view of underestimation, bordering on outright contempt for Japan, on the one hand, and the reassessment of Japan as an increasingly important independent actor particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, on the other. The former perception is content with a Soviet-Japan policy which is more or less an extention of Soviet U.S. strategy. The latter urges the formation of a distinct foreign policy toward Japan which is independent enough to be distinguishable from Soviet U.S. policy, taking full account of the specific conditions of Japanese-Soviet relations.

What the new Soviet leadership under Gorbachev has been pursuing in regards to Japan is a mix of attitudes and measures stemming from the two perceptions noted above. On the one hand, Soviet attempts to pay more attention to Japan and to woo the Japanese are becoming evident. Calling Japan "the land of the rising sun," Soviet newspapers have recently carried numerous articles, which underline the need for the Soviets to learn from the "Japanese people's unique capability to creatively master technology." Starting with Gorbachev's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone at Konstantin Chernenko's funeral, the Soviets seem to be making attempts to refrain as much as possible from mentioning the term "Northern Territories," an issue which never fails to stir up Japanese nationalism. Instead, they have been using such indirect expression as "hardships and obstacles artificially fabricated by the Japanese which hinder the development of relations between the two countries" or "problem of the past" (Gorbachev in his Vladivostok speech). Furthermore, the new Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze paid a visit to Japan in January, 1986, a visit his predecessor Gromyko had refused to make for ten years, and not only he, but also General Secretary Gorbachev received the then Japanese Foreign Minister, Shintarō Abe,
in the Kremlin, when Abe paid a return visit to Moscow in late May of the same year. Soviet top leader Gorbachev himself has assured to the Japanese that his visit to Japan is of "necessity (neobkhodimost')."55

On the other hand, the traditional Soviet attitude of contempt for militarily weak Japan still remains firmly-rooted in the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev. The Soviet proposal to Japan on confidence-building measures (CBMs) in the Far East provides a good example.56 Japan does not want to conclude any treaty or agreement with the Soviet Union until it settles the territorial question in a peace treaty. With the aim of shelving the peace treaty and hence the territorial issue, the Soviet Union has tenaciously been proposing a treaty or agreement which can serve as a substitute for a peace treaty, the Soviet proposed CBMs in the Far East being a typical example. Frustrated by the cool and negative reaction to the CBMs by the Japanese, the Gorbachev leadership threatened in an article published in Pravda that, if Japan does not consider the CBMs seriously, then chances are that the security of Japan's sealanes might not be guaranteed. The CPSU's major organ argued: "Japan greatly depends upon imported resources. Accordingly, Japan must be well aware of the fact that an escalation of the arms race in sealane communication only increases her vulnerability. The Soviet Union is ready to apply the proposed CBMs to the sealanes such as those in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. If Japan accepts the Soviet proposal, it will fit in well with her vital interests."57

Gromyko's departure from the Foreign Ministry seems to have helped to enhance the former attitude, thereby weakening the latter. It is well known that the former Foreign Minister's diplomatic attitude toward Japan was negative. No one regards his nickname "Mr. Nyet" as more appropriate than do the Japanese. Of course, the change in foreign ministers this time was not made primarily with the aim of redressing Soviet foreign policy toward Japan. But it is not wrong to speculate that, as long as Gromyko remained as Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, Soviet-Japan relations would not have changed much. All of a sudden, however, one of the constraints has been taken away. Of course, one should not overestimate the change in the Gorbachev regime's policy toward Japan. To be sure, the change that one can detect in the Gorbachev government has remained at best one of style, and may not represent changes in the basic Soviet policy stance or policy orientation. In a criticism to another paper by myself dealing with the Gorbachev policies in general, however, Christoph Bertram, diplomatic correspondent for the weekly Die Zeit, has contended that "the appearance and the substance of policy tend to be closely intertwined: a change of style and of a personnel often reflects a departure on political substance."58 He may be right. In the past, Soviet behavior and manner in dealing with Japan was very bad—it has been unsophisticated, clumsy, heavy-handed, inflexible, and intimidating, as best illustrated by their behavior toward the Japanese in the Mig-25 incident, the KAL 007 disaster and the harassment of Japanese fishermen.59 And it is nothing but such Soviet behavior and manner that help enhance anti-Soviet feeling among Japanese. Therefore, if the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev is to adopt a less heavy-handed, more affable manner and style in its attitude toward Japan, even if it were only superficial and tactical, chances are good that the Japanese would be easily impressed and encouraged to improve their feeling toward the Soviets.60
IV. Issues

Between Japan and the Soviet Union there are a number of issues, which either help these neighboring countries become closer to each other or prevent them from becoming friendly with each other. Recognizing this, D. Petrov writes the following as cited previously: "Geographic proximity between the USSR and Japan gives rise to a number of difficult problems that must be solved by their joint efforts." During forty years of Soviet-Japanese relations, however, most of the problems arising between the two countries have already found solutions or methods for solving them. As a matter of fact, during the visit to Tokyo of Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze in January 1986 the two countries were able to reach a tariff agreement and during the visit to Moscow of Shintarō Abe in late May of the same year they were able to conclude successfully a cultural agreement. To be sure, fishing negotiations need to be conducted every year but these negotiations have become business-like and almost completely excluded, for better or worse, political and other considerations. As a result, only one important issue remains unsolved: the conclusion of a peace treaty solving the territorial dispute.

