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TITLE: Japanese Perceptions and Policies Toward the Soviet Union: Prospects and Changes under Gorbachev

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Post-war Japanese perceptions of the outside world have undergone various changes. But there is at least one thing that has not changed. That is the extreme unpopularity of the Soviet Union among Japanese. One public opinion survey after another indicate that the Soviet Union is the most unpopular country among Japanese. Unpopularity here does not simply mean passive indifference, but it denotes more an actively negative meaning: the Soviet Union provokes among Japanese suspicions, if not outright hatred.

I have examined elsewhere in detail why the Soviet Union deserves such suspicions among Japanese. It suffices here to state that many historical, political, cultural, and military reasons exist for the negative image of the Soviet Union. The unpopularity of the Soviet Union is not uniquely Japanese, however. In fact, it would be difficult to think of any country throughout the world, in which the Soviet Union is endeared in popular consciousness of its citizenry. For instance, U.S. public opinion surveys also indicate the similar pattern of unpopularity of the Soviet Union among the Americans. What is unique is the policy implication of this unpopularity. In the United States, despite its unpopularity the Soviet Union is recognized as one of the most important countries with which the United States must reach some accord. Hence, it become one of the top priorities of any administration to construct a comprehensive strategy toward the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the United States has built an intricate network of official and unofficial communications with the Soviet Union, and the importance of these channels is not questioned. In contrast, in Japan the unpopularity of the Soviet Union has led to the policy to limit the interactions between the two countries to minimum. Strangely, this lack of interest in improving the relations has been shared by the Soviet Union as well. Thus,
Japanese-Soviet relations in the post-war years is characterized above all by the mutual disinterest to improve the relations beyond the minimal contact.

This article attempts to examine why such unusual relations have developed, what changes have been brought about since Gorbachev’s accession to power, and whether there are any prospects of drastic change in the relations in the near future.

1. Reasons for Japan’s Low-Priority of Policy toward the Soviet Union

Japan’s foreign policy goals can be summarized as (1) protection of her economic interests, (2) protection of its national security, and (3) promotion of a stable international environment.6

In its pursuit of economic security, the Soviet Union plays only a minimal role with its total volume of trade with the Soviet Union occupying only 1.5% of the total in 1986.6 The oil shock of 1973 necessitated Japan to diversify its energy sources, raising temporarily the hopes for increased trade activities with the Soviet Union. But the successful structural change that the Japanese economy underwent in subsequent years diminished such hopes, and the oil glut in the world market in the 1980s all but finished off the earlier enthusiasm. As Soviet economy began to falter in the latter half of the 1970s, the Siberian development was put on the back burner, and the Japanese involvement in special projects was substantially reduced. Soviet spokesmen argue that Japan-Soviet trade declined because of the Japanese government’s political decisions. But without politics, it was destined to decline.7 In economic relations Japan-Soviet relations are based on unequal needs: Japan does not need the Soviet Union as much as the Soviet Union needs Japan’s technology and financial assistance.
When it comes to the security issue, Japanese interests are diametrically in opposition to those of the Soviet Union. Japan and Russia have remained to be two principal military opponents in the Far East since the 19th Century, and have fought four wars in this century. This adversarial relation has resulted partially from the conflicting interests in the region, and partially from the geopolitical situation. Cooperation existed only during the brief periods of 1906-16 and 1941-45. As the Soviet Union achieved the status of a global military superpower, the bow-shaped Japanese archipelago became an even more irksome obstacle controlling the three crucial straits in order for the Soviet Pacific Fleet to break through to the Pacific, or to prevent the hostile forces from entering into its bastion. The Soviet military buildup in the 1970s provoked a fear of military threat of the Soviet Union among Japanese. Particularly, the deployment of a division in the northern islands in the late 1970s alarmed many Japanese, prompting Japan to increase more closely its security ties with the United States.

Japan's military power is, of course, miniscule, compared with the collossal destructive power of the Soviet Union. But Japan's security is assured by her alliance with the United States. This security arrangement has made it inevitable for the Soviet Union to treat its relations with Japan in terms of U.S.-Soviet relations. For the Japanese, too, the Japanese-U.S. security arrangement has a profound consequence in Japanese-Soviet relations, contributing to the situation where Japan does not have to deal with the Soviet Union directly in its own security policy, since the direct dealing with the Soviet Union in security matters can be delegated to the United States. Hence, while the Soviet emergence in the global superpower has necessitated the United States and Western Europe to increase its
contact with the Soviet Union, Japan has been shielded from such necessities—an important factor that has led to the lethargy in developing an independently comprehensive Soviet strategy.

In the third goal of Japanese foreign policy—to create a stable international environment—Japan and the Soviet Union have not found much in common. Soviet proposals for Asian collective security and a bilateral treaty of good neighborliness have been considered by the Japanese self-serving, designed to further its own interests at the expense of others. Moreover, the rapid Soviet military buildup in the Far East, when the United States showed signs of withdrawal from Asia, served as an important unstabilizing factor in the region.

The deterioration of Japan-Soviet relations in the 1970s coincided with the Sino-Japanese rapprochement. There is no question that this rapprochement greatly contributed to the stability in the Far East. But whether Japan could have achieved this rapprochement without alienating the Soviet Union, and whether it was wise to tilt so heavily toward China even to the point of subscribing to the anti-hegemony clause, some doubts are expressed.

It is clear, therefore, that in Japan's foreign policy goals, the Soviet Union either contributed little or stood completely in opposition. From Japan's perspective, there was very little to be gained by attempting to improve its relations with the Soviet Union.

