

Putin's Russia and its Foreign Policy



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the International Economic Forum (SPIEF), June 2019, Sankt Petersburg. (Photo Reuters/AFLO)

Thirty years have passed since the end of the Cold War. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global status of the Russian Federation has remained one of the major issues in the post-Cold War world order. On the whole, however, we must say that the West has not succeeded in establishing amicable relations with Russia. Leaving aside the question of whether we can describe the 2014 Ukrainian crisis as part of a new Cold War, it goes without saying that Russia is one of the factors that has destabilized the current liberal international order. While strengthening its assertiveness under the Putin administration, Russia has a weak

economic base and a peculiar presence in the international community, due in part to its “quasi-alliance” relationship with the emerging superpower China.

Putin has remained in power for 20 years since first inaugurated in 2000 (from 2008 to 2012 he ran a “tandem” government with President Medvedev), and it is true that he implemented political and economic liberalization and overcame the chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and managed the economy through stable, vertical control and the development of energy resources.

During the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Putin annexed Crimea and Russia was subjected to international sanctions, including expulsion from the G8. At the same time, in a world becoming increasingly multipolar in security and other areas, Russia continues to hold an important position as part of Eurasia, together with such emerging superpowers as China and India. From Japan's point of view, Russia is not only a neighboring country with which Japan has a territorial issue, but is also one directly linked to Japan's security, as seen in its efforts to gain a new foothold in a region stretching from the Arctic Ocean to the Indo-Pacific Ocean through its "Pivot to the East" policy.

How has Putin's Russia evolved politically and economically? What is Putin's foreign policy? What impact will it have on the international order, the East Asian region and Japan?

The Putin administration today is supported by an elite group centered on the executive branch comprising the "Siloviki", made up mainly of officials from the military ministries, and a "liberal" faction. The former is also dominant in the energy sector. In recent years, the Putin administration has been actively promoting the

replacement of local government heads and the appointment of young people to central government posts, and the power balance between the Siloviki and the liberals is changing. It is believed that Putin himself is trying to test potential successors by watching the performance of young people in these positions. With Putin's approval ratings declining and mass protests against the government appearing at the local level, the Putin administration is nervous about local governance. The rise of young people entrusted with local governance and being "put to the test" will be the key to the future of Putin's regime.

It is widely known that the Russian economy is linked to oil prices. The challenge for the Putin administration is how to minimize the impact of oil price fluctuations on the economy and build a robust industrial structure. Accordingly, the current administration's economic policy is based on a contractionary fiscal policy and is supported by advisers who aspire to "liberal" economic policies. At the same time, there is a tendency to emphasize the role of the state and to promote state intervention in specific strategic industries. Adding to these basic policies are others formulated in response to changes in the international environment

following the annexation of Crimea. In other words, sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union after the annexation of Crimea have compelled Russia to implement a “forced import substitution” policy and to approach “Eastern countries” such as China and Turkey to obtain funding and export destinations for its natural resources. In the energy sector, which accounts for an important part of the Russian economy, the “Pivot to the East” is accelerating. However, these measures have not been sufficient to revive the Russian economy, which has been in a low-growth mode recently. Dissatisfaction among the Russian people is rising steadily, as shown by the sluggishness in real income growth and increasing consumer debt. The Putin administration’s implicit social contract that barter sausages for political freedom is beginning to collapse. We should pay attention to how these cracks will affect domestic politics.



Russian dissenters at a demonstration, Sep. 2019, Moscow.
(Photo AFP/AFLO)

The geopolitical characteristics of Eurasia, where Russia is located, vary greatly depending on its relations with Europe and the United States, with the former Soviet republics and the countries of the Middle East, and with Japan, China, and other Asian countries. These factors define Putin’s basic foreign and security policies.

Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe have not fully recovered from the confrontation that followed the Ukrainian crisis. From the Russian point of view, the perception of Russia within the US establishment, regardless of party, is a very unfavorable one, and it is unlikely that the United States will soften its policy toward Russia in the future. Even in areas such as arms control where the United States and Russia were thought to be able to cooperate, disagreements between the two countries are conspicuous, as seen in the invalidation of the INF Treaty. It would be desirable for Russia to construct a new arms control framework that would include emerging China, India and Iran, but such a proposal would not be easily accepted by either the United States or emerging regional powers and, therefore, it would be difficult to find a good starting point for a dialogue with the United States. In its

relations with Europe, Russia has been trying to influence those who oppose the EU establishment to lessen the adverse impact on Russia by disrupting coordination among EU countries, while some European countries, such as Italy and France, have been trying to mend their relations with Russia. Russia seems intent on “reintegration into the international community” through these efforts.

It is extremely important for Russia to build stable relations with the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and with countries in the Middle East. This is because some regions in Central Asia have been shaken by international terrorism and drug pollution. Political and economic stability in Central Asian countries is desirable in preventing these problems from spreading to Russia. Good relations with Middle Eastern countries are also necessary in stabilizing the prices of energy resources, which are Russia’s main exports. Russia is seeking regional stability by reintegrating the former Soviet bloc both politically and economically through such frameworks as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The reintegration of the former Soviet bloc is also extremely

important from the viewpoint of restraining China, which has been expanding its influence in Central Asia through its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI).

One of Putin’s most important policies is the “Pivot to the East” policy, which aims to strengthen relations with Asian countries that are gaining in economic and political weight. In recent years, Russia has concluded FTAs with Vietnam and Singapore, thereby steadily building a foothold in Asia. The “Pivot to the East” policy itself had been in place before relations with Europe and the United States deteriorated, but the Ukrainian crisis gave support to Russia’s eastward orientation. In particular, its approach to China has become more important for restraining the United States. In September 2019, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Russia and established a “comprehensive strategic cooperation partnership” that showed both at home and abroad that Sino-Russian relations constitute a “quasi-alliance”. On the other hand, there is the view that there are certain limits to the strengthening of China-Russia relations. While China and Russia are stage-managing a honeymoon through initiatives such as “Pivot to the East” and BRI, Russia is

still wary of China's "Ice Silk Road" initiative. It has also been pointed out that Russia's intention to possess intermediate-range nuclear weapons even in violation of the INF Treaty was to eliminate the asymmetry between China and Russia. Regardless of the reality surrounding the Russo-Chinese "quasi-alliance", as Russia's approaches to China gain momentum, Japan's position vis-à-vis Russia is changing. In the past, some Russian experts viewed Japan as a counterbalance to China, but now they think that, with no sign of improvement in US-Russia relations, the increasingly confrontational atmosphere between the United States and China has put Japan-Russia relations on the back-burner.

In addition to these basic policies, a priority on national interests and opportunism are also factors shaping Putin's foreign and security policies. The annexation of Crimea, triggered by the Ukrainian crisis, and intervention in the Middle East (Syria), in which the US presence has declined, can be described as opportunistic responses that give priority to their own interests and respond to the situation at hand. Today, Russia is neither able nor willing to establish the kind of international

order that existed during the Cold War. However, Russia's influence as a global actor remains significant, and its "opportunistic" behavior, coupled with the decline in US influence under the Trump administration, has a non-negligible impact on the international order.

For Russia, Japan is positioned not only as a negotiation partner for the long-standing territorial issue, but also as an important piece in its "Pivot to the East" diplomacy, which aims to deepen relations with neighboring countries by leveraging the development of the Russian Far East, Eastern Siberia, and the Arctic region. In the increasingly important Indo-Pacific region, what weight should Japan give to its relations with Russia, a Eurasian power with abundant natural resources? As the strategic value of the Arctic region increases in line with climate change, how does Japan position Russia in its foreign policy? Despite good personal relations between the leaders of Japan and Russia, there is no sign of a solution to the territorial dispute. On the other hand, cooperation with Russia is indispensable for the stability of the Northeast Asian region, and it is important to come up with effective

cooperation measures with Russia for global issues such as international terrorism, drug pollution, and climate change. Based on this recognition, and in light of the fact that today's good Japan-Russia relations have become a valuable asset for Japanese diplomacy, it will be necessary once again to reconsider from a strategic perspective what Russia is to Japan and what role Russia can play. ■