

Trump's Tariffs Might Jumpstart Japan's "Eurasian Pivot". Russia-Japan Rapprochement?

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Global Research, September 08, 2018

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Intelligence](#)

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Japan will probably remain one of the US' "unsinkable aircraft carriers" for the foreseeable future, but its government has been making remarkable progress in its rapprochement with Russia in recent years, and the imposition of any serious tariffs by the Trump Administration might only accelerate this dimension of Tokyo's "Eurasian Pivot".

The Russian-Japanese Rapprochement

Many of the geopolitical relationships that were previously taken for granted have been turned upside-down by the paradigm changes brought forth by the [New Cold War](#), with one of the most visible examples being the incipient rapprochement between Russia and Japan. Despite having never signed a formal peace treaty for ending their World War II-era hostilities and the consequently lingering existence of what Tokyo regards as the "Kuril Islands Dispute", the two sides have been making great strides in pioneering a new era of relations with one another, incidentally motivated partially by the aforementioned challenges but also driven by the pragmatism of expanding their economic ties in the 21st century. Russia is courting Japanese investment for its underdeveloped Far East region while Japan is interested in receiving Russian energy and using its partner's mainland and maritime territory as a bridge for reaching Western Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Arctic Sea Route, respectively.

The author explored the contours of their strategic complementarities in two earlier analyses:

* ["Russia's Diplomatic Balancing Act Is To The Benefit Of Its Chinese Ally"](#)

* ["21st-Century Geopolitics Of Japan"](#)

Both pieces importantly explain how a socio-economic condominium between Russia and Japan over all of the Kuril Islands, Sakhalin, and Hokkaido could present a mutually beneficial win-win opportunity to finally end the political problems that have been plaguing their relationship for decades while simultaneously building a transnational geostrategic platform for strengthening their economic engagement with one another. This concept was elaborated on more at length in the author's piece about how the ["NISEC Proposal Would Add Necessary Juice to Russian-Japanese Relations"](#), which if successful would form a core component of [Russia's "balancing" strategy](#) in Northeast Asia and allow for the two parties to expand the joint Indo-Japanese "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" to the Russian Far East and

Arctic regions. Taken even further, tunnels or bridges could be built for connecting Hokkaido to Sakhalin and thenceforth to mainland Eurasia, though economic studies would need to be undertaken to discover if the reduced delivery time between Japan and Europe would justify the astronomical costs.

Shadow Diplomacy

In any case, it's plain to see that the Russian-Japanese rapprochement is leading to closer relations between the two that serve each of their interests. Moscow might be able to diversify its [regional economic dependence](#) on Beijing while Tokyo could streamline shorter transit corridors to Europe, thereby incentivizing both Great Powers to continue along their current trajectory and take it as far as politically possible. Even so, the pace of their rapprochement could be quicker if they signed a peace treaty for ending World War II, though that would require the resolution of what Japan regards as the "Kuril Islands Dispute", ergo the author's NISEC proposal. Conventional wisdom would consider this to be an impossible task because of the US' military occupation of Japan, though the fact that Tokyo's top spy [held secret talks](#) with a high-ranking North Korean official in Vietnam recently without the US' knowledge suggests that it might also work behind Washington's back when it comes to Russia as well.

Unlike the abovementioned example with North Korea, the diplomatic interactions that Japan has with Russia are public, though the precedent of Tokyo independently pursuing its interests with a country at odds with America has now been established and therefore give rise to the thought that something similar might occur vis-à-vis the Kuril Islands (potentially through NISEC). After all, Japan risked America's wrath by secretly meeting with the North Koreans to discuss the prospective release of a few abductees, so it would make sense that it would also at the very least seriously consider doing something like this again if it could bring about enormous game-changing economic dividends for the rest of its people like the resource investment and transit potential of the Russian Far East could pending a resolution to their lingering World War II-era issues. Even though this process is already presumably underway, it might need a spark to take it to the next level, and therein lays the relevancy of Trump's threatened tariffs.