It should be pointed out also that Japan's disinterest in improving its relations with the Soviet Union is further supplemented by the peculiar status that Soviet affairs occupy in the Japanese foreign policy decision-making mechanism. While various actors—various bureaucratic organizations, LDP politicians, business communities—exert multiple influence in decision-making process in formulating policies toward other countries, formulation of Japan's
policy toward the Soviet Union is the domain that is virtually monopolized by the Foreign Ministry. Moreover, within the Foreign Ministry, its Soviet Desk, which has the reputation of its hawkish outlook toward the Soviet Union, plays a decisive role. This peculiar condition makes it extremely difficult to expect that initiatives to improve relations with the Soviet Union would come from the government.

2. Reasons for Soviet Low Priority of Policy toward Japan

Among the Soviet Union's relations with major industrialized countries, Japan-Soviet relations occupy an unusual place. Although four Japanese prime ministers paid their visits to Moscow—Hatoyama in 1956, Tanaka in 1973, Suzuki in 1982 (at Brezhnev's funeral), and Nakasone in 1985 (at Chernenko's funeral)—no general secretaries of the CPSU nor chairmen of the Council of Ministers ever set foot in Japan. Even more humiliatingly for the Japanese, for ten years from January 1976 until January 1986, no Soviet foreign ministers bothered to visit Japan. The clear one-sidedness of the scoreboard with regard to the visitations of heads of the states and foreign ministers has more than symbolic significance; it underscores the low priority the Soviet Union has accorded to Japan in its foreign policy.

It is puzzling why Japan has been kept in such an insignificant place in the priority list of Soviet foreign policy, particularly when one considers Japan's emergence as global economic power. This abnormality stands out more clearly, when one compares the Soviets' Japan policy with their policy toward Europe. Western Europe occupies a high place in the priority list of Soviet foreign policy for at least two reasons. First, the Soviets are interested in weakening the Western alliance by decoupling Western Europe from the
United States. Second, the Soviet Union is interested in acquiring technology needed for modernization of its economy. For these reasons, the Soviet leadership has pursued rather a sophisticated, moderately successful policy toward Western Europe. One would assume that for the same reasons Japan should play an analogous position in Soviet global strategy in Asia, but this is not the case. One wonders if this neglect is a part of their carefully thought-out global masterplan that we have yet to decipher, or simply a result of their stupidity.

The low priority accorded to Soviet policy toward Japan is even more puzzling, when one considers that Japan is one of the most popular countries among the Soviets. It is known that Japanese culture has held the fascination of the Soviets for many years. But the high cultural esteem for Japan held among the Soviets has not found equivalent respect for Japan among the Soviet foreign policy decision-makers. This is because the Soviet political elite is not identical with cultured intelligentsia, and because culture is basically irrelevant to Soviet foreign policy.

But another aspect of Japanese post-war achievements—Japan's emergence as one of the most powerful economic powers in the world—has been posing a problem for Soviet foreign policy. In the first place, capitalistic Japan, which was completely destroyed by World War II, has now surpassed the gross national product of the Soviet Union. Japan is now a leader in the most advanced technology, whereas the Soviet Union has lagged far behind in the third industrial revolution. If the Soviet Union has not caught up with the Western capitalistic nations, there is an excuse that it is still catching up with the advanced capitalist nations. But to lag behind Japan simply does not fit well in their sense of zakonomernost'.
Japan's success has embarrassed the Soviet Union's mediocre economic performance. One of the easiest things that ideologues could do in such a case is to ignore Japan's economic achievements.10

But if Japan's economic development posed ideologically an embarrassing problem, it also raised a practical question from the Soviet Union's own strategy for economic development. If the policy of detente pursued by Brezhnev was partly designed to modernize Soviet economy by borrowing Western technology, Japanese technology could not be ignored. In fact, Japan-Soviet trade expanded rapidly in the 1970s. Thus, from an economic point of view, there was a need to reevaluate Japan's position in Soviet foreign policy, as the contradiction between political-ideological downgrading of Japan and its practical-economic significance became glaringly apparent.

Under Brezhnev it was impossible to solve this contradiction by fundamentally reevaluating Japan's position in its global strategy. During the Brezhnev period the most important factor in its concept of the correlation of forces was military power. Primacy of military power was reflected in its Asian policy in the sense that its primary targets were, first, the United States, and second, China. Japan, as a lesser military power, whose meager self-defense force would never threaten the security of the Soviet Union, was not worth taking into consideration in the same league as the United States, China, and the NATO countries. Thus, Japan-Soviet relations was considered nothing but a function of U.S.-Soviet and Sino-Soviet relations. This view was most forcefully championed by Gromyko, who not only saw international politics through the bipolar vision, but also simply disliked Japan.11

The downgrading of Japan's significance may have been reinforced by the generational prejudice of the Soviet leadership. The old men
who wielded power in the Politburo such as Brezhnev and Gromyko
belonged to the generation who grew up watching Japanese militarism
threatening their security in the Far East, their own country
engulfed in the war with Nazis Germany, and their victorious Red Army
defeating the Japanese in Manchuria, the Sakhalin, and the Kuriles.
They must have had a hard time reconciling their image of a
humiliated Japan reduced to a second-class nation with that of an
economic giant that can produce better and more than the victorious
Soviet Union. Certainly, their image of Japan was significantly
different from that of the younger generation who grew up watching
the Japanese economic achievements.

In other words, reevaluation of Japan’s position in the Soviet
Union’s global strategy was impossible without a “new thinking” about
a whole host of problems such as the need to modernize economy, the
approach to international situation, and the way to replenish the
cadres. For that, it had to await Gorbachev’s accession to power.

3. Northern Territorial Issue

One big stumbling block for improvement of Japanese-Soviet
relations remains to be the northern territorial issue.

Although history of the northern territorial issue goes back to
the 17th Century, it suffices here to mention only three treaties
concluded between Japan and Russia before World War II. The first
was the Shimoda Treaty in 1855, which drew the border in the Kuriles
in between Uruppu and Etorofu, thus making it clear that the four
northern islands belonged to Japan. The second was the St.
Petersburg Treaty in 1875, in which Russia and Japan exchanged
Sakhalin and the Kuriles: Japan gave up its claim on Sakhalin in
return for its exclusive territorial right on the Kuriles. The third
was the Portsmouth Peace Treaty in 1905 at the end of the Russo-Japanese War, in which Japan gained claim on South Sakhalin. It should be pointed out that the territory that Japan acquired through "unlawful military aggression," as described in the Yalta Agreement, could be applied only to South Sakhalin.

