

## Russia Seeking an Exit Strategy

If 2020 was the year Russia was forced to deal with an unknown coronavirus, 2021 was the year it sought an exit strategy from the pandemic. Since the beginning of the year, when the coronavirus situation had improved slightly, Russia has made clear its stance of prioritizing the economy and has gradually loosened measures put in place to prevent infections. On the diplomatic



President Joe Biden meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Geneva, Switzerland, June 2021. (Photo by AP/Aflo)

front, Russia has sought to recover from the stagnation it was forced to endure in the previous year by holding the first face-to-face summit between the United States and Russia in June and resuming large-scale international meetings. However, because Russia prioritized economic reopening over infection prevention measures, the virus began spreading again in Russia in the autumn. Diplomatic relations with the United States and other Western countries have not improved significantly, and it is expected that confrontational relations will continue into the near future. As the US-China confrontation intensifies, Russia is increasingly leaning toward China to counter the US.

### Resurgence of COVID-19

The second wave of infections that got underway in late September of the previous year began gradually subsiding in very early 2021. Unlike the first wave in spring 2020, the Russian government took few measures against the coronavirus, with the exceptions of aggressive infection testing and a campaign to inoculate the country with domestic vaccines such as Sputnik V, and proceeded to relax behavioral regulations as if the country had overcome the coronavirus. The Russian government, weighing the economic losses it would incur against stricter measures to prevent infections such as lockdowns, decided to focus on avoiding economic losses.

The citizens of Russia have accepted this pro-economy stance and they have been trying to live fairly normal lives while not self-isolating or actively trying to get vaccinated out of mistrust of domestic vaccines. The attitude of the Russian government and citizens to prioritize the economy is reflected in economic indicators. The Central Bank of the Russian Federation acknowledged that the economy had recovered to pre-pandemic levels in the second quarter of 2021, mainly due to a rapid recovery in

household consumption and other domestic demand, but then continued to raise its key interest rate in stages from March due to concerns about demand-pull inflation.

In the diplomatic arena, Russia was quick to return to the pre-COVID-19 era. Major international events resumed in 2021, and in June the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum was held for the first time in two years in a hybrid face-to-face and online format. The Moscow International Aviation and Space Salon (MAKS 2021) took place in July and the International Military-Technical Forum (ARMY 2021) in August. At the Eastern Economic Forum convened in early September, the announcement of a new special zone plan for the Kuril Islands inclusive of the Northern Territories drew considerable attention.

Russia, which has given priority to the economy and diplomacy and half abandoned measures against the coronavirus, suffered two outbreaks in 2021. In the fourth wave that began in September, the numbers of infections and deaths have increased at a faster pace than ever before, with more than 1000 deaths per day since October 16. Public mistrust of both domestic vaccines and the government and a lack of fear of the disease are also believed to be factors contributing to the spread of the disease. In the wake of the rapid spread of the disease caused by the fourth wave, the government, which had not taken any serious measures, finally decided to change its policy. President Putin decided to designate October 30 to November 7 as “non-working days” throughout Russia, while the city of Moscow independently decided to make October 28 to November 7 “non-working days” and imposed a limited lockdown. Although the number of new infections temporarily decreased, the outbreak did not stop until the end of December.

### **US-Russia Relations Showing No Signs of Improving**

Over the past several years, US-Russia relations have deteriorated steadily, as seen in the imposition of sanctions against Russia by Western countries triggered by the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war since 2015, its alleged intervention in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, and the expiration of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019. Extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which was set to expire on February 5, 2021, became an urgent issue.

US president Joe Biden, who took office on January 20, 2021, proposed an extension of the New START treaty, about which former president Donald Trump had been passive, and the leaders of the United States and Russia agreed to an unconditional five-year extension of the treaty in a telephone conversation on the 26th of the same month. On February 3, the two countries exchanged memorandums of understanding to complete the process of extending the treaty. Although this prevented the complete elimination of the arms control framework between the United States and Russia, relations between the two countries did

not improve and in fact further deteriorated.

