

For Japan's Abe, a moment to end World War II with Russia?

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Prime Minister Abe and Russian President Putin will meet Thursday and Friday. A territorial dispute that has prevented the signing of a WWII peace treaty will be discussed.

By [Gavin Blair, Correspondent](#) December 14, 2016



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A woman looks at a banner showing Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Senzaki station in Nagato, Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan, Dec. 14, a day before their summit meeting. The words on top read, "A new start from here in Nagato."

Toru Hanai/Reuters

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Tokyo — When Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet on Thursday and Friday, they do so as two leaders with time on their side and seemingly unassailable domestic political strength. They may need to draw on reserves of both to reach an agreement.

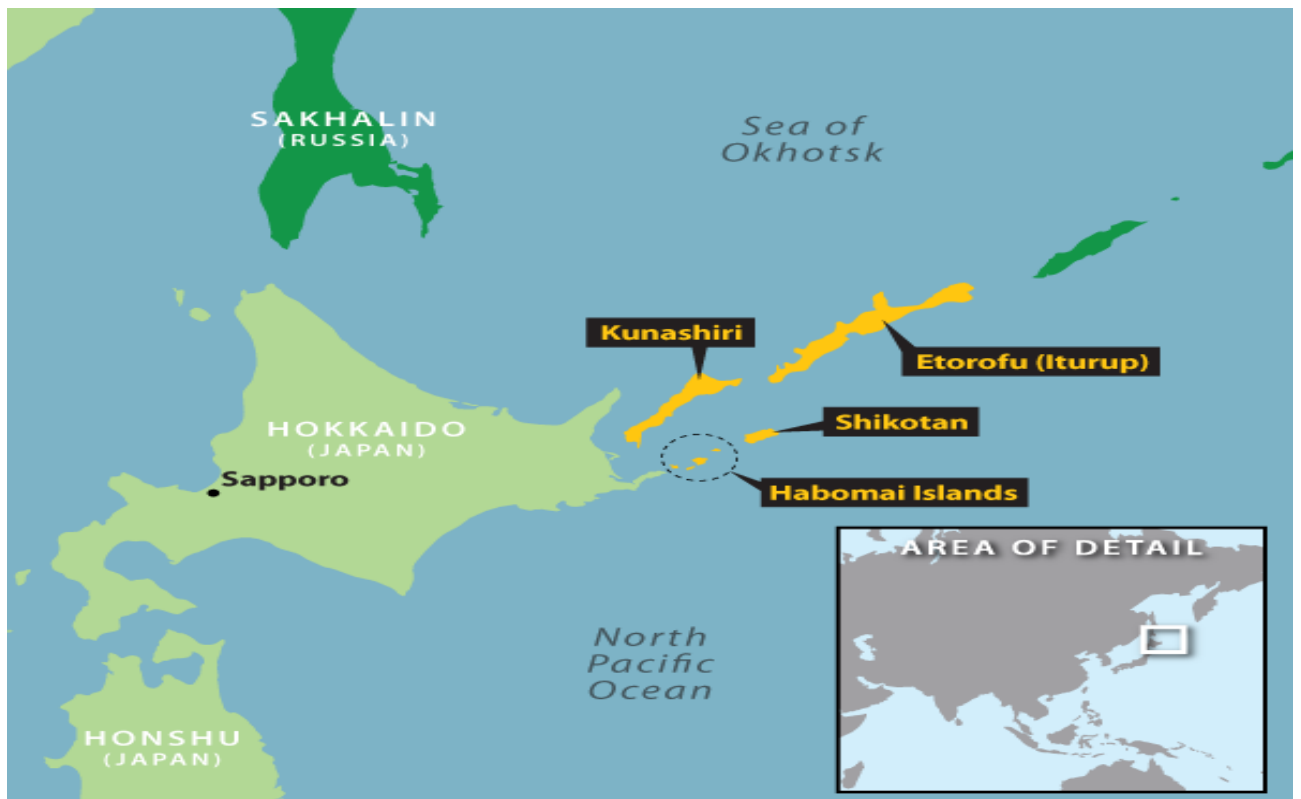
On the first day, the two premiers are expected to discuss a territorial dispute with roots in a 150-year-old treaty, while visiting a hot spring resort in Mr. Abe's home constituency of Yamaguchi Prefecture, in southern Japan. Day 2, in Tokyo, will focus on economic ties and Japanese investment in Russia.