The Yalta Secret Agreement contained the clause that the Kurile islands are to be "handed over" to the Soviet Union after Japan's surrender. (In contrast, South Sakhalin was to be returned to the Soviet Union.) The Soviet Union claims that when Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration, it also accepted the Yalta Secret Agreement; hence Japan abandoned its claim to the four contested islands. Japan, however, has argued that since Japan was not a party to the Yalta Agreement, and besides, the Secret Agreement remained secret until February 1946, Japan should not be bound by a treaty she never signed and that she did not know existed. In any case, the four islands were occupied by the Soviet Union along with the rest of the Kurile islands. About 17,000 Japanese residents evacuated to Japan's homeland by 1948.

Soon the northern territorial issue was embroiled in the Cold War. The conservative Japanese leadership led by Yoshida Shigeru chose to gain Japan's independence by exploiting the Cold War. The result was the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which Japan concluded with the allies notably without the Soviet Union and China. In Article 2, C of the treaty, Japan abandoned the rights and claims to the Kurile islands and South Sakhalin. But precisely what the Kurile islands included was not made clear in this treaty. At the time the Japanese government interpreted that although Kunashiri and Etorofu were included in the Kurile islands which Japan had abandoned, Habomais and Shikotan were excluded. The change of the Japanese government's
view that this was not the case occurred only when negotiations between Japan and the Soviet Union began in London in June, 1955. With regard to the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the Japanese government's current legal argument is (1) that although Japan abandoned the claim to the Kuriles, the San Francisco Peace Treaty did not specify exactly what it meant by the Kurile Islands, (2) that the four islands are not included in the Kuriles Islands that Japan had abandoned, and (3) that Japan abandoned its claim only to those countries that signed the peace treaty; since the Soviet Union is not a signatory to the Peace Treaty, Japan has not abandoned its claim to the Kuriles, and still possesses its legal right to demand the Soviet Union to return the Kuriles.

On the other hand, the Soviet Union claims that even if the Soviet Union did not sign the peace treaty, the fact remains that Japan has already renounced its claim to all the rights and interests in Sakhalin and the Kuriles. Japan's claim to the Kuriles will change the basic framework of World War II settlements, and the Soviet Union cannot accept such an attempt.

A good chance for the settlement of the territorial issue came in 1955-56, when Japan and the Soviet Union began negotiating for normalization of diplomatic relations. It was also the closest that the Soviet Union came to returning at least two of the islands—Shikotan and Habomais. There was a group within the Japanese leadership that was willing to settle with the return of the two islands. But two factors intervened against this settlement. First, the influential, conservative group within the LDP insisted on the return of the four islands. The territorial issue was deeply embroiled with the internal factional struggle within the LDP, which proved unable to go beyond petty factional fights and form national.
consensus on this issue. Second, the United States intervened by issuing a State Department memorandum, which stated that the United States would consider that all the four islands belonged to Japan, thus reversing the previous stand on this question. John Foster Dulles intimated to Foreign Minister Shigemitsu that if Japan were to give away Kunashiri and Etorofu to the Soviet Union, the United States would never return Okinawa to Japan. Because of the differences on the territorial issue, the conclusion of the peace treaty was postponed until this issue was settled, although both countries agreed to end the state of war and normalize relations.

When the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty was renewed in 1960, the Soviet Union stiffened its position. It declared that until Okinawa and the Ogasawara islands were returned to Japan by the United States and foreign troops were completely withdrawn from Japan, not even Habomais and Shikotan would be returned to Japan. In response to Prime Minister Ikeda's letter which stated that Japan would be interested in concluding a peace treaty in return for the Soviet Union's returning the proper Japanese territory, Khrushchev replied that the territorial issue had been settled by a series of international treaties, and that for the Japanese government to raise the territorial issue would be intentionally to block the normalization of relations.

The second chance for the settlement of the territorial dispute came in the early 1970s. In the background there was a drastic change in international relations. The Sino-Soviet dispute deteriorated to the point of armed confrontation in 1969. The normalization of US-PRC relations was finalized by Nixon's visit to China. The Soviet Union, fearing that it would be encircled by the hostile triple alliance of US, PRC, and Japan, began courting Japan.
In 1969 Brezhnev made a proposal on Asian collective security. For the first time in six years Gromyko came to Japan in 1972, and assured that negotiations for a peace treaty would be resumed within a year.

Tanaka went to Moscow in 1973. As a result of the negotiations, the Japan-Soviet Joint Communiqué was issued, in which both sides recognized the importance of "concluding a peace treaty by settling outstanding questions left unresolved since World War II." The Japanese side wanted to include the expression, "territorial question," in the joint statement, but the Soviet side did not agree on this. The problem was made even more ambiguous by rendering the expression, "the unresolved outstanding question into "unresolved outstanding questions.""

Japan was in a strong position to force the territorial issue at this point. But she let this opportunity slip. Japan's increased international prestige collapsed with the oil shock in 1973. Without carefully balancing between China and the Soviet Union, Tanaka was too quick to tilt toward China. Tanaka's leadership itself crumbled with the Lockheed scandal, and he was succeeded by a weak leader, Miki Takeo. Some argue that Tanaka was too quick to commit Japan's cooperation without extracting any Soviet political concession."

