

# Japan's Rapprochement to Russia: Japan's Pragmatic Response to the Dynamics of Contemporary International System

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**Abstract:** The relationship between Japan and Russia, rather than one that's stable and based on harmony, is full of issues and complexities that follow right after. One crucial issue that continues to overshadow the relation between them is the issue regarding the seizure of property rights over the Kuril Islands, an area which plays a big role in both countries' geopolitics and geostrategy. Arising in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this issue eventually culminated at the end of World War II; and in the midst of instability and efforts made toward an agreement, a deadlock situation has been seen often, resulting in both countries having yet to sign any peace pact to this day. This is primarily due to the belief that if any of the two countries give up their rights of ownership over Kuril Islands then there will be negative view from the international society toward them regarding their existence and role in the international system itself. In mid-2016, however, Japan implemented a new foreign policy which is a rapprochement toward Russia, and this policy is implemented through meetings resulting in an agreement on comprehensive economic and energy cooperation as well as a final meeting to resolve said issue. This paper argues that the dynamics of international system contributes to Japan's decision in conducting rapprochement toward Russia in 2016.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Japan and Russia is an unstable and conflict-filled relationship. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, for the past seven decades, relations between Russia and Japan have not shown a positive sign. The unfortunate relation is of course somewhat indispensable from the territorial dispute between the two in which Japan and Russia strive to fight for the rightful ownership of the Kuril Islands. In its journey, the issue of the Kuril Islands dispute has become quite important for both Japan and Russia as the Kuril Islands became an area of geopolitical and geostrategic significance. Viewed from a geopolitical and geostrategic perspective, the Kuril Islands not only function as a border territory of Russia-Japan but are also attractive due to the richness of natural resources that can be useful for the achievement of interests and the increasing role of the two countries in the international system. Therefore, the issue of disputes between these two countries has succeeded in transforming and continuing into contemporary era today.

However, amidst the deadlocks of negotiations and settlements related to this issue, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe subsequently made a

"breakthrough" by rapprochement policy towards Russia where it was proven by Abe's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi and Vladivostok, respectively in May and September 2016. These two meetings became an important turning point for the Japan-Russia relations related to the settlement of the Kuril Islands problem as well as the opportunities for the establishment of economic cooperation between the two countries. On this occasion, the author tries to explain that the policy adopted by Japan is a tangible manifestation of the systemic impulse at international level which continues to experience the dynamics of change since the post-Cold War era until now.

## 2 INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

The international system has become one of the variables considered to determine the formulation and implementation of a country's foreign policy. One of the figures who always stressed the importance of this international variable is David Singer. He argues that

the international system as an external factor is considered capable of influencing a country in generating its foreign policy (Singer, 1961). In line with David Singer's Laura Neack's *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era* states that as a level of foreign policy analysis, the international system then focuses on studying state versus state, geostrategy of regional forces, or action state against international organizations (Neack, 2008). In particular, Valerie Hudson states that as a variable, the international system is a macro-level approach that departs from system theory and consists of the national attributes of a state as one of its components.

Therefore, the situation and condition of the international system together with various attributes such as military capability, economic power, geography, population and so on later become the benchmark of formulation and implementation of foreign policy of a country (Hudson, 2007). In line with Hudson's thinking, Breuning also stated that this systemic variable is considered as one of the macro-level variables which are then considered capable of influencing variables at the micro level such as behavior and output of a country's foreign policy. Furthermore, Breuning also states that the formulation of a country's foreign policy will always depend on national capabilities and attributes owned by the country in the context of its interaction with other countries (Breuning, 2007). From the ideas of these figures, it can be illustrated that in the level of analysis of the international system, each country is assumed as part of the system so that the interaction that they do in the system will affect and impact the other countries because of their nature as a systemic unity. Therefore, based on this assumption, the formulation and implementation of a country's foreign policy can be understood as a response to the dynamics occurring within the international system itself.

