

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's Russian Policy

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Abstract

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō inherited Russian policy from his father, Abe Shintarō, former Foreign Minister who endeavored to improve substantially Japan-Russia relations with Gorbachev. Consequently when Abe was reelected as Prime Minister in December 2012, Russian policy was one of his highest policy objectives.

This analysis follows chronologically how his policy developed during the eight years of Prime Minister-ship until September 2020 when he retired. It gives overall perspectives on how he enlarged the scope of relationship from economic, cultural, security, ultimately tackling the most difficult issue of peace treaty negotiations. In November 2018 at his meeting with Putin in Singapore he proposed to resolve the territorial issue based on the 1956 Joint Declaration and for a while the negotiations proceeded well. But soon after, the two sides came apart in furthering closer ties.

Two years after his retirement Abe was tragically assassinated. But in these two years, Abe left a testimony over his policy he covered as Prime Minister, to groups of journalists. *Hokkaido Shimbun*, which followed most meticulously Abe's Russian policy published already a ground breaking book while he was still alive, including an important interview Abe made in December 2021.

But another group of journalists primarily of *Yomiuri Shimbun* made a long interview on Abe's overall policy agendas, Russian policy being one of the focal points, narrated surely without any anticipation of his tragic ending. *Yomiuri* Journalists published in 2023 all Abe's account, which Abe surely expected

to be published in much later stage. This paper's analysis is primarily based on those so far little-known *Yomiuri* narrative.

The author concludes that what remains as most impressive is Abe's conviction that drastically improving relations with Russia is in Japan's national interest and his tireless energy to have pursued his wide and deep scope of Japan's relations with Russia including the most difficult issue of a peace treaty conclusion.

Keywords: Abe Shinzō, Abe Shintarō, 1956 Joint Declaration, Japan-Russia relations, Japan-US Security Treaty, Abe-Putin Nagato Meeting, Abe-Putin Singapore Meeting

Introduction

In August 2020, Abe Shinzō was in his 8th consecutive year as prime minister but his health was deteriorating due to ulcer in large bowel, (medical name: Gastric Ulcer Colitis). On August 24, he just became the prime minister with the longest tenure, starting from the pre-war Meiji Constitution, and still his tenure as the President of the Liberal Democratic Party remained until September 2021.

But on August 28, he held a press conference and declared that, due to his declining health, he would resign. His comment on policy matters and on what he regretted to not have achieved was very short. He just said: "it is my extreme regret of not being able to resolve the abduction issue. It also breaks my heart of leaving the post with unfulfilled task on the conclusion of the peace treaty with Russia, and the revision of the constitution."¹ He resigned on September 16, 2020.

To me, Abe's reference to Russia was particularly striking. Abduction issue certainly remains regrettable, but, against Kim Jong Un, there was a limit of what he could have done. Constitutional revision may also be

¹ Shushōkaiken shōhō [Detailed Report of Prime Minister's Press Conference]. *Kyodo Tsushin*, 28.08.2020.

regrettable but he has actually made a fundamental change by changing the interpretation of Article 9. The collapse of his negotiations with Russia remains a truly regrettable issue.

Abe Shinzō's awakening experience with Russia originates from the meeting between his father, Abe Shintarō, with Gorbachev in January 1990. Shinzō was his father's private secretary then. Abe Shintarō, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Nakasone Cabinet, requested Gorbachev "to resolve difficult issue between the two countries with wisdom, while you are the general secretary of the CPSU." In April 1991, Gorbachev visited Japan as the President of the Soviet Union and met Shintarō again, when his health was deteriorating seriously due to terminal cancer. "All the more so, it was a moving meeting of warmth and friendship which left a lasting impact on me to realize my father's unfulfilled political agenda." [Abe 2006, pp. 34–37].

Abe could not achieve much during his first prime-ministerial term, which ended quickly (September 2006 to September 2007) because of his health problems due to gastric ulcer colitis. But when he came back as prime minister in December 2012, he did not waste his time to take up Russia as one of his priorities. In the eight years during his second tenure, he did his best to improve relations with Russia, ranging from cultural, economic, security, and culminating in the conclusion of the peace treaty. But, despite his all-out efforts, he clearly did not reach his final objective, as he lamented on August 28, 2020.