Nevertheless, in order to prevent Japan-China rapprochement, the Soviet Union urged the Japanese government to conclude with the Soviet Union a Japan-Soviet Treaty of Good Neighborliness. But in these proposals there was no concession on the territorial issue. Insisting on the settlement of the territorial issue as a precondition of a peace treaty or a treaty of good neighborliness, Japan ignored such proposals. Snubbing the Soviet overtures, Japan concluded a treaty of peace and friendship with China in 1978, which
included an anti-hegemony clause. Although Japan stated that the anti-hegemony clause was not directed against any specific country, the Soviet Union concluded that the anti-hegemony clause was directed against itself.

Even before the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship, the Soviet Union shifted back its gear of territorial issue to the highest intransigence. At the 25th Party Congress in 1976 Brezhnev stated that Japan's territorial claim to the northern islands was "unlawful and unfounded." From then on, the Soviet stand was a flat rejection of the existence of a territorial question between the two countries. The Soviets even refused to talk about this question in any bilateral negotiations.

Reviewing a brief history of the territorial dispute between Japan and the Soviet Union, one can make a few generalizations. First, the Soviet position on this issue has not been uniform. Depending on the expected results it wanted to gain from Japan, the Soviet Union has shifted its gear. Despite the range of options offered by the Soviets, they have never allowed the possibility of returning the two bigger islands. Thus far, its hinted maximum concessions have been the return of the smaller islands--Shikotan and Habomais. Second, the northern territorial issue has been equated by the Japanese government with entire Japanese policy toward the Soviet Union. Generally speaking, the Japanese attitude toward the northern territorial issue can be divided into two groups: iriguchi-ron (entry theory) and deguchi-ron (exist theory). The iriguchi-ron takes the view that the solution of the territorial issue is the precondition for improvement of bilateral relations, while the deguchi-ron argues that marked improvement of bilateral relations will eventually lead to the solution of the territorial issue satisfactory to Japan's
aspects of the "new thinking" in international relations include
downgrading military power as diplomatic means and emphasizing
economic interdependency that cuts across differences in the economic
systems. Such approach necessitates reevaluation of Soviet policy
toward Japan.\(^\text{16}\)

One of the most important personnel changes directly related to
Soviet policy toward Japan took place in the ambassadorial position.
In May, Petr Abrasimov was replaced by Nikolai Soloviev. Unlike his
predecessors, Soloviev is a career diplomat without membership in the
Central Committee, but having served as head of the Second Far
Eastern Department in the Foreign Ministry for ten years, he has a
wide range of acquaintances in Japan. Fluent in Japanese, and
knowledgeable in Japanese culture and society, he is expected to be
more effective than his "influential" predecessors.\(^\text{17}\) The change in
the ambassadorial post might signal a change in the Soviet approach
to Japan from the previous high-handed manner to a more business-like
manner with emphasis on economic and technological cooperation.

One of the most obvious signals that the Soviet Union could send
to Japan to indicate its serious intention to change its approach
would be to fire Ivan Kovalenko, deputy-chief of the international
department of the Central Committee, who is said to have been the
most important person in Soviet policy toward Japan. Kovalenko's
initial contact with Japan was to interrogate Japanese prisoners-of-
war in Siberia. This experience is reported to have formed his basic
perception of Japan, injecting a firm belief that the Japanese should
be bullied to subjection from the position of strength. Kovalenko
reportedly exerted great influence on Gromyko. Last year, Mainichi
reported that Kovalenko's influence was being undercut, and that a
Soviet source revealed the possibility of imminent replacement of
Kovalenko, but up until now Kovalenko retains its post. 18

Together with the personnel change, the Foreign Ministry's organizational change is significant. In June 1986 the Asian section of the ministry was streamlined in such a way to correspond to reality of the Asia-Pacific region. In this reorganization, the Japanese section was elevated to a higher department, indicating a changed perception by the Soviets of Japan. 19

(2) Shevardnadze's Visit to Tokyo

The first concrete sign of change was Shevardnadze's visit to Japan in January 1986. It was the first time a Soviet foreign minister came to Japan for ten years since 1976. The last time a Japanese foreign minister visited the Soviet Union was in 1978. Regular foreign ministerial conferences have ceased since then. Shevardnadze agreed to resume regular foreign ministerial conference, thus ending the abnormal condition that had existed since 1978.

The most important issue discussed during the foreign ministers' conference was the territorial issue. The Japanese side succeeded in having Shevardnadze accept the expression, "to negotiate the unresolved questions," in a joint statement. Japan took this to mean that the Soviets were willing to go as far as to restore the conditions that existed in the Tanaka-Brezhnev Joint Communiqué in 1973, although Shevardnadze himself repeated the Soviet position that the territorial question had been resolved. Previously, the Soviets had refused even to talk about the territorial question at the negotiating table. Therefore, the fact that the territorial question was raised at all at the negotiations and that the expression indicating the existence of "unresolved questions" was included in the joint statement demonstrated softening of the Soviets' previous
Foreign Minister Abe visited Moscow in May 1986. Substantial progress was made in three areas as a result of this conference and the subsequent follow-up negotiations. The first was the conclusion of the Cultural Agreement. Since 1973, Japan and the Soviet Union had continued cultural exchanges on the fairly irregular basis of the exchange of memoranda between the two foreign ministers without a formal cultural agreement. In May the Soviet Union accepted Japan's demand to establish a Japanese Public Relations Office on the principle of reciprocity—the point that the Soviets had refused to accept until then, and a Cultural Agreement was concluded for the first time between the two countries.

Another result was the reestablishment of the Committee for Cooperation on Science and Technology, which was suspended since Japan joined the sanction against Poland and the Soviet Union. The Soviets were vitally interested in the resumption of this committee. But the Japanese made the resumption conditional on the Soviet acceptance of the non-visa visits by the Japanese to their relatives' graves in Sakhalin and the northern islands—a practice that was suspended by the Soviets since 1976. The Soviet Union accepted this condition, although it limited the Japanese access only to the two islands (Shikotan and Habomais) and demanded reciprocity by asking the Japanese government to accept Soviet citizens' right to visit their relatives' graves without visas. The Japanese had a difficult time locating old graves of the victims of the Russo-Japanese War and other Russian graves scattered around the country. But the mutual non-visa visits occurred, and the Science-Technology Committee was
blessed with reopening.