Without a peace treaty, some schools of thought on international law maintain, Japan and the USSR have not put a complete end to the formal state of war. For example, the late L. Oppenheim, writes in one of the most authoritative standard textbooks on international law: "the most frequent end of war is a treaty of peace. Many writers correctly call a treaty of peace the normal mode of terminating war."61 A Soviet textbook, *International law*, edited by the Institute of Law of the USSR, Academy of Sciences, holds the same view, stating that "a peace treaty legally ends the state of war between two signatory states, thereby establishing political and other relations."62 In other words, Soviet Union appears to be in agreement with Japan that in order to place bilateral relations on a more stable legal basis, a peace treaty or its substitute is needed.63

Both the Soviets and the Japanese appear to assume that a peace treaty would include a clause on the settlement of the territorial or border question. In his interview with Shōryū Hata, then editor-in-chief of *Asahi Shimbun*, late General Secretary Brezhnev stated on June 5, 1977: "There is no need to say that a peace treaty usually includes questions dealing with broad matters, including the border issue."64 There is, however, a difference between the "border issue" and "the territorial question." The "border issue" Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders refer to is undoubtedly nothing but the boundary, currently and virtually prevailing, i.e., supported by the Soviets and rejected by Japan. What is meant by the "territorial question," on the other hand, is Japan's claim that the present boundary dividing Japan and the Soviet Union is unfounded, illegal, and subject to negotiation. In any case there is no disagreement between the two governments that the conclusion of a peace treaty solving the border or territorial question constitutes perhaps the only major issue left between Japan and the Soviet Union.

No one denies that the issue of the Northern Territories has hampered the improvement of Soviet-Japanese relations. Yet some reservation seems necessary to at least this author regarding the statement that the Northern Territories issue constitutes the greatest stumbling block to harmonious Soviet-Japanese relations. To begin with, to
test this assertion, let us assume that the Kremlin were to decide to return immediately the Northern Islands to Japan. In that event, Japanese national feeling toward the Soviet Union would surely improve and hence Soviet-Japanese relations would certainly be greatly improved. Yet nobody can predict for sure to what extent Japanese feeling toward the Soviet Union would improve. The reversion of Okinawa was greatly appreciated by the Japanese but not to the extent that it had been expected by some Americans. The Japanese appeared to take the U.S. action somewhat for granted. The great "China euphoria" following the signing of the Sino-Japanese Peace Treaty in 1978 turned out to be a very short-lived phenomenon. It would also be overly optimistic to presume that with a return of the disputed islands all the frictions between the two countries would be automatically wiped away, that Tokyo-Moscow relations would suddenly become rosy, and that conflicts or other problems would not occur again. It is somehow understandable that in the light of such and other past Japanese behavior the Kremlin leaders are thus reluctant to take a risk for such an intangible, volatile, and unreliable thing as Japanese sentiment. Indeed, they have not yet ascertained what benefits they could obtain from Tokyo in exchange for a return of the islands they seized.

Another reason for Soviet intransigence on the territorial issue is of a military-strategic nature. Located north of Hokkaido, the islands could affect the access of Soviet ships to the Pacific Ocean. Their strategic importance has been publicly affirmed by Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Furthermore, the military-strategic significance of the Sea of Okhotsk has recently increased, largely because of the new Soviet "bastion strategy." Owing to the development of military technology, Soviet ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are now capable of reaching almost all ports in the United States, but U.S. anti-submarine technology is capable of detecting Soviet submarines. To protect their SSBNs from U.S. detection, the Soviet Union must make the Sea of Okhotsk a sanctuary to defend the SSBN bastion area. This bastion strategy certainly invests the Northern Territories with increased military importance in Soviet eyes. If we accept the above interpretation, it leads us to the position mentioned formerly: the importance of the role that the global confrontation between the USA and the USSR plays in Soviet-Japanese relations. According to that school of thought, what really obstructs harmonious Soviet-Japanese relations is Japan's postwar diplomatic-military ties with the Soviets' principal archenemy. The Northern Territories issue is merely the tip of the iceberg; the more profound stumbling block between Japan and the Soviet Union is the global power struggle with the United States.

V. Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have sought to identify those variables which the author of this paper regards as the major factors that influence Soviet-Japanese relations. Certainly there are still other important determinants, — even no less important than those discussed. The first caveat that this author would like to attach is, therefore, that those variables examined above do not necessarily exhaust all the determining factors of Soviet-Japanese relations.