In less than two years after his resignation, on July 8, 2022, Abe was tragically assassinated, causing a wave of shock throughout Japan and the world. Even not knowing about his tragic ending, Abe left quite a lot of testimony about his work as the prime minister with the longest tenure in the history of constitutional Japan.

On Russian policy, Abe gave a long interview to *Hokkaido Shimbun*, published on December 26, 2021. *Hokkaido Shimbun* added this interview to the outcome of its reporting already published in September 2021 and added other factors such as the Ukrainian War and Abe's assassination and published its comprehensive version in December 2022 [Watanabe 2022].

Journalists in *Yomiuri Shimbun* made their own efforts. In February 2023, they published their own version based on interviews lasting 18 times and 36 hours of recording. [Abe 2023] This book was supplemented by another book entitled the *Official Reader*. [Yachi 2023] These two books covered all aspects of Abe's policy, but the Russian part constituted one of the highlights of his foreign policy agenda.

In particular, within the *Official Reader*, the part written by Yachi Shotarō, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs and Director of the National Security Bureau under Abe, and Teshima Ryūichi, a former NHK journalist known to be close to Abe and Yachi, comprises quite an interesting analysis of Japan-Russia relations. Thus, this essay chooses, among others, the two latest *Yomiuri* books as the main guideline to narrate Abe's Russian policy.

Chapter One: Abe's Russian policy begins to move March 2013 – March 2014

“My first visit to Russia as prime minister took place in April 2013. I asked Mr. Mori, – former Prime Minister and Putin's best friend in Japan,² – to meet President Putin prior to my visit to smooth out the ground of our talks. In the Joint Communique we agreed to seek for a ‘mutually acceptable solution (of the peace treaty).’ This visit became the starting point of my territorial negotiations with Russia.” [Abe 2023, p. 182]. Abe took with him a large-scale economic mission, which started serious exchange of views with their counterpart. On security matters, the two sides agreed to establish a “Two-Plus-Two” mechanism, which existed, thus far, only with the U.S. and Australia [Tōgō 2017, p. 226].

“My second visit was made to Sochi, in February 2014, at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. I thought it a good opportunity to talk to Putin, because the U.S. and European countries absented to protest

² Note by the author of this essay.

the Russian policy of punishing homosexuals. Putin greeted me at the entrance of the Presidential Residence with an Akita-breed dog called Yume. When I smoothed the dog, Putin teased me saying: 'Be careful, he might bite you.'" [Abe 2023, p. 182–183].

But soon after this opening ceremony held on February 7, the Maidan revolution exploded in Kiev from February 19 to 21. Ukrainian incumbent President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from Kiev, resulting in Russian annexation of Crimea. Under the leadership of President Obama, the G7 began imposing sanctions against Russia. The Japanese government joined these sanctions, but, under Prime Minister Abe's strong guidance, always as the last and with minimal scale, on March 18, April 29, August 5, and September 24 [Tōgō 2015, pp. 218–231]. Nevertheless, due to these sanctions, intimate contacts between the two governments nearly collapsed.

But, in the course of the year 2014, Prime Minister Abe did his best to keep up his channel of dialogue with President Putin:

1. On August 31, at the International Judo Championship in Chelyabinsk, Yamashita Yasuhiro, golden medalist of the Los Angeles Olympics, passed on Abe's goodwill message to Putin.

2. On September 10, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō conveyed Abe's personal letter and good-will message to President Putin.

3. On September 21, on Abe's birthday, Putin made a phone call of congratulation, which was reciprocated on October 17 by Abe on Putin's birthday.

4. On October 17, at a meeting under the auspices of ASEM held in Milano, the two leaders had a 10-minutes talk.

5. On November 9, at a meeting under the auspices of APEC Summit, the two leaders had an extended meeting, in which an agreement was reached to invite President Putin to Japan [Tōgō 2015, pp. 229–230].