(4) The 27th Party Congress

In the speech at the 27th Party Congress Gorbachev referred to the imperialist world divided by the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. This was the first time in the general secretaries' speech to the party congresses that Japan was mentioned as an independent power in itself comparable with the United States and Western Europe. More importantly, Gorbachev concluded that, although the interlocking mutual interests among the imperialists would not be destroyed, within these mutual interests the United States can no longer expect either Western Europe or Japan to obey its orders obediently at the sacrifice of their own interests. 

This passage may indicate Gorbachev's intention to elevate Japan to a higher position in its priority at least as equal as Western Europe in its attempts to decouple other imperialist powers from the United States.

(5) Gorbachev's Vladivostok Speech

Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech in July, 1986, signified a major departure from the traditional Soviet foreign policy orientation. First, it was the beginning of an active Soviet Asian-Pacific policy. Although former General Secretaries paid lip service to the importance of Asia and the Pacific, no such comprehensive and substantial attention to this region have been attempted. Second, the Vladivostok speech was the repudiation of the previous policy characterized as the primacy of military power, and affirmation of the redirection of Soviet efforts to political and economic ties with the region.
Although the Vladivostok speech referred to specific measures to improve the relations with China, no concrete measures with regard to Japan were included. First, Gorbachev referred to Japan as the “power of the supreme significance that accomplished in a short span of time incredible achievements in industry, trade, education, science and technology. Second, Japan’s non-nuclear policy is highly evaluated. According to Gorbachev, Japan was the first victim of atomic weapons, and officially adopts three non-nuclear principles on which it conducts foreign policy, although these principles, together with the peaceful constitution, have the clear tendency to be ignored in recent years. Third, Gorbachev mentioned that Japanese-Soviet relations showed signs of developing in better direction, and stated: “The objective situation of the two countries...requires more cooperation on the healthy, realistic basis in the quiet atmosphere, not burdened by the problems of the past. We have set the beginning in this direction this year. The exchange of visits by foreign ministers took place. The next order of business is the exchange of visits at the higher level.” Fourth, with regard to security in Asia, Gorbachev mentioned that, although in the Asia and Pacific region, militarization has not reached such dangerous point as Europe, such a danger exists and grows more real in this region as well. In order to avoid this danger, a comprehensive security conference is necessary. Such conference will contribute to the stabilization of the region. Finally, it is emphasized that the Soviet Far East must attain regional self-sufficiency in industry and agriculture. For this purpose, Gorbachev envisioned the need to open up the Far East more actively for foreign trade. Since only Japan is the most likely candidate for such a trade partner, if not the only one, to provide technological assistance, this suggestion is
important in Japanese-Soviet relations. The possibility of opening hitherto closed Vladivostok to foreigners was also mentioned.

Immediately after the speech in the Japanese public opinion three different interpretations emerged as to how to interpret the Vladivostok speech. The first was the enthusiastic endorsement of the speech as the new opening of a Soviet Asian policy with a totally different orientation. Nakajima Mineo, the leading proponent of this interpretation, argued that Japan should respond to Gorbachev’s call for improvement of relations with flexibility. At the opposite pole, Hogan Shinkichi, Sono Akira, and other hawkish critics of the Soviet Union saw in the Vladivostok speech nothing new; they argued that Gorbachev’s speech represented nothing but a standard Soviet tactic to obtain Japanese economic cooperation without paying anything in return. The third opinion was offered by Kimura Hiroshi, who took the position that although the Vladivostok speech contained the seeds of a new Soviet Asian policy, it is also hampered by the remnants of the traditional Soviet Asian policy.

Some of Kimura’s arguments that sought continuity between the traditional Soviet policy and the Vladivostok speech are not convincing. He also overlooked the importance of what was not mentioned in the speech: the usual denunciation of Japan’s security arrangement with the United States and the warning of revival of Japanese militarism. These omissions may have been a signal indicating Soviets willingness to improve bilateral relations while conceding the Japan-U.S. security arrangements as a given reality. But in the final analysis, I agree with Kimura’s conclusion that the Vladivostok speech cannot be taken a completely new departure from the traditional policy, although my interpretation is somewhat more skewed to the positive side than Kimura’s.
The reason why I hesitate to endorse the Vladivostok speech as a totally new departure, as Nakajima does, is that in this speech Gorbachev did not offer anything new and specific with regard to the territorial question, a position that could not be expected to bring about a positive reaction from the Japanese side. The expression, "cooperation on a healthy, realistic basis in a quiet atmosphere, not burdened by the problems of the past," could mean two things. It could mean that the Soviet Union would be realistic enough to accept Japan's security arrangement and that the Soviet Union was willing to solve the territorial question, irrespective of its past position, as Nakajima argued. But it was bound to be interpreted by many, as Kimura did, that it was an attempt to gain economic cooperation without paying the necessary price of solving the territorial issue. If the Vladivostok speech was an attempt to create a momentum in Japan for improvement of bilateral relations, it fell short of its intended objective precisely because it did not express Soviet willingness, if there was, to talk about the northern territorial issue, if not to accept Japan's demands.

