

# Japan FM Maehara's Brinkmanship with China and Russia

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With the recent collision between a Chinese trawler and Japan Coast Guard patrol vessels near the Senkaku Islands and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Kunashiri Island, conventional wisdom suggests that the Democratic Party of Japan's foreign policy appears to be at the mercy of these two countries. However, is this actually true?

First, let us look at the situation with China. In September this year, the arrest of a Chinese trawler captain by the Japan Coast Guard and the subsequent extension of his detention came as a great shock to the Chinese government. Even under the administration of former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, when Sino-Japanese relations were particularly bad due to Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine at which Japanese Class-A war criminals are enshrined, Chinese protesters landing on one of Senkaku's islets were taken into custody for immediate deportation to China. This time, paying scant heed to a remark by China's State Councilor Dai Bingguo that the arrest and detention of the captain was a matter of grave concern, Japan investigated the incident – which had happened within its own territory – in accordance with its domestic law, and suggested that China calm down.

China did not recognize the Senkaku Islands as Japanese territory during its negotiations with Japan toward the conclusion of the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. While claiming the islands, Beijing also acknowledges Japan's effective control over them and agrees to shelve the issue tentatively. On the other hand, Japan still publicizes to its people that China has acknowledged that the Senkaku Islands are an "integral part" of Japan (this despite the official records of the negotiations still being classified). Under the LDP government, Tokyo seemed to uphold the tacit "agreement" with Beijing that the Senkaku issue would not be addressed in the relations. Following the recent collision, however, China believes Japan's Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara ignored the realities and adopted an aggressive stance, trying to force China officially to recognize Japan's sovereignty over the islands. Through China's eyes, he also succeeded in having video footage leaked onto the Internet showing the Chinese trawler ramming the Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel. The perpetrator of the leak was not arrested. "The patriotic activity, even if it were done illegally, must be innocent" (愛国無罪). While the international community continues to criticize China for the intensified ethnic conflicts seen in its various territories (such as Tibet and Uyghur) as well as for heightened social unease caused by the widening gap between rich and poor in the country and its intervention in human rights issues following the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident, Beijing is confronting a "sly" Japan that is arguably instigating such sentiment.

Next, let us look at Russia. Undoubtedly, Vladimir Putin, the previous Russian president and the current prime minister, has made serious efforts to foster progress over the disputed Northern Territories issue. The Japanese government, however, raised hurdles and exerted pressure while giving the appearance of making a compromise. In July 2009, Tokyo provoked Moscow by enforcing a law stipulating that the islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu, in addition to those of Shikotan and Habomai, are "integral parts" (固有の領土) of Japanese sovereign territory. Foreign Minister Maehara took every opportunity to condemn Russia for its "illegal occupation" of the northern islands.

In fact, Japan and Russia had continued constructive discussions over the islands since immediately after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. In the Tokyo Declaration on Japan-Russia Relations in 1993, Moscow

officially acknowledged that the four islands were disputed between Russia and Japan (though NOT recognizing that they belonged to Japan). During the Kawana Summit in 1998, Tokyo promised that Japan would NOT accuse Russia of illegally occupying the islands after World War II and would recognize Russia's ad hoc administrative competence if Russia accepted Japan's proposal for drawing a legal borderline between Urup and Etorofu (which means Japan would exercise sovereignty over the four islands). Then-President Boris Yeltsin rejected it because giving the four islands back to Japan was not in Russia's interests, while his successor, Putin, confirmed the validity of the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. This represented a pledge to hand Habomai and Shikotan to Japan, a concession which went further than those made by Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev.

Here, Foreign Minister Maehara is not tied down to the past. It would be seen as preposterous for him to compromise over territorial issues. Japan has already waited 65 years since the end of World War II; waiting for another 50 years or so will only serve to raise hopes of recovering the islands (including military recapture). Maehara stresses not only the need for Russia to return the four islands, but also highlights the historical process of the former Soviet Union's "illegal occupation" of them (it was suggested in the 1990s that these historical details be left for further negotiations though). Since such historical "illegal occupation" was not necessarily limited to the four islands, Russia felt that Japan was motivated by a desire for revenge in also trying to recover the North Kuril Islands and South Sakhalin. Having become impatient with Tokyo's hard-line stance, Medvedev visited Kunashiri Island, and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov also had no choice but to state that Russia would hand over neither Shikotan nor Habomai. Standing in front of them is a Japan contemplating coming to terms with history by turning back the clock to pre-war days.

The U.S. is also perplexed by these events. Once regional tensions come to light, Washington has no choice but to support Japan as an ally. At heart, however, Washington expects Tokyo to restrain itself and cooperate with its neighbors. Tokyo bureaucrats must be applauding this situation, having previously feared that the U.S. might give up on their country at any time due to Japan's erratic policy drift over the issue of relocating the Futenma U.S. Marine Corps Air Station within Okinawa Prefecture and other issues. The recent spats with China and Russia have provided golden opportunities for Japan to cling to its alliance with the U.S. For the time being, there is no prospect of U.S. troops leaving Japan, and U.S. Marines will also remain in Okinawa to protect the islands there. Tokyo could also offer generous host-nation support for U.S. forces stationed in Japan.

An aggressive stance toward China and Russia has been adopted in Japanese diplomacy, and Japan's alliance with the U.S. is strengthened as it seeks to gain cooperation from Washington. As a patriot, I admire this outstanding strategy articulated by Foreign Minister Maehara. That said, however, the endpoint of brinkmanship diplomacy is always perilous; if Japan became isolated in the region and were abandoned by the U.S., it might feel the need to develop nuclear weapons. Has the time come to discuss the "Northkoreanization" of Japan?

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