The second weakness of this paper lies in its inability to answer to the crucial question: What is the relationship among these variables? What is the interaction of
these and other determinants? How and to what degree do each of these factors exert influence on Soviet policy toward Japan and under what conditions and during which time period? Or, to put it more bluntly, which factor constitutes, in the author’s view, the single most important determinant, for instance, the “Northern Islands” issue or the Japanese alliance with the United States or the global scale confrontation between the USSR and the USA? These are naturally the next and probably more important questions to be asked. Unfortunately, however, these are questions which can never be answered easily or accurately. As Professor A. Dallin, who has been working harder than anyone else on the subject of the determinants of Soviet foreign policy, has concluded, there is “no technique or methodology that permits us to assign weights to the ingredients in the mix.” The interrelationship between determinants, for example, remains by definition in a state of constant flux, varying over time and contingent upon issues and circumstances. Realizing that there is no methodology for defining the interconnection among variables, Dallin appears to suggest that the best we can do is even speculate, that is to say, to attempt to “intuitively” make some assessments and judgements (subject to reversion) regarding future relations between these two countries.

What I have attempted to do in this paper is simply to single out and examine some factors which I have regarded as the most relevant determinants of Soviet-Japanese relations. If I may summarize what I have found or emphasized in that examination, the major points are as follows: (1) The geographic proximity between Japan and the Soviet Union does not necessarily guarantee good-neighborly relations between these countries. Instead, these geographically neighboring nations are required to live and deal with each other even more carefully than those countries which are not in such a geographic position. (2) The economic complementarity between Japan and the Soviet Union does not provide an inevitable ground for these two countries to become good economic partners. The Soviets’ inability to provide Japan with goods and projects appealing enough to Japanese businessmen and above all the shortage in foreign currency have prevented these two nations from developing economic intercourses. (3) In historical retrospect, Japan and the Soviet Union have frequently been at odds with each other. Yet, there is no more validity in historical determinism than in geographic or economic determinism; no more in regard to Soviet-Japanese relations than in respect to other bilateral relations (e.g., between France and Germany, between U.S. and the Soviet Union). (4) Ideology has been given an increasingly reduced role in determining the foreign policy of a given country. The relationship between Japan and the Soviet Union, despite their ideological, political, systemic differences, could be as close and friendly as that between Japan and the PRC. (5) The global superpower confrontation between the United States and the USSR and Japan’s diplomatic-military ties with the Soviets’ principal archenemy seem to me the most significant determining factor of Soviet-Japanese relations. This is the basic framework of the bilateral relations, which should be, in my view, rightly called the more profound obstacle between Japan and the Soviet Union than the “Northern Territories” issue. (6) The Northern Territories question was originally just one of several issues between Japan and the Soviet
Union. Yet, it has now become the symbol of the block, which has been most obstructing harmonious Soviet-Japanese relations. (7) The Kremlin leaders have lately begun to perceive Japan not as a function or an extension of its far more important competition with the United States, but, rather, as an important, independent source of political and economic power in the world, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. It does not, however, necessarily follow that they are more likely to make territorial concessions to Tokyo. To begin with, perceptions and policy actions are usually quite different things, the former being only one of many factors determining the latter. The return of territories occupied by the Soviet Union and the removal of its military forces there are actions that the Kremlin is not willing or able to undertake easily in its own light. Furthermore, there is even a possibility that in the perception of Kremlin leaders, Japan has not yet become such an important element as to justify the making of major concessions as requested by Tokyo. In any case, the core of the Kremlin's current Japan policy appears to lie in its stated intention of improving relations with Tokyo on its own terms, without yielding to Japan on the territorial issue.

Notes

1. Izvestiia, September 19, 1980. For a similar statement by Akagi, see, for example, Asahi Shimbun (evening edition), May 20, 1977.
6. Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau was once quoted as having said (March 1969) that, for Canada, being America’s neighbor “is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” Quoted in Louis Turner, Invisible Empires (New York : Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1971), p. 166, and W. H. Pope, The Elephant and the Mouse (Toronto : McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. vii.
Ibid., pp. 54–55.
16 Spandar’ian, p. 91.
18 Petrov, Iaponiia v mirovoi politike, p. 240.
19 Izvestiia, August 11, 1976.
24 Ibid., p. 5.
29 Bialer, The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline (N.Y.: Alfred A.
Seueryn Knopf. 1986., p. 264.


32 Ibid., July 29, 1986. (italics by H. K.)


34 Pravda, November 7, 1984.


39 Ibid., p. 41.

40 Ibid., p. 40.


43 XXV s’ezd kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza (24 fevralia-5 marta 1976 goda) : stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow : Politizdat, 1976), 1, p. 45.


52 Literaturnaia gazeta, June 19, 1985.
54 Pravda, July 29, 1986.
55 Yomiuri Shimbun, and Nihon Keizai Shimbun, August 12, 1986.
57 Pravda, June 22, 1985.
64 Pravda, June 7, 1977.
68 David W. Paul writes that “Understanding the process of Soviet foreign policy-making
can sometimes be a frustrating challenge," partly because "there is no simple approach which will immediately enlighten the policy-making process." David W. Paul, "Soviet Foreign Policy and the Invasion of Czechoslovakia: A Theory and a Case Study," *International Studies Quarterly,* 15, No. 2 (June 1971), 159.

69 Dallin, "Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign Policy," p. 380.
71 Dallin, "Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign Policy," p. 380.
72 Charles Gati, "History, Social Science, and the Study of Soviet Foreign Policy," in Hoffman and Fleron, Jr., p. 8