Chapter Two: Recuperation of Active Russian Policy May 6, 2016 at Sochi

On May 6 2016, Abe visited Sochi to recuperate his energy aimed at Japan-Russia relations.

“President Obama was against my visit. In March, when I visited America to attend a nuclear security summit, I told him that I would meet Putin in Sochi. He told me that ‘I would not go if I were you.’ Since Japan was exercising sanctions after Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, he might have been concerned about the emergence of disunity among the G7. But I told him that ‘Japan and Russia do not have a peace treaty. I need to change this situation, so let me decide what to do.’ Some bitter atmosphere emerged. President Obama might have been offended and I was warned by American officials not to go. But I did.” [Abe 2023, p. 218].

“Why did I insist on going to Russia? In the 1956 Joint Declaration, it was prescribed that Habomai and Shikotan shall be transferred after the conclusion of the Peace Treaty. Matsumoto Shunichi and Shigemitsu Mamoru, the Japanese negotiators, thought that Habomai and Shikotan should be transferred to Japan, but then-U.S. Secretary of State J.F. Dulles intervened to prevent them from accepting that offer. At the time of the Cold War, the U.S. did not want drastic improvement of Japan-Soviet relations. Since then, there have emerged such views in Japan that there is no hope for the negotiations and Japan needs to stick to its maximum position to demand the four islands in a bunch.

But then the Soviet Union changed into Russia, and it became a G8 member. Just adopting the policy of a head-on clash does not meet Japan’s national interest. Furthermore, China began to rise and strategic environment around Japan changed substantially. The largest security threat now comes from China. Alliance with the U.S. alone is not sufficient. Facing China and North Korea, I thought that there is absolute need to improve relations with Russia. I have spoken extensively on China at Sochi and elsewhere to President Putin, but I could not get his frank views on China.

Putin did not spare words in criticizing the U.S. On one occasion, when I told him that, under Trump, the U.S. antagonistic policy to Russia may change, Putin just said: 'Yes, I think I can talk to Trump, but I have no illusions about the U.S. as a whole.' He was always careful of saying anything negative about China." [Abe 2023, pp. 216–219].

"At any rate, there are Russians living on these islands. We need to engage in common economic activities, and let them think that 'it is nice to be with the Japanese.' We need to engage Russians as a whole through joint economic activities in the Far East or so. We agreed on a new approach of the Eight-Point Economic Cooperation Plan in Sochi, including energy, Far Eastern development, transport. This was all proposed to ensure better understanding of Japan among Russians." [Abe 2023, p. 217].

At this Sochi meeting, upon Abe's proposal, the first *tête-à-tête* meeting with the presence of interpreters only took place. [Komaki 2020, p. 160].

Chapter Three: Putin's Visit to Nagato and Tokyo December 15 and 16, 2016

"I was fully cognizant of the importance of Putin's visit to Japan because no head of state is willing to visit a foreign country with which one has a territorial problem. I invited President Putin to my home town, Nagato in the Yamaguchi Prefecture, first of all to entertain him in a relaxed atmosphere. I planned to have as long as possible for a *tête-à-tête* meeting. On substance, I proposed joint economic activities on the four islands, with the same spirit of a new approach as agreed in Sochi in May. I planned to establish a 'special economic system' which would not derogate respective legal position. I showed a letter by a woman, former islander, or pictures of the islands when Japanese and Russians lived together, to show that these are images of future cooperation. I think he was impressed." [Abe 2023, pp. 240–241].

In summing up the outcome of the Nagato negotiations, the Japanese Foreign Ministry distributed to the press two papers: the first

one, covering the simplified procedure for former islanders to make graveyards visits; and the second one, on the joint economic activities on the islands, including possible areas of cooperation.

