

Medvedev Considers Kurils Visit in November

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President Dmitry Medvedev may combine a visit to the disputed South Kuril Islands with a trip to Japan, a source in his administration said Friday, a gesture certain to anger Tokyo.

Medvedev said earlier in the week that he would soon visit the islands, which Japan calls the Northern Territories, and Tokyo warned that would badly damage relations.

Medvedev is expected to attend a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group in Japan in mid-November, and a visit to the islands could bring a major rift.

"We would consider it right and appropriate to link a trip to the Kurils to the next visit to Japan," the source in Medvedev's administration said.

The dispute over the islands, which Soviet forces occupied toward the end of World War II, has prevented Moscow and Tokyo from concluding a formal peace treaty and caused persistent tension despite diplomatic and economic ties.

The dispute is flaring up just as Tokyo is locked in a territorial dispute with China over a separate group of islets.

Medvedev said Wednesday that bad weather had thwarted his plans to visit the islands after three days in China last week but vowed to make the trip soon, pointedly calling the Kurils "an important region of our country."

Japan's foreign minister warned that such a visit would "severely harm" relations. Firing back, Russia's Foreign Ministry called Tokyo's claim to the islands a "dead end."

Neither Medvedev nor his predecessor, Vladimir Putin, has visited the cluster of small islands, just northeast of Japan's Hokkaido, as president.

The dispute is a perennial subject of talks when Japanese and Russian leaders meet, but there have been no signs of a potential breakthrough for years.

Politicians in both countries have used tough talk on the dispute to bolster their credentials as patriots.

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