In fact, this variable is greatly influenced by the neorealists' notion that the international system is an anarchy and the state actor remains the main actor in international relations. One of the neorealist central figures Kenneth Waltz stated in his book *Theory of International Politics* emphasizes the importance of the structure of the international system of each country and then assumed to have the relative capability or the difference of their respective powers so that in the structure of the international system that is anarchy, the state with a large relative capability will largely determine the most important outcome of international politics itself (Waltz, 1979 in Jackson & Sorensen, 1999). Therefore, in the international system then there is a 'division' of the state based on

the power capabilities they have because power capability will usually determine how big the role of a country to the system itself. Breuning shares the power of the countries of the world into three categories. First, great power or country with a considerable power capability. Countries categorized as great powers are countries that have a major influence in the constellation of international systems and have the capability to spread its influence on a global scale (Breuning, 2007). The second category is the middle powers or can also be referred to as emerging country where the country included in this category is a country whose economy is experiencing significant development and has the capability to influence within the regional scope. While the third category is the small state powers included in this group is a country that has limited ability to influence other countries in the context of their systemic environment both at regional and international level (Breuning, 2007).

Furthermore, the division of the country based on the capability of power at the international level is able to create at least four patterns or patterns of formulation and implementation of a country's foreign policy. The first pattern is the consensus pattern of countries with middle capability and small powers will voluntarily follow the directions and decisions of great powers countries. The second pattern is compliant where countries with greater power capability will repress to countries with smaller power capabilities to be obedient to their direction and decisions. Furthermore, there is also a counter-dependent pattern in which this pattern can occur when the repressive efforts of countries with greater power capabilities get negative responses from countries with smaller power capabilities. While the last pattern that can be formed in this context is the compensation pattern in which there is a leader of a country that is committed to a policy of counterdependent to countries with greater power capabilities in the international system to achieve their domestic interests (Breuning, 2007). However, it should be noted that the international system based on this state power capability does not always place great powers as a determinant of the direction and purpose of the system itself because ultimately, the nature of the international system itself will determine how the direction and performance of the system affect the formulation and the implementation of a country's foreign policy.

### **3 SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS RELATED TO JAPAN AND RUSSIA APPROACHMENT EFFORT FROM 1956 TO 2006**

As we have already known, the relationship between Japan and Russia is not a stable and harmonious relationship but a relationship of conflict and contradictions. The conflict between Japan and Russia began 'officially' when both countries vis a vis in the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-1905 in which the war was surprisingly won by the Japanese (Crompton, 1997). Not stopping there, the two returned to conflict in the Second World War. After the end of the Second World War, the two countries' conflictual relations did not necessarily end but moved to the complexity of the new issue of disputes over the legal ownership of the Kuril Islands. This territorial dispute ultimately transforms into one of the major determinants of the long history of conflictual relations between Russia and Japan in which both countries today claim that they have legitimate ownership rights over the Kuril Islands.

The Kuril Islands is an archipelago that stretches from the Kamchatka Peninsula to the northeast of Hokkaido and separates the Okhotsk Sea to the northern Pacific Ocean. The dispute between Russia and Japan concerning the Kuril Islands then focuses on the seizure of Etorofu Island, Kunashir, Shikotan, and Khabomai (Gorenburg, 2012). So far, negotiations and diplomacy related to the settlement of the Kuril Islands disputes have been deadlocked for about seven decades because neither Japan nor Russia either wanted to recognize or bring these negotiations farther because if one of them handed over the legal title to the islands then the party will be regarded as a weak country by the international world (Gorenburg, 2012).

However, during those seven decades, both Japan and Russia, still Soviet-era, were not only silent in the face of the complexity of the territorial problems. There are several policy approaches that are then implemented by both leaders of the country concerned. The negotiations began after the death of Josef Stalin, who always regarded Japan as a subordinate country at the international level, thus closing all possible negotiations related to the legal ownership of the Kuril Islands with the Japanese (Miller, 2004). However, after Stalin's death and the election of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Union then began to open negotiations related to the settlement of the Kuril Islands dispute with the Japanese.