Although the Vladivostok speech did not bring about specific changes, however, its long-term significance should not be rejected, because it can be interpreted as an application of the new thinking in Asian policy. The new thinking emphasizes interdependence and global problems that transcend differences of the social systems, downgrades the military factor as the instrument of foreign policy, and calls for a multi-faceted approach to foreign policy. Also the Vladivostok speech and the subsequent Japanese reaction underscored once again the persistence of the troublesome northern territorial issue as the greatest obstacle for the improvement of Japanese-Soviet relations.
(6) Gorbachev’s Unrealized Visit to Japan

After the foreign ministers’ conference in May, Gorbachev’s visit to Japan seemed finally to materialize. Such a visit would signal a big step toward the improvement of Japan-Soviet relations, since no general secretaries have ever set foot in Japan. When Foreign Minister Abe visited Moscow, he formally invited Gorbachev to come to Japan. Gorbachev himself reaffirmed in his Vladivostok speech that “the exchange of mutual visits at a higher level” than the foreign ministerial level was necessary.26 At his press conference in September 29, Ambassador Soloviev mentioned that the general secretary’s visit to Japan had been decided on in principle, but that the specific date was still indefinite.37 In October a Japanese Foreign Ministry source revealed that both countries were negotiating on the schedule of Gorbachev’s visit to Japan around January 15, 1987.

The momentum that was moving rapidly toward Gorbachev’s visit to Japan was suddenly dumpened, as the chilly wind of October began to blow. On October 24, Gorbachev attacked “the military alliance among the United States, Japan, and South Korea,” at the reception of Kim Il-sun.38 This attack went one step farther than his expression, “military triangle,” in his Vladivostok speech. Furthermore, in November the then deputy-foreign minister, Kapitsa, criticized Japan’s participation in SDI and the joint military exercise by Japan and the United States.39 Their criticism of Japan’s military role, which had been muted at least since Shevardnadze’s visit to Japan, represented a new departure in Soviet policy toward Japan. Finally, on November 14 Shevardnadze in Moscow told Foreign Ministry Councillor Yanai that since Gorbachev’s schedule for the next year
was still in the process of adjustment, it would be impossible to visit Japan in January. This virtually killed the idea of an early visit by Gorbachev to Japan.

The question is: why did the Soviets cancel Gorbachev's visit in November? The arguments that seek the main reason in the failure of the Reykjavik premisum or in the marked decline of Nakasone's political prestige are not plausible. Japanese-Soviet relations do not necessarily correspond to the rise and fall of U.S.-Soviet relations. If anything, the "failure" of Reykjavik dampened the enthusiasm on the Japanese side to court for Gorbachev's visit.

As for the Japanese domestic factor, it may have been a supplementary factor, if not the decisive one. It should be pointed out that the moderate improvement of Japan-Soviet relations in 1986 was also motivated by the Japanese desire for improvement. This desire can be explained partly by Nakasone's personal philosophy that without the solution of the territorial question it would be impossible to end Japan's "post-war era" (sengo no sokessan)--the mission Nakasone assigns to himself, and partly by the need for Nakasone to score a diplomatic victory for his bid for reelection as premier beyond the limit allowed by the LDP party statutes. But Nakasone's prestige showed some signs of erosion by the fall of 1986. The Soviets may well have considered it wise to wait and see what would happen to Nakasone's power.

In addition, there might have been a Soviet domestic factor. The plenum of the Central Committee, which was scheduled to open in December 1986, was postponed until January. In December Kunaev was dismissed from the Politburo, which resulted in a street riot in Alma Ata. As it turned out, the January plenum, which dealt with the cadre question, was a crucial meeting for Gorbachev's perestroika.
It may have been that at this crucial juncture it was impossible for Gorbachev to leave the country.¹¹

These reasons cited above do not seem decisive, however. More important reason seems to be the Soviet assessment that the Japanese side was not forthcoming with concessions appropriate for Gorbachev's visit. The Soviets may have hoped to begin negotiations with Japan on economic cooperation and security questions in Asia, while shelving the territorial issue as an unsolved question. It became clear by October-November that the Japanese government has not changed its adamant Iriguchi-ron as a precondition for entering into negotiations on other matters. Even such advocates of the deguchi-ron as Nakajima and Wada argued for the settlement of the territorial question with the return of the two islands, thus underscoring the importance of some kind of territorial solution at Gorbachev's visit. The Soviet government must have concluded that the premature visit by Gorbachev to Japan without being prepared to meet Japan's high expectations would be counterproductive.¹²

(7) The Toshiba Incident: Back to the Big Chill?

The most serious crisis that is facing Japan in the 1980s was the deterioration of U.S.-Japanese economic frictions. In 1987 this crisis has reached the dangerous point where economic and security issues have the tendency to be merged into one emotional issue. The Toshiba Incident took place at this crucial juncture, and was destined to affect Japanese-Soviet relations.

The Toshiba Incident was not an isolated case. After the Japanese metropolitan police indicted Toshiba Machine Co. on April 30 for a possible COCOM violation, four Japanese were arrested on May 20 in connection with an espionage case, where they were suspected of
selling the Soviet agents classified U.S. air force information taken from Yokota Air Base. In July 20, there was another espionage case involving an executive of Tokyo Instruments for Aeronautics, who confessed that he had sold classified defense information to a Soviet agent. The Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry (MITI), which was lenient in the past in enforcing the COCOM rules, has now bent backwards to toughen the export regulations in face of the mounting pressure from the United States.

Another question involving the United States and the Soviet Union indirectly involved Japan in the spring of 1987 exactly at the time the Toshiba Incident surfaced. At the end of February Gorbachev made a new proposal on INF, accepting the zero option in Europe. Differences between the United States and the Soviet Union suddenly narrowed, and made the accord on INF realistic for the first time. But the Soviet insistence on retaining 100 SS-20 warheads in Asia, which Reagan had accepted at Reykjavik, displeased both Japan and China, prompting Nakasone to comment that the United States should consider deploying INF in Alaska.