The agenda of the two days neatly divides the aims of the two leaders.

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At stake for Abe is regaining at least two of the four Kuril Islands that the Soviet Union seized in the final days of World War II. Their return is seen as a matter of honor for the prime minister's conservative base. Getting the islands back would provide Abe with a genuine legacy and complete the work of his father, who as foreign minister negotiated for their return with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990. When Abe spoke to the Japanese parliament this week about the upcoming discussions with Mr. Putin, he recalled accompanying his father on his trip to Moscow and expressed the duty he feels to resolve the issue.

The meetings will be held against a complex geopolitical backdrop, including both countries' concerns about a rising China and whether a more pro-Moscow Trump presidency will help facilitate better Japan-Russia relations.



Japan and Russia dispute ownership of the Kuril Islands, or Northern Territories, which have been in Russian hands since 1945. Jake Turcotte/The Christian Science Monitor

The border between Russia and Japan was formally established under the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, which divided the 56 Kuril Islands that run between the two countries. Japan was given sovereignty over Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and Habomai, the four southernmost islands and currently disputed territories. Subsequent wars and treaties saw Japan take control of more islands. That was reversed in 1945 when the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan on the condition it was given control of all the Kurils in a deal hammered out between Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at the Yalta Conference.

By 1948, the Japanese and indigenous Ainu population had been expelled from the islands; the 1951 San Francisco Treaty failed to resolve the dispute. Russia and Japan signed a joint declaration in 1956 that returned Shikotan and Habomai to Japan, but the US blocked the deal and Russia subsequently withdrew its signature, leaving it officially still at war with Japan.

“Abe needs to make some dramatic concessions to Putin to reach an agreement on the islands,” says Takashi Kawakami, president of the Institute of World Studies at Takushoku University.

Abe has already proposed closer economic cooperation with Russia, which is hurting economically from depressed oil prices and US-led sanctions imposed after its annexation of Crimea. Two Japanese banks have already lined up loans totaling \$850 million for Russia's state-owned gas company Gazprom, and more carrots are set to be dangled before Putin in Tokyo on Friday.

Both Putin and Abe have hinted at a “two islands plus alpha” deal that would see Shikotan and Habomai return to Japan. Russia will likely seek renunciation of Tokyo’s claims on the other islands or possibly some form of joint administration. Any such deal would provoke anger from nationalist groups in Japan and factions inside Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but with a “super-majority” in both houses of parliament, high approval ratings, and no serious challengers to his leadership, Abe could weather that storm.

Dr. Kawakami puts the likelihood of a deal on the islands at 40 percent, but other observers are less optimistic of an immediate solution.

“The first stage will be economic deals, an exercise in mutual confidence-building,” says Takashi Inoguchi, professor emeritus at University of Tokyo and an international affairs specialist.

The American factor

The Japanese government consults closely with Washington on diplomatic activities. But the current political situation in the US may have muddied the waters.

“Nobody knows what foreign policy line the new US president will pursue, though his secretary of State nominee has close ties to Russia and Putin. In this transition period, nothing solid will come out of the Abe-Putin meeting,” says Professor Inoguchi.

Even if no agreement is reached on the islands, the meetings may pave the way for closer ties. The Obama administration has been cool on Abe's friendliness with Putin; the two have met more than a dozen times in recent years and reportedly call each by their first names, something reserved for very close friends in Japan.

A Putin-friendly Trump administration could see Moscow-Tokyo ties become even closer, though some observers have suggested a more cordial stance from Washington could actually reduce the need for Russia to ally itself with Japan.

For sure, Japan's first priority will be its relationship with the US.

"Abe risked his political career on the security legislation [reinterpreting the pacifist Constitution to allow a more active role for the military] last year to protect the US-Japan alliance," says Naoyuki Agawa, a visiting professor at Doshisha University and US-Japan Council board member.

Both Abe and Putin have the luxury of taking time to watch for signals from Washington, and elsewhere, next year. In October, the LDP adopted a resolution extending the limit on party presidential terms, allowing Abe to stay on as prime minister until September 2021. Similar rule changes in Russia mean Putin could serve well into the 2020s.

"If Russia and Japan can reach a deal on the islands and sign a peace treaty, Abe will be remembered as the prime minister who solved the final issue left over from World War II," says Mr. Agawa.