In 1956, the Soviets offered a conflict resolution option through a concession in which Russia would provide the two smallest islands Shikotan and Habomai to Japan as a condition of peace as well as the settlement of disputes between the two countries. Japan under Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama was later 'tempted' to accept this offer but the United States Government as Japan's closest alliance expressed their objection to the Soviet offer that the Soviets eventually withdrew the offer in 1960 (Miller 2004). It affected the stagnation of relations between the Soviet-Japan and into the 1980s where the governments of both countries were controlled by conservative figures and then continued to rule out the possibility of compromise of interests associated with the Kuril Islands. On the one hand, the Government of the Soviet Union still viewed the 'eye of potential' and the development of Japan as one of the new industrial country or NIC in East Asia. On the other hand, the Government of Japan sees that the full right of the Kuril Islands is a requirement that the Soviets absolutely must fulfill if they wish to sign a peace treaty with Japan (Miller, 2004).

The negotiations then entered a new phase when Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union where Gorbachev views Japan as one of the most potent economic partners in economic development projects in the Far East of the Soviets. But the settlement of the dispute through economic cooperation returned to a dead end as the conservative Soviet political elite felt that the surrender of the Kuril Islands to Japan was a shame. On the one hand, the Cold War bipolarity conditions placed Japan in a position where the transfer of possession of the Kuril Islands could only be done by the Soviet Union as a superpower (Miller, 2004). This policy continued until the early days of the founding of the Russian Republic under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, where domestic pressure related to Russia's position related to the settlement of the Kuril Islands dispute made Yeltsin subsequently shifted the focus of cooperation to China (Miller, 2004). In 1997 it began a new round of negotiations between Russia and Japan where President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto declared their commitment to placing a new premise in Japanese-Russian relations. The two met in an informal meeting in Krasnoyarsk in November 1997 in which both Yeltsin and Hashimoto later declared that they would do their utmost to reach an agreement on a peace deal in 2000.

However, negotiations returned to a deadlock when Russia unilaterally refused to discuss any something related to the Kuril Islands dispute in negotiations with the Japanese (Akaha, 1998).

Entering the era of Vladimir Putin, Russia reapplied what is called 'Formula 1956' namely the settlement of the Kuril Islands dispute through the concession of two smallest islands Shikotan and Habomai to Japan. This policy was responded negatively by the two Prime Ministers of Japan at the time of Prime Minister Mori and Koizumi stating that negotiations will only continue when Russia includes two other islands into the negotiation clause. However, in Koizumi's time, Japan took two measures at once, firmly and flexibly in which the talk of the dispute of the Kuril Islands must consist of the four disputed islands but on the other hand, Koizumi held a fairly comprehensive economic and energy cooperation with Russia (Miller, 2004).

Tsuneo Akaha in his work *A Paradigm Shift in Russo-Japanese Relations* states that the main determinant of sufficient determination of a paradigm shift toward a more positive direction in the policy approach of the two countries related to the dispute of Kuril Islands is the dynamics that occur in the postwar international system Cold (Akaha, 1998). The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of the world as ideologically divided, as if united under the umbrella of liberal-capitalism. This brings the consequence that the international world is then more hiraui to the global aspect of cooperation in the economic field so as to create a world that is economically unlimited. The situation at the international level is then also becoming more complex when the phenomenon of rise and fall of supremacy occurs. This is demonstrated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and followed by the fact that the hegemonicity of the United States continues to experience a declining phase. On the other hand, emerging powers such as China and Japan are attempting to show their role and influence in the international system (Agnew, 2001). This situation can not be separated from the shift of focus within the international system itself after the end of the Cold War.