The Soviet government has watched these development with apprehension, and protested rather lamely that these spy cases and the Toshiba Incident are consciously concocted by the Japanese government to poison the relationship between Japan and the Soviet Union. On INF as well, when Gorbachev announced that the Soviet Union decided to eliminate the SS-20 warheads from Asia, too, without reciprocal reduction of any nuclear forces of its adversaries, even with his accompanying statement that intentionally excluded Japan from the countries armed with U.S. nuclear weapons, the Japanese government's reaction was a cool detachment. On the following day, to add insult to injury, Japan decided to join U.S. sponsored SDI.
On August 20, Moscow expelled a military attache and a deputy-director of Mitsubishi Trading Company's Moscow office on trumped up charges. This was the first time in post-war history that a Japanese diplomat has been expelled from the Soviet Union. What seemed to be a thaw in 1986 after the long winter between the two countries looks like plunging into the big chill again only one year after the Vladivostok speech. Nevertheless, the Soviet government seems careful not to wreck the framework of normalized relations with Japan, which it had labored to create since Shevardnadze's visit. Nakasone, in turn, expressed his regret for the Soviet action, but reaffirmed his hope that both countries would preserve the normalized bilateral relations.

5. Future Prospects

There is little likelihood that Japanese-Soviet relations will be drastically improved in the near future. There are basically two reasons for this conclusion. First, neither side is willing to change its position on the northern territorial issue. Second, squeezed by pressures from both the Soviet Union and the United States, Japan is not likely to accommodate itself to Soviet pressures.

(1) Future of the Northern Territorial Issue

When Shevardnadze visited Japan in January 1986, he accepted the Japanese right to raise the northern territorial issue at negotiations. But all the official and unofficial statements made by influential spokesmen indicate that the Soviet Union has made no concessions on this issue. The most authoritative decision was taken by the Politburo on June 5, 1986. When it discussed the results of the Abe-Shevardnadze conference in May, the Politburo made it clear...
that although it favored the conclusion of a peace treaty with Japan, it would be against "being burdened with the problems that were resolved as a result of World War II and making it difficult to conclude the peace treaty." Despite some differences in nuances by various spokesmen on this issue, the Soviet government rigidly adheres to the view that there exists no territorial question between Japan and the Soviet Union.

Why is the Soviet Union so intransigent on this question? In my opinion, there are two important reasons. The first is the military significance of the four islands. The Soviet Union has deployed up to a division of its ground force in the three islands, and about 40 MiG-23 are deployed at the airfield on Etorofu. These forces are crucial in controlling the sea, land, and air in and around the Sea of Okhotsk to make its strategic SSBN force invulnerable. Considering the military significance of these islands, it seems difficult to subscribe to the scenario of the Soviets' willingness to return to the four islands. Such a scenario has to assume a significant reduction of military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union as well as the existence of a viable arms control agreement in the Far East--an impossible dream in the near future. The possibility of the Soviets' willingness to return Habomais and Shikotan, or Habomais alone might be feasible, but that itself would have a serious military implication.

The second reason is that the four islands are practically the only viable leverage available to the Soviet Union. The Soviets tried to intimidate Japan with its massive military buildup in the late 1970's, but it provoked the U.S. military buildup, Japan's increase in self-defensive military power, closer Japan-U.S. security cooperation, and drawing China closer to the United States and Japan.
In other words, the primacy of military power in Soviet foreign policy did not work well in the Far East. Since the Soviet Union does not possess any other leverage except the four islands, it will have to use this hostage carefully to extract maximum concessions from Japan.

Although the northern territorial issue is the only leverage available to the Soviet Union, it must be admitted that the Soviet Union has a number of advantages. First, the Soviet Union has kept the islands for more than forty years, and for these years the Soviets have lived, and developed the islands. In Sakhalin oblast, where the four islands belong, it is said that there are 600,000 young people born after the war. No Japanese now live on the islands. Thus, the situation is different from Okinawa, where the Japanese continued to live on the occupied island.

Second, time is on the side of the Soviet Union. The longer it keeps the islands, the more firmly it will keep a grip on them. Transplanted Soviets have become native islanders, and practically no traces of Japan are left on the islands. In Japan, those native islanders who had evacuated will die out.

Third, as long as the Soviets have the possession of the islands, they can call the shot as to what they will return and when. They will be able to choose a variety of options ranging from returning no islands, one, two, three, or four islands, depending on the price they want to attach to their concessions.

From the Japanese perspective, time is against Japan. The longer it waits, the less likely it becomes for Japan to regain the islands, not only because the Soviets will increase their claim on the islands, but also Japanese interests in this issue will decline. The public opinion polls show that although the demand for the return of
the northern islands receives wide support among the Japanese, it is not an emotional national issue comparable to the Palestinian or Northern Ireland questions.38

Moreover, the Japanese public opinion as expressed in the journalistic debates has recently shown a tendency of division. In December 1986, two influential advocates of deguchi-ron—Nakajima Mineo (professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) and Wada Haruki (professor at Tokyo University)—argued that Japan should settle for the return of the two islands for the moment.39 There are small differences in their arguments, but Wada and Nakajima are in agreement on the three major points.

First, when the Soviet policy toward Japan shows signs of change, and when Gorbachev's visit to Japan is likely to happen, it is a good chance for Japan to come up with a realistic proposal on the territorial issue. If Japan misses this opportunity, it might not have any other chance. Second, the demand for the return of the entire four islands is not likely to be accepted by the Soviets. To insist on the return of the four islands is to postpone the solution of the territorial question for a long time and to miss the opportunity to regain the two islands. Third, the most realistic solution would be for Japan to demand the return of the two islands, Shikotan and Habomais, and recognizing the Soviet territorial right on Kunashiri and Etorofu, to strive for joint economic projects and de-militarization on these islands. These arguments have been attacked by Ito Kenichi, Kamiya Fuji and others, who accuse Wada and Nakajima of playing into the hands of the Soviet Union.

The real debate on the northern territorial issue, however, does not seem to be over whether Japan should regain these territories or over how many islands Japan should demand that the Soviets should
return. The real issue hidden behind the debate is actually what fundamental policy Japan should take toward the Soviet Union.

