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Japan-Russia Ties Are an Opportunity for U.S.

By Jeffrey Mankoff

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The Winter Olympics in Sochi come as Russia's relations with the U.S. and European Union stand at an impasse. Amid rising tensions over Russia's crackdown on dissent and treatment of homosexuals, not to mention intervention in Ukraine, President Barack Obama and most European leaders decided to skip the Olympics. Only one major democratic country's leader came to Sochi for the Games: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who attended the opening ceremony on Feb. 7 and met President Vladimir Putin the following day.

Abe's trip to Sochi, his fifth meeting with Putin just since the beginning of 2013, is one indicator of what has been a rapid improvement in Russian-Japanese relations in recent years. Owing in part to shared concerns about China, this rapprochement between Moscow and Tokyo is good news for the U.S., which should encourage it as part of a larger strategy for managing China's rise.

Relations between Russia and Japan have long been strained, in particular because of a dispute

over four uninhabited islands — which Russia calls the Southern Kurils and Japan the Northern Territories — that Soviet forces seized from Japan in the last days of World War II. These islands, between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific, have prevented Moscow and Tokyo from signing a treaty ending World War II hostilities and have been the source of significant nationalist agitation in both countries. As recently as 2010, then-President Dmitry Medvedev became the first Russian leader to visit the islands, which he also threatened to militarize, setting off a storm of protest in Tokyo.

Today though, Moscow and Tokyo are making a concerted effort to make progress on the territorial dispute. During Abe's previous visit to Russia in April 2013, the two sides agreed to accelerate efforts to reach a settlement, and sub-Cabinet-level talks are ongoing. At the same time, economic and security cooperation are developing rapidly even without a final agreement.

The main reason is growing concern in both Moscow and Tokyo about the consequences of growing Chinese power.

Japan is most concerned at the growth of Chinese military power, which many in Tokyo fear will be used to establish Chinese hegemony in East Asia and undermine the U.S.-led regional order that has provided for Japanese security since 1945. The challenge is especially acute because of China's aggressive handling of a territorial row with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. Beijing's declaration in late 2013 of an air defense identification zone over the islands, which remain under Japanese administration, raised tensions to a new height. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Abe noted that relations between Japan and China reminded him of ties between Britain and Germany a century ago, on the eve of World War I. In response, Abe is seeking to revise Japan's pacifist constitution.

China is Russia's largest trade partner and a key ally at the United Nations Security Council. Yet Moscow is also worried about China's growing strength. In addition to a growing military imbalance, Russia fears that the growth of Chinese trade and investment will undermine Moscow's influence over distant Siberia and the Far East, leading to what Carnegie Moscow Center director Dmitry Trenin terms the region's "Finlandization." China already buys the majority of the region's oil through a pipeline financed by its banks, and is negotiating a similar deal for gas. Beijing and its companies are also snapping up timber, agricultural land, and other natural resources.

Both Japan and Russia favor improving bilateral relations in large part to address their respective concerns about China. Moscow is courting Japanese investment, especially in new oil and gas production in the Far East to balance its dependence on China. Japan is already the world's largest importer of liquefied natural gas, or LNG, and given its proximity to the Russian Far East, Russian LNG would be among the most cost-effective ways for a post-Fukushima Japan to meet its energy needs.

Security ties between Moscow and Tokyo are also developing rapidly, especially at sea. In September, the two countries' foreign and defense ministers signed agreements on counter-piracy and counter-terrorism cooperation, as well as more regular consultation between the respective maritime staffs. In 2012, Russian forces participated in the U.S.-led

Rim of the Pacific naval maneuvers, along with their Japanese counterparts. Japan is also working with Russia to ensure access to transit routes through the Arctic, and was admitted to the Arctic Council last year as an observer with Russian support.

This maritime cooperation is especially significant given the welter of territorial disputes in the seas around East Asia and the perception that China is pressing its claims more assertively.

Today is not the first time Japan and Russia have sought to deepen relations and overcome the territorial dispute that has dogged their relationship since the end of World War II. What has changed is the emergence of the Chinese challenge to both Russian and Japanese security. Unlike their predecessors, both Abe and Putin arguably also have the political capital needed to negotiate a deal on the disputed islands.

For the U.S., increased Russian-Japanese cooperation is a welcome development that should be encouraged. Greater Russian engagement in Asia and cooperation with Japan contributes to a more resilient regional security order. It also undermines prospects for a Chinese-Russian axis that many U.S. strategists once feared, while bolstering Japan's security in an increasingly dangerous East Asia. Finally, Asia offers a new platform for U.S.-Russian relations, one that is relatively free of the Cold War legacies that haunt ties in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Washington can facilitate deeper Russian-Japanese ties around the edges. First, while reinforcing its commitment to Japan's security, the U.S. can encourage Tokyo to show flexibility in seeking a negotiated solution to its territorial dispute with Moscow. Second, the U.S. can act as a convener, promoting more trilateral interactions among the U.S., Russia, and Japan, including the next round of naval exercises and other forms of multilateral maritime cooperation, and in regional fora like as the East Asia Summit. It can also promote ad hoc cooperation on issues like disaster response and humanitarian assistance.

As the U.S. carries out its pivot to Asia, it will need to both strengthen existing alliances and seek out new partners. Getting behind the emerging Russian-Japanese rapprochement will help it build a stronger, more secure Asia.

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