The country's focus on the international system of the Cold War era emphasizes the accumulation of hard power especially in the military as part of efforts to achieve state survival. While in the post-Cold War era, economic strength and expansion of aspects of cooperation became a very important thing. Russia's position with its geo-strategic advantages and military strength then seemed to be of little significance as the Cold War ended, affecting Russia's influence both regionally and globally. While Japan played a less significant role in the Cold War era, it succeeded in transforming itself into one of the countries with significant influence both regionally and globally as a result of their rapidly

growing economic capabilities (Akaha, 1998). Therefore, the dynamics of the international system then slightly compel Japan and Russia to contribute significantly in the effort to create a stable international system post Cold War which one of them is through the policy of the approach of the two countries related to the dispute of Kuril Islands. Although still experiencing various impasse, the paradigm shift between the two countries related to the establishment of better relations has entered a new level which of course this will have a positive impact for the increasing role of Japan and Russia at regional and international level.

#### **4 SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE RAPPROCHEMENT TO RUSSIA IN THE YEAR 2016**

Entering the year 2016, Shinzo Abe as Japan's Prime Minister then made a move called by many people quite risky but very spectacular. How not, Abe decided to implement a new visionary foreign policy of starting a rapprochement with the Russian side through President Putin in connection with the settlement of the Kuril Islands territorial dispute. The rapprochement policy began when Abe and Putin met in Sochi, the venue for the opening of the 2016 Winter Olympics in Russia where the event was boycotted by the United States and many Western European countries as a response to the inauguration of the anti-gay laws in Russia. The Sochi meeting, which became known by the Japanese public as the "Russian Initiative", resulted in a new breakthrough for the settlement of the Kuril Islands disputes where both leaders agreed that they would use a new approach to it (Akaha, 2016).

After the meeting in Sochi, Abe and Putin met again in Vladivostok in a series of Eastern Economic Forum events in September 2016. At the meeting, there was at least agreement on three important things namely the existence of Japan-Russia cooperation related to the development and exploration in the far east Russia, inaugurated the cooperation effort at the ministry level, as well as the official state invitation to President Putin to Japan in December 2016 (Akaha, 2016). Especially in the economic field, the Vladivostok meeting also produced eight aspects which later became the focus of economic cooperation between the two countries namely technology and information in the fields of medicine, renewable energy, environmentally friendly energy, petroleum, natural gas, advanced technology, and



industrialization in the Russian Far East. Russia's Far East region became one of the focal points on which the Japanese-Russian rapprochement policy is based. Japan then agreed to become a partner of Russia's cooperation in economic development efforts in the region. Russia's Far East is strategically the main 'gateway' for Russian interaction with countries in the Asia Pacific region including Japan. The situation and conditions of the Far East Russia experiencing various obstacles in the field of development regarded Japan as one of the opportunities to increase cooperation with Russia. The enhancement of the cooperation not only benefits Russia but also Japan because the Far East region of Russia is renowned for its wealth of energy resources that could be one of the strategic solutions for Japan to respond to the energy crisis they are experiencing (Arai, 2016).

It is worth noting that by 2015, energy has occupied three quarters of Japan's total imports from Russia with details of crude oil imports of 43%, refined oil products by 6%, and natural gas reaching 23% (Arai, 2016). Therefore, cooperation in the energy field then became one of the important determinants of the Japan-Russia cooperation framework in the Russian Far East region. Finally, strengthening cooperation in the economic and energy sector is expected to be a strategic move between the two countries to re-seek a settlement related to the issue of the Kuril Islands where it is planned to be the main agenda of Putin's state visit to Japan in December 2016. Many parties later is optimistic about Japan's rapprochement efforts in which they argue that Putin and Abe's meeting in Yamaguchi Prefecture in December will result in an important agreement for both parties in connection with the resolution of the Kuril Islands disputes that have continued to experience deadlock over the past seven decades.