One can assume that the contents of these two papers were debated thoroughly, but clearly it reflects only the Japanese position, not necessarily fully agreed by the Russian side. But, as if to fill in that vacuum, at the concluding press conference held in Tokyo on December 16, Putin made an unexpected sudden intervention. Partly because simultaneous interpretation did not work well, the Japanese press could not grasp the thrust of Putin's remarks, but later it was put up in full in the Presidential Home Page as follows:

1. (Regarding the major aspects of territorial negotiations) We should stop this historic ping-pong of taking back and forth these islands.

2. We should act to achieve the final objectives to transform these islands from islands of dispute to islands of connecting Russia and Japan, as was proposed by Prime Minister Abe.

3. If we follow the process proposed by Prime Minister Abe, we shall be able to create conditions to ultimately conclude the peace treaty.

4. If someone says that economic connections are most important, that is not so; in my view, the conclusion of the peace treaty is most important [Tōgō 2017, pp. 237–240].

As was said, Putin's statement at the press conference saved the visit from lacking meaningful results. But, before moving to the next chapter, two things need to be added to show the fragile basis on which this visit stood.

First, just a month prior to the visit, in the Japanese media, serious reports which obviously would have negative impacts began suddenly floating. On November 9, S. Yachi, Director of National Security Bureau, met Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council. Patrushev asked Yachi whether, if the islands were transferred to Japan, the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty would apply to these islands. Yachi apparently said "yes." On November 19, at the Abe-Putin meeting in Lima, Peru, under the auspices of an APEC Summit, Putin raised this issue and questioned Abe rigorously. Neither the exact content of the

Yachi-Patrushev meeting nor of the Abe-Putin meeting is confirmed, but this is apparently the first incident when security issues appeared seriously in Abe-Putin talks [Watanabe 2022, p. 217].

Second, after the Nagato meeting, joint economic activities, which became the most important outcome at Nagato, failed to produce any tangible results for nearly two years. There was a consensus that it was essential that Japanese side would send an expert mission to the four islands to investigate plausible joint activities. The first delayed mission was sent for five days (June 27 – July 1, 2017). On September 7, at the Abe-Putin summit meeting in Vladivostok, the two sides agreed five priority projects: maritime products, green house vegetation, tourist tours, wind generated electricity, and reduction of garbage. At the end of October 2017, the second mission was sent to investigate these priority projects, but barriers preventing the implementation of the agreement still remained high. Various systemic, practical, and legal barriers remained unresolved. In fact, the first and only one of these priority projects, a tourist tour, materialized as late as in 2019 to Kunashiri (October 30 and 31) and Etorofu (November 1) [Watanabe 2022, pp. 245, 260, 276, 305–308].

Chapter Four: The Singapore Meeting November 14, 2018

“On September 10 at the Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok, President Putin threw an audacious ball to me. ‘Let us conclude the peace treaty without any pre-conditions by the end of the year,’ he said. I could not immediately grasp his intention; so, when I left the Forum for a while, I told him that I need to resolve the issue of ownership of four islands, so I cannot accept. But because (in reality) Putin asked me in public ‘What is Japan’s ultimate policy?’ I decided to jump into my ultimate position. Japan-Russia Joint Declaration is a public document which has the validity of an international treaty. Taking a neutral position, it is unreasonable that we ignore this treaty. I decided to come back to this starting point.” [Abe 2023, pp. 326–327].

In reading Abe's own account, it is clear that Putin's statement on September 10, 2018 triggered his audacious proposal in Singapore. But some observers say that it was precisely Abe's behavior on that day at the Forum prior to Putin's statement which triggered Putin to make his 'peace treaty first' proposal.

Let me quote the account of Komaki Akiyoshi, an *Asahi Shimbun* reporter:

1. On the podium, there was also Xi Jinping, the Mongolian President Batturga, the Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon.

2. Abe made the statement which emphasized that, thanks to Japan's assistance, Russia gained much, as if to highlight the backwardness of Russia.

3. The joint economic activities on the islands, which he boasted about, had not produced any results for nearly two years yet.

4. Asking Putin to confirm, in front of this audience, the joint wish for the conclusion of the peace treaty might have caused an impression to utilize international pressure against Russia – a mistake Japan has committed so many times." [Komaki 2020, pp. 19–22].