Tariff Trouble

The American President has been [cracking down](#) on what he deems to be unfair trading arrangements between the US and its Old Cold War-era allies that were perpetuated after 1991 in order to build a liberal-globalist "New World Order" at the expense of his countrymen, and many observers believe that Japan – and specifically its automotive industry – is his [next target](#) after Trump said in an interview that his good relations with Japan "will end as soon as I tell them how much they have to pay." The two countries enjoy a complex economic interdependence with one another, including through the factories that Japan built inside the US and the significance of its marketplace to the country's automotive exports, so it's possible that an arrangement can be reached between the two that avoids the deterioration of their trading ties. Nevertheless, the Japanese are a very proud people who don't like to be disrespected, and if they feel slighted by what Trump is doing, then they may have every reason to accelerate the Russian dimension of their "Eurasian Pivot".

The Double-Edged Sword Of "Zero-Sum" Strategies

Next week's upcoming Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok will be a barometer for

gauging the progress that's been made in the Russian-Japanese rapprochement over the past years, and Prime Minister Abe will [once again](#) participate in the forum and [hold talks](#) with President Putin about all aspects of their countries' bilateral relations. It'll be important to watch what deals emerge from this event, as Japan's growing investment role in Russia's Far East will make it an even greater stakeholder in the success of America's rival, thereby adding yet another wrinkle to Japanese-American relations as well, though only if Trump conceives of this through a "zero-sum" perspective. There's also a chance, however unlikely it may seem at the moment, that instead of Japan going behind America's back to secretly discuss a World War II peace treaty with Russia in reaction to the possible imposition of "offensive" tariffs against it, that it might even do so with Washington's blessing.

This might initially sound absurd in some circles but carries with it a certain strategic logic, namely that the US might tacitly have an interest in facilitating some aspects of the non-military (key word) nature of Russia's "balancing" act so long as it results in a perceived (key word) "zero-sum" loss for China. This was elaborated on more in-depth in the author's analysis earlier this spring about "[What The US Really Wants From Russia](#)", but the main idea is that Washington might turn a blind eye to some of Moscow's moves outside of the Mideast so long as it makes so-called "compromises" in Syria and especially if Russia's outreaches are thought to complicate China's plans, such as they might if some so-called "hardliners" in the People's Republic fret about Japan's growing presence in the Russian Far East and refuse to see it through the prism of multilateral win-win partnerships.

To be clear, there's no indication that China has any problem with Russia inviting Japan to play a larger economic role in this borderland region, but the point is that Kissinger-influenced American wishful thinking in this respect might ultimately be counterproductive for its own "zero-sum" interests if decision makers misjudge Beijing's reaction to this and therefore tacitly give the green light to Tokyo patching up its problems with Moscow out of the erroneous expectation that it'll lead to problems between China and Russia somewhere down the line. Through this manner, the US' "zero-sum" strategy towards the Russian-Chinese-Japanese triangle could dramatically backfire on it in the long run in the New Cold War the same as its Old Cold War one of [building up China](#) as a geopolitical and ideological "counterweight" to the USSR eventually did, which is why it's absolutely crucial to track the progress of the Russian-Japanese rapprochement in order to assess the likelihood of this happening.

Concluding Thoughts

Altogether, Russian-Japanese ties have considerably warmed up over the past few years, notwithstanding their unresolved issues stemming from the end of World War II, though it's unclear at this moment whether Tokyo is acting on its own initiative in defiance of Washington or if it's doing so with its US military overlord's blessing. Should it be the former, then it can't be ruled out that it'll go behind the hegemon's back once more just like it recently did with North Korea for much lesser stakes in order to clinch a peace treaty with Russia for advancing this dimension of its "Eurasian Pivot", though the latter scenario would suggest that any progress that's made in this direction would tacitly be part of an anti-Chinese strategy. Even if that's the case, this could doubly backfire on the US by unleashing uncontrollable dynamics in what would by then be the Russian-Japanese Strategic Partnership and possibly facilitating a Japanese-Chinese rapprochement through these two Asian Great Powers' newfound shared interests in the Russian Far East.

This article was originally published on [Eurasia Future](#).

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