From a systemic point of view, the movement initiated by the Japanese against Russia can be understood as a response to what then occurs at the international system level. As the previous authors point out, this policy is a form of sustainability of the paradigm shift of both countries in establishing a better rationale in the real contribution of both countries to support the creation of a stable international system post Cold War (Akaha, 1998). Russia and Japan in today's relationship are influenced by US and Chinese factors which are the main forces of the international system in the post-Cold War era. From a Japanese point of view, the Chinese factor has become one of the main reasons behind Russia's rapprochement policy because China's emergence as one regional and even global

power has threatened Japan, both directly and indirectly (Izumikawa, 2016). The Chinese threat ultimately has implications for Japan's foreign policy to draw closer to Russia. There are at least two main reasons behind Japan's foreign policy to Russia in response to the development of Chinese forces at both regional and international levels. Firstly, with Japan and Russia approaching, there is an effort to perform a potential counterweight to the existence of China which from time to time shows quite aggressive behavior. Through this effort Japan does not expect to form an anti-Chinese coalition with Russia but at least Japan hopes that an intensity increase in its relations with Russia could provide a restraining effect on China's aggressive behavior while preventing Russia from becoming too close to China (Izumikawa, 2016). The second reason is that the increasingly aggressive behavior of China in the South China Sea has put Japan's security focus on the southern region, which has led Japan to push for security stabilization in their northern regions. The stabilization effort in question is to normalize relations with Russia, especially those related to the dispute of Kuril Islands (Izumikawa, 2016). Whereas from the Russian point of view, the Chinese factor is not a crucial determinant because in reality, Russia's interest in China is only a pragmatic interest. Therefore, the Chinese factor then makes Russian policy to answer the Japanese rapprochement is also part of Russia's pragmatic attitude to prevent political attachment with China because in some cases like Crimean and Ukrainian Crisis, China shows opposing attitude toward Russia (Streltsov, 2016).

On the other hand, there are also United States factors in the midst of Japanese and Russian relations instability. From a Japanese perspective, the existence of the United States as one of Japan's major alliances subsequently impeded efforts to normalize relations with Russia. However, the United States factor for Japan is highly dependent on the nature of relations between the United States and Russia (Izumikawa, 2016). This is evidenced in the Cold War era where the United States blocked efforts to resolve the dispute of the Kuril Islands between Japan and Russia which was still a Soviet Union that in fact is the opposite of the United States in a bipolar international system. However, the end of the Cold War made the nature of relations between the United States and Russia better so that it had a direct impact on Japan's efforts to normalize its relations with Russia where the United States saw that the settlement of the Kuril Islands dispute was a positive and must-do thing. This is the basis for Abe to run a rapprochement policy against Russia despite its

efforts, the tension of relations between the United States and Russia again increased after the Crimean case (Izumikawa, 2016).

The United States factor is also becoming increasingly complex as US and Russian relations deteriorate where China becomes the third party to become Russia's main alliance to counterbalancing the interests of the United States where Chinese involvement will ultimately complicate Japan's position towards Russia (Izumikawa, 2016). However, after the US presidential election in December, many people are then optimistic about the smoothness of Japan's rapprochement policy towards Russia because the elected American President Donald Trump is known to have a good relationship with President Putin. Meanwhile, from the Russian point of view, the existence of the United States amid efforts to normalize relations with Japan to make Russia has always been a dead end. This is because the binding position of the United States-Japan alliance makes the Russian Government a bit skeptical of the normalization of relations with Japan (Streltsov, 2016). However, with the declining hegemony of the United States, Russia then exploits Japanese pragmatism to get closer to them where Russia shows Japan that the cooperation between them will result in both economic profit and the neutrality of Russia's position related to competition between Japan and China (Streltsov, 2016).