Let us come back to Abe's own account on the Singapore meeting: "In the *tête-à-tête* meeting with Putin, I recounted my father's meeting under terminal cancer with Gorbachev in April 1991, and how he stood up from his wheelchair and thanked Gorbachev for having created the basis of true friendship. I told Putin that many people in my fathers' generation lost their lives in the war. So, my father, as was his responsibility as a survivor, was determined to conclude a peace treaty, the last remaining point on the agenda, and normalize relations with the Soviet Union.

I told President Putin that I too, since I had a stable political basis at home, wanted to open audaciously a new world with him. From there I moved on to the issue of the 1956 Joint Declaration. Putin responded then that 'Conclusion of the peace treaty is a historic task. Resolution of territorial issue is beneficial to both peoples.'

In preparing the Singapore meeting, I informed Putin about our intention to go back to the 1956 Joint Declaration. We discovered that Sergei Naryshkin was working as the head of the Foreign Intelligence

Service (SVR in Russian³). He visited Japan many times and has some knowledge on Japan. His counterpart in Japan was Kitamura Shigeru, Director of Cabinet Intelligence Office. Kitamura informed Naryshkin and conveyed thoroughly my intention to go back to the 1956 Declaration.

During our meeting in Singapore, I raised the issue of a possible placement of American forces in the transferred territory. I told Putin that ‘Hypothetically, this issue might exist. But where were the Americans, including during the Cold War period? They were in Okinawa, the warmest area, located furthest from Hokkaido. Hokkaido is defended by Japan Self-Defense Forces. How can the U.S. place their forces in the transferred islands, which are colder and even more remote than Hokkaido?’

In the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement, on the one hand, it is prescribed that the ‘U.S. cannot establish its bases without the consent of the Japanese side’. But, in the Manual produced by the Japanese MoFA, it is also indicated that ‘there is a problem with entering into an agreement with the Soviet Union about not placing American forces in the transferred territory.’⁴ So I spoke frankly about the Status of Forces Agreement, saying that, ‘Given my extremely friendly relations with President Trump, Trump would not object if I commit myself ‘not to place American forces in the transferred territory.’ Trump is already

³ SVR (Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki) – Foreign Intelligent Service (Russia).

⁴ Author’s note: Nichibei chii kyōtei no kangaekata [How to Consider the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement], originally published as a classified document by MOFA, was re-published by *Ryūkyū Shinpōsha* on December 8, 2004. This re-published version includes the key Note 16 on page 31, translated into English by the author as follows: “Based on these considerations, as a condition of reversion of the Northern Territories, granting the Soviet Union a legal commitment in general terms ‘not to place American bases in the returned Northern Territories’ would create a problem from the point of view of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and its Status of Forces Agreement.”

complaining that the American burden on U.S. bases is too heavy. Putin responded that ‘It is a clear explanation. There is no problem.’

In December, we had a meeting in Buenos Aires. We agreed that the two sides would aim to come to an agreement at the G20 Heads of State Osaka Meeting to be held in June 2019. Putin stated that ‘We can start a foreign ministers’ meeting from tomorrow’ and said jokingly to Lavrov, who was sitting next to him, ‘You are just drinking whisky since you have nothing to do! It is not good for your health. Should you drink, it must be vodka!’

I consider this point the closest one where the Japan-Russia relations reached under my tenure. It was truly a great opportunity to reach an agreement based on the two islands transfer. But, when negotiations started in 2019 under foreign ministers and vice-ministers, the Russian side returned to fundamentalism.” [Abe 2023, pp. 326–331].

Chapter Five: Collapse of Abe-Putin Negotiations Beginning of 2019 – September 2020

In the narratives made after his resignation, Abe acknowledges that negotiations from early 2019 did not move smoothly. But one can see that he was paying attention not to rebuke President Putin personally for the rising difficulty of the negotiations.

