

Russo–Japanese relations, bleak as ever

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The large-scale natural-gas deal struck on 21 May between Russia and China does not bode well for Japan's relationship with Russia. With the Japanese government ratcheting up anti-Russian sanctions and temporarily suspending talks over the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands, the prospects of Japan hastening the resolution of the territorial dispute, and improving ties with Russia as a counterbalance to China remain as frail as ever.



Faced with the dilemma of whether or not to follow the G7's measures against Russia, it would have been [prudent of Japan to limit its response](#) ^[1] to official statements of condemnation and sanctions of a ceremonial nature. That way Japan would have shown its dedication to antimilitarism, stayed in line with its traditional reactive foreign policy and made sure that rapprochement with Moscow was still feasible. Unlike trilateral relations with the United States and China, whereby strengthening ties with one country effectively means their weakening with the other, Japan does not have the same zero-sum relations with Russia and the G7; simply chastising Russia for annexing Crimea and stirring unrest in Eastern Ukraine would still have left room for rectifying Russo–Japanese ties in future.

However, Japan's reaction has gone above and beyond the first wave of sanctions imposed in the wake of Crimea's annexation. In April, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida [cancelled his trip to Moscow](#) ^[2], officially citing a scheduling conflict. Later that month, [Japan imposed visa bans](#) ^[3] on 23 Russian citizens. While the identities of the affected persons were not disclosed, the list was confirmed to be based on [those compiled by the US and the EU](#) ^[4], therefore likely hitting Putin's inner circle. Finally, in May, Japan decided to temporarily halt the negotiation process with Russia over the [disputed islands](#) ^[5] and peace treaty.

Unsurprisingly, these actions did not go unnoticed in Moscow. On 24 May, [Putin blamed Japan](#) ^[6] when pointing out that it may have become impossible to go on with territorial talks, while the visa ban list's exposure was criticised as awkward due to its confidential nature. Still, Putin has expressed [readiness to resume negotiations](#) ^[7] with Japan, saying that he was confident the two countries could resolve the territorial issue.

The latter statement was most welcomed by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who still seems to be walking a tightrope trying simultaneously to support the G7's anti-Putin measures and — much to Washington's chagrin — ensure Russo–Japanese relations do not deteriorate beyond repair. Being less dependent upon trade with Russia than Europe, the US has shown greater resolve in confronting Russian leadership and expects the same from other G7 members, especially Japan, whose relationship with America has traditionally been the diplomatic cornerstone.

However, in June, Abe expressed the [hope of continuing dialogue](#) ^[8] with Putin, whose visit to Japan is due this autumn. The prime minister's attempts to keep bilateral ties intact are driven by two primary factors.

Firstly, Japan, currently devoid of nuclear power, is seeking to [diversify its energy imports](#) ^[9] and Russia — with its export-oriented, hydrocarbon-based economy — presents an excellent choice.

Secondly, and more importantly in the long term, Japan wishes to use Russia to offset China's rapidly growing power and ambitions. However misplaced this may seem — especially in light of [China's implicit support](#) ^[10] of Crimea's annexation despite persistent avowals of territorial integrity — both Japan and China believe that Russia can effectively change the geopolitical architecture in East Asia, which today resembles a sort of 'G2' represented by the US and China contending for hegemony in the region.

But the hardest blow to Japan's plans of wooing Russia back is not the Kremlin's expected backlash over Japan's sanctions but the huge [Sino–Russian natural-gas deal](#) ^[11] signed in May. While the details of the deal are undisclosed, it is known that the overall price of the contract reaches US\$400 billion over 30 years and the annual scope of gas supply is 38 billion cubic meters, which puts the price at about US\$350 per thousand cubic meters, less than what the state-owned Gazprom sells gas to Europe for.

Despite great fanfare and the deal being held up as compelling evidence of Russia pivoting East in defiance of Western sanctions, various reports suggest that — in business terms — it portends [more losses than gains](#) ^[12] to Russia, with new pipelines alone costing as much as US\$30 billion. Moreover, while Russia and China do share views on some foreign and domestic issues, the power relationship between them is imbued with a certain inequality. As the Japan-based Russian academic Konstantin Sarkisov argues, there are [significant psychological obstacles](#) ^[13] between the two countries and China does not favour Russia as an equal partner in East Asia, which it increasingly considers its own domain.

Still, in signing the gas deal with China, Russia made its foreign policy priorities at the current stage abundantly clear. Despite Japan trying to keep the door open for rapprochement with

Russia, hopes of the bilateral ties warming seem bleak.

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[2] cancelled his trip to Moscow:

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<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-28/u-s-aims-at-putin-s-inner-circle-with-latest-sanctions.html>

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[7] readiness to resume negotiations:

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[8] hope of continuing dialogue:

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[9] diversify its energy imports:

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