Furthermore, Chen Yo-Jung sees this Russian-Japanese rapprochement policy as a strategic move that exploits systemic environmental situations and conditions at the international level in a broader perspective. The systemic environment referred to by Yo-Jung here is the situation and condition occurring in the G-7 forum which is known as the forum for the gathering of the developed countries which is considered the 'main force' of the world especially in the economic field where this is proven by a total of 64% global net worth is represented by the G-7 countries. Initially, the G-7 member states constituted one of Japan's 'major obstacles' in rapprochement against Russia where the United States became one of the major 'obstacles' in which it was influenced by Russia's aggressive policy in the Crimea. The Crimean case puts the G-7 countries on top of economic sanctions against Russia and Japan, including one of the countries that approved the sanctions (Yo-Jung, 2016). However, the systemic dynamics that occurred in the body of the G-7 then made Japan seem to regain its chances of rapprochement to Russia where it is actually one of the 'violations' of the G-7's decision to sanction Russia.

The systemic dynamics referred to by the authors here refers to the domestic dynamics of each of the G-7 member states, especially the United States, Britain, France and Germany (Yo-Jung, 2016). As mentioned earlier, the United States as one of the most influential parties in the G-7 and the international world is focusing on the most 'shocking' presidential elections throughout the nation-state's history where Japan saw that Donald Trump, presidential candidate is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. After Trump's victory in the US presidential election will make Japan's rapprochement policy smoother as the United States in the Obama era is one of Japan's main obstacles to return to Russia (Yo-Jung, 2016). Western European countries are also inseparable from their domestic problems. Britain is experiencing a fairly serious identity crisis after the Brexit incident where Britain surprisingly decided to quit the EU membership after conducting a referendum. France is facing terrorism problems as well as preparing for elections in 2017. While Germany is facing an unresolved refugee crisis from the Middle East (Yo-Jung, 2016). This systemic condition at the international level is ultimately able to encourage Japan to smooth its rapprochement plan against Russia where talks on signing a peace agreement through the settlement of Kuril Islands disputes will be the main agenda of Japan and Russia in the effort of the rapprochement.economy. In addition, the strong influence of China in the Asian continent also made the United States paranoid to lose the area since the end of the Second World War has been close and dependent on the role model of the United States. Through the theory of Long Cycles proposed by George Modelski, the pattern of US movements in the implementation of Pivot to Asia foreign policy is not only the writer wants to balance the situation at the global level as the official statement from the United States government. There is another interest in stifling China's increasingly aggressive growth and challenging the position of the United States as a world power.

## 5 CONCLUSION

From the above explanations, the authors can draw two simple conclusions which show that the policy adopted by Japan and Russia related to the signing of a peace agreement based on the settlement of the Kuril Islands dispute is the response of the two countries to the systemic dynamics occurring at the international level. First, after the end of the Cold War there was a paradigm shift between Japan and Russia

in the settlement of the territorial dispute of the Kuril Islands where it was marked by the increasingly improved Tokyo-Moscow relations in Yeltsin and Hashimoto era. Although still ending in a deadlock situation, the existence of an intention to contribute significantly to the establishment of a more stable international system post Cold War has encouraged Japan and Russia to engage in economic and energy cooperation in the Russian Far East where it is manifested in order reaching a new stage of establishing better relations between the two countries.

Secondly, the dynamics of the contemporary international system then again succeeded in pushing Japan to a step further in normalizing its relationship with Russia, especially with regard to issues of territorial disputes. The progress is realized through the formulation and implementation of a fairly visionary and pragmatic Japanese policy of rapprochement to Russia in 2016. The policy includes more comprehensive economic and energy cooperation with Russia in the Russian Far East focal point where the policy is perceived by many parties as one of the crucial stepping stone to bridge the settlement of the Kuril Islands disputes as well as the achievement of a peace agreement between the two parties. The author then saw the event as a response of Japan and Russia to the dynamics of the international system in the contemporary era that was marked by the declining hegemonitas of the United States, the increasing role and influence of China at regional and international levels, and uncertain conditions at level G-7 which in fact is countries that have a major influence in the systemic environment at the international level. Finally, at this point the authors see that the various attempts to solve the problems between Japan and Russia that began from 1956 to 2016 are inseparable from both the dilemmatic and pragmatic attitude of both countries in the face of the dynamics occurring within the scope of the international system of the War era Cold, post Cold War, until the contemporary era today.

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