From the economic, political, as well as national security point of view, Japan does not have an urgent necessity to improve drastically its relations with the Soviet Union. All she has to do is to avoid further deterioration of the relations. For this purpose, the territorial issue serves as a good excuse not to improve the relations. Thus for those who believe that Japan should not seek rapprochement with the Soviet Union, it is convenient to adhere to the demand for the return of the four islands so as to make sure that the Soviets would reject this demand. To these people Japan's policy toward the Soviet Union equals to the northern territorial issue, beyond which they have no long-term strategy to deal with the Soviet Union.

(2) Japanese-Soviet Relations in the Context of U.S.-Japanese Relations

Another reason why there is little likelihood of drastic improvement of Japanese-Soviet relations is that the increasing tensions between Japan and the United States have the tendency to spill over in Japanese-Soviet relations. Trade frictions between Japan and the United States are no longer a strictly economic issue, but political-security matters are increasingly involved in the frictions. The Toshiba Incident is a case in point. In this tense situation, where the United States is carefully watching every Japanese move, there is little maneuverability for Japan to take more conciliatory policy toward the Soviet Union. Japan is likely to accommodate itself to U.S. wishes and desires, where her vital interests are not involved, and Japanese-Soviet relations are one
such area where Japan can well afford to subordinate to Japan's more vital interests in maintaining and managing her alliance with the United States.

One may ask whether there is any possibility of Japan's using a "Soviet card" in dealing with the United States. This is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, Japanese economic, political, security ties with the United States are too vital to be tampered with. Any Soviet attempts to take advantage of frictions between Japan and the United States would be resented by Japanese and therefore counterproductive. Second, in order for the "Soviet card" to be credible, it would have to be based on a serious intention on the Japanese part to improve the relationship. At the present moment, such initiatives are unlikely to be taken either by LDP, bureaucracies, or the business community.

(4) Problems in Japan's Long-Term Foreign Policy Goals

It might serve Japan's short-term objectives to stay the current course of keeping the Soviet Union at arms' length by using the northern territorial issue as the front-line defense against further improvement of relationship beyond the present level. This policy might pose serious problems, however, for her long-term objectives.

First, the Soviet Union could choose to accommodate itself with China and the United States first, and postpone rapprochement with Japan until later. In fact, at this moment this scenario is more likely. When Japan finds it necessary to improve relations with the Soviet Union, the territorial question will become an inconvenient obstacle for Japan as well, since all the arguments to make the territorial issue a precondition for the improvement of relations will be turned against its attempts for improvement. It seems that
Sino-Soviet relations are moving rapidly for improvement, despite the three obstacles imposed by China. U.S.-Soviet relations might change for the better, if they manage to solve the INF tangle. In the past, Japan could afford to ignore the improvement of relations with the Soviet Union, because she enjoyed stable relations with the United States and China, and she could count on the basic hostilities between the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the United States and China, on the other. There are already clear signs of visible strains between Japan and the United States as well as between Japan and China. The assumptions of continuing hostilities between the Soviet Union and China and between the Soviet Union and the United States can no longer be sustained, and the possibility of Japan’s diplomatic isolation cannot be discounted.

Second, the arms race in the Far East and the Pacific is being stepped up. The complexity of Asian international politics will make it extremely difficult to reach an arms control agreement in this region. But if Japan continues to insist on a solution on the territorial question as a precondition of any agreement with the Soviet Union, Japan might miss the chance to conclude a valuable arms control agreement, or a crisis management agreement with the Soviet Union. The resulting instability in the region will not serve the best interests of Japan.

Third, there are two trouble spots in Asia: Korea and Indochina. Solution of the conflicts and reduction of tensions in these areas are essential for stability in Asia. It is impossible to exclude the Soviet Union from the settlement.

Fourth, domestically the territorial issue has the potential danger of dividing Japanese public opinion. As long as the Soviet Union adheres to an intransigent position, this division would not be
serious. But once the Soviets decide to make concessions, a division will become inevitable, and one can be assured that the Soviets will take full advantage of this division. The Japanese government's decision to subordinate Japanese-Soviet relations to American interests might backfire, and the security arrangement between Japan and the United States might be questioned on this occasion.

6. Conclusion

International relations surrounding Japan are rapidly changing. Also changing are Soviet perceptions of the outside world. In this situation it behoves Japan to reexamine basic assumptions and goals in its policy toward the Soviet Union, and construct an overall strategy in dealing with this superpower to serve its long-term objectives. The northern territorial issue should be subordinated to this overall strategy, not vice versa.
Notes


2 For detailed discussions on this subject, see ibid.


4 Ibid., pp. 18-21.


10 This is not to say that Japan's economic achievement was completely ignored. Specialists on Japan began in the 1970s to study Japan's economic development, and particularly its management. Accumulation of their research has provided an important precondition for accepting Japan as an important place in Soviet foreign policy.

11 Kimura, "Basic determinants," pp. 77-78.


13 Togawa, p. 75.


* Distributed by the Council in October, 1986.


20 "Nisso aratana shuppatsu," Nihonkeizai Shimbun, 1/19/86.


22 Nakajima, Gorubachofu soren no yomikata, pp. 132-170.


26 Izvestiia, 7/29/86.

27 Hokkaido Shimbun, 9/30/86.

28 Hokkaido Shimbun, 10/25/86.

29 Hokkaido Shimbun, 11/15/86.

30 Mainichi, 11/15/86; Hokkaido Shimbun, 11/15/86.

31 See Marc Zlotnik’s analysis on the power struggle within the CPSU as reported in Japan Times, May 1, 1987.

32 Kimura Hiroshi, "Go shokicho ichigatsu honichi naze kieta: sono neraiwo reiseini kangaenaose," Sankei, 12/24/86.


34 Yomiuri, 6/6/86.

35 For detailed discussions on this, see Hasegawa, "Japan-Soviet Relations under Gorbachev."


37 Nakajima, Gorubachofu soren no yomikata, p. 219.