His interview to *Hokkaido Shimbun*, published in December 2021, is the first example: “In Buenos Aires, Putin agreed to proceed with what we had agreed in Singapore. But, after that, negative views rose on the Russian side, and his position slid backwards. It is regrettable, but even Putin cannot decide easily.”⁵

Then his memoir gives the same line of explanation: “From the beginning of 2019, when negotiations started, Lavrov and Morgulov

⁵ Abe motoshushō ryōdō kōshō shohō [Detailed Reports of Former Prime Minister Abe on Territorial Negotiations]”. *Hokkaido Shimbun*, 26.12.2021. P. 5.

began destroying the negotiations. Russian side insisted that 'As the prerequisite to the negotiations, the Japanese side should recognize that the four islands belong legitimately to Russia.' Since the Soviet Union occupied these islands after Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration, that cannot be accepted by Japan.

They also raised hard claims regarding the Japan-US Security Treaty and missile defense. Putin seemed to have made efforts so as not to block the negotiations, but it looked like he did not succeed. I did my best to explain, but I might not have succeeded in wiping out Russian distrust against the U.S. In 1989, at the time of unification of Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia did not join NATO. But later they did, and now American missile defense system Aegis Ashore is placed in Poland and Romania. They are aimed at Iran but the Russian side considered that they were aimed at Russia too. Putin must have these things in mind as well." [Abe 2023, pp. 329–332].

In contrast to this, Yachi Shotarō, a trusted aide to Abe, first as Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and then the first Director of the National Security Bureau, made a clearer denunciation of the Russian position as a whole. Yachi retired from the position of the Director of National Security Bureau in September 2019, but as early as on January 24, 2020, stated the following in a televised BS program: "Russian position was to ask the Japanese side 1) to acknowledge that the Northern Territories became Russian territory as a result of World War II; 2) withdrawal of all foreign troops from Japan; and 3) unconditional conclusion of a peace treaty. They were all 'non-starter' for us and we do not have any mobility." [Watanabe 2022, p. 311].

S. Yachi made an on-the-record lecture to a monthly magazine KOKEN, published in December 2020, and made the same remarks: "We conducted twenty and more summit meetings with Russia. Prime Minister Abe took up this issue on all occasions and had serious debate with President Putin. But the Russian side gradually hardened their position. Currently, Russia shows such a position as if they have no intention to resolve this issue.

They now claim that 1) Japan should recognize as an objective fact that the Northern Territories became Russian territory as the result of World War II as the prerequisite of negotiations. This is totally unacceptable; 2) all foreign troops should be withdrawn from Japan. This means to nullify the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. From the point of view of Japan's own security, this absolutely cannot be accepted; 3) to conclude the peace treaty first and tackle the territorial issue later. If we conclude the peace treaty first, the Russian side will entirely lose their incentive to resolve the territorial issue. We cannot conclude peace treaty under such conditions.”⁶

Yachi Shotarō appears once more in the Official Reader to the Memoir of Abe Shinzō, in a dialogue with Teshima Ryūichi, a former NHK correspondent known as an expert on intelligence and foreign policy. The only point Yachi emphasized in this debate was the profound shadow of Russia-U.S. relations that has affected Abe's policy regarding Russia:

“Working in actual diplomacy with Russia, I felt a gigantic wall which transcended the actual conduct of diplomacy. While we conducted foreign policy under Abe, the U.S.-Russia relations deteriorated rapidly. It was said that the ‘U.S.-Russia relations are at their worst since the end of the Cold War.’ The traces of this exacerbation coincide accurately with the exacerbation of territorial negotiations. If the U.S.-Russia relations warm up, there might be a possibility for the warming up of territorial negotiations. But, at this point, there is no basis for optimism at all.” [Yachi 2023, pp. 36–37].

As if to supplement the moderate tone of Yachi's statement in this Reader, Teshima Ryūichi left a four-pages sharp note about the untold part of the last stage of failed negotiations between Abe and Putin:

“If a part of the four islands would fall under the governance of Japan, theoretically there would emerge a possibility that the

⁶ Shōtarō Yachi. Uizu korona no kokusai jōsei to Nihon gaikō [International Situation and Japan's Foreign Policy With Corona]. *KOKEN Seminar*, December 2020, Issue 685. <https://koken-publication.com/archives/875>

U.S. bases would be located there after the Japan-U.S. consultations. But the Russian side will never accept such an eventuality of American bases placed in the transferred territory. Therefore, Japanese diplomats needed to resolve this issue with the Russian side prior to the concluding part of the negotiations. Fully cognizant of this situation, the Japanese side began its concrete preparation: to obtain an assurance by the U.S. 'not to place American bases in the transferred territory' and to transmit this assurance to the Russian side to eradicate their justifiable concern.

The Japanese side proposed to the Russian side to start consultations on security matters, with a view primarily on the issue that there shall not be American bases after the transfer of the islands. But, to the puzzlement of the Japanese side, not only was there no positive reaction of the Russian side, but this well-intended proposal also received wide public exposure aimed at giving precisely the opposite result, implying that there is a possibility of American bases being placed in the returned territory.

Alerted by the emerging situation, the Japanese side sent a representative to Moscow to check what was going on. It became clear that this 'disinformation' reached Kremlin and caused the President's anger. Who and why could have caused these things is a story covered with heavy mist and totally hidden.

But whatever the truth is, one cannot but deny that this carefully orchestrated 'intrigue' had the overwhelming power of wiping out the territorial negotiations conducted under Abe and Putin." [Yachi 2023, pp. 48–51].

Finally, in order to amplify the seriousness of R. Teshima's conclusion and the difficulty of finding out what really took place then, let me quote a Japanese newspaper article related to this subject:

Asahi Shimbun in December 2016 reported that: "At the Yachi-Patrushev meeting in the first half of November in Moscow, Patrushev asked Yachi whether there is a possibility of American bases placed in the two islands transferred according to the 1956 Joint Declaration. Yachi

answered that ‘there is a possibility.’ According to several Japanese government sources, Yachi’s answer was a perfectly justifiable one, but Putin made it an issue in Lima.”⁷

Conclusion

This essay tries to reconstruct the late former Prime Minister Abe’s policy towards Russia from available public information. There are three points I would like to make in conclusion.

First, I tried to mobilize all public information available in Japan, primarily in Japanese-language sources, that I could reach, but, since I was not a recognized member of the Japanese negotiations team, the scope of my analysis is bound to be partial. I recognize my limitations but just hope that, nonetheless, I managed to draw Abe Shinzō’s picture worth presenting in the English language.

Second, as is amply shown in this analysis, despite all-out efforts by Abe, he could not have realized the final objectives of concluding the peace treaty. I think Abe’s strategy in pursuing his Russian policy, which consisted in starting with a wider area of culture and economy, then security, and then reaching the most difficult issue of the peace treaty in the end was correct and it was the only possible approach for a successful negotiation with Russia. Because of the exacerbating U.S.-Russia security relations, the last stage of his negotiations nearly collapsed. It was truly regrettable, but perhaps Abe did his best and, under the mismatch of his policy and the international situation, there was little he could do.

Third, nevertheless, what remains as most impressive is Abe’s conviction that drastically improving relations with Russia is in Japan’s national interest. Based on his conviction, he tirelessly pursued implementing his Russian policy objectives. It is so regrettable that his

⁷ Hōnichimae, kyōkō shisei de kugi, Pūchin shi [Mr. Putin Wedged a Hardened Position Before the Visit]. *Asahi Shimbun*, 14.12.2016. P. 2.

objectives failed, but what we can learn and think in relation to Japan's future is the righteousness and validity of his policy conviction. Especially after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Kishida adopted a basic policy to align with Ukraine, the U.S., G7, and NATO, at the expense of Japan's policy which it pursued particularly after Gorbachev and which focused on the Russian Federation. As the war in Ukraine seems to be dragging for 2024 and possibly longer, I think it is absolutely essential to put oneself in Abe's thinking and think hard: 'how would Abe have reacted in the present situation?' I do think that this mental exercise is useful to all policy makers and intellectuals who are related to or interested in this war.

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