On March 17, the Russian ambassador to the United States was recalled over President Biden's remarks about President Putin. On April 15, President Biden decided to impose new financial sanctions and expel ten Russian diplomats from the United States over Moscow's involvement in election meddling and cyberattacks on American companies. In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on the following day that it would take similar retaliatory measures and it also recommended the temporary recall of the US ambassador to Russia. Furthermore, President Putin decided to compile a list of countries unfriendly to Russia on April 23, and the Russian government included the United States and the Czech Republic in the list on May 14. As a result, the number of staff at the embassies of the United States and the Czech Republic in Russia was restricted.

Relations between the United States and Russia were thus at their worst since the end of the Cold War when, on June 16, the leaders of the two countries met face-to-face for the first time in Geneva and agreed to return their repatriated ambassadors to their posts and to begin working-level talks for all forms of cooperation in the diplomatic domain. According to the "Joint Statement on Strategic Stability" adopted at the meeting, the two presidents "reaffirmed the principle that 'nuclear war has no victors and must never be fought'", and noted that the two countries would soon begin an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue through which they would "seek to build a foundation for future arms control and risk reduction measures". This agreement came about because the Biden administration, unlike its predecessor that had insisted on involving China as well as the United States and Russia in arms control measures, has indicated that it will go ahead with the reduction of nuclear weapons by the United States and Russia.

Prompted by the success of the Geneva summit, the United States and Russia have continued their dialogue. Information security and cybercrime were discussed during the Putin-Biden telephone conversation on July 9, and the Strategic Stability Dialogue agreed at the June Summit was held in Geneva on July 28. Although details of the discussions have not been made public, the Strategic Stability Dialogue has been held twice in 2021. At the second meeting in September, agreement was reached on setting up two expert working groups on "Principles and Goals of Future Arms Control" and "Capabilities and Actions with Strategic Implications".

Nevertheless, the Geneva talks have not led to any drastic improvement in US-Russia relations. Although the ambassadors of the United States and Russia have returned to their respective posts following the Geneva talks, the numbers of embassy staff members in both countries have not been normalized and working-level talks on this issue continue. There have also been no signs of improvement in relations with

NATO. Immediately after the Geneva talks, an incident occurred on June 23 in which Russian troops chased a British warship off the coast of Crimea. On July 7, a Russian plane scrambled to intercept an American warplane flying over the Black Sea, and on November 25 the Russian fleet began surveillance on a US warship sailing in the Black Sea, heightening tensions with NATO. On October 18, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced the suspension of Russia's mission to NATO in Brussels and the closure of NATO's information office in Moscow. The move was in response to NATO's expulsion of Russian mission officials as "undeclared intelligence officers" earlier that month.

Tensions between Russia and NATO are also rising over Ukraine. In late October, it was discovered that 100,000 Russian troops were massing near the border with Ukraine, sparking fears among NATO countries that Russia would soon invade Ukraine. At the US-Russia summit held on December 7 amid continuing tensions, President Putin called for a legally binding guarantee of Russia's security, as well as a halt to any further NATO expansion into the former Soviet bloc and the cessation of NATO military activities in Eastern Europe. Biden, for his part, warned of strong additional sanctions if Russia invaded Ukraine, saying that Russia's demands were unacceptable but that he would continue talks to ease tensions.

### **Rapid Rapprochement between China and Russia**

As relations with the United States have grown ever more tense, Russia has moved closer to China, and the areas of cooperation between China and Russia has become increasingly extensive. In 2021, a series of events marked the deepening of Sino-Russian cooperation.

On May 19, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping attended an online groundbreaking ceremony for a new nuclear power plant to be built in China with Russian technology. About a month later, on June 28, a China-Russia summit was held online. In a joint statement adopted at the meeting, China and Russia singled out the United States for criticism, denouncing its withdrawal from the INF Treaty and its pursuit of a global missile interceptor program as undermining global strategic stability. China and Russia announced that they would continue to cooperate on various fronts, including politics, security, economics and energy. They also agreed to automatically extend for five years the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation concluded 20 years earlier.

In response to the rapidly developing situation in Afghanistan, China and Russia, which share a common interest in the stability of the Central Asian region, have been exchanging views. At the above-mentioned China-Russia summit meeting held on June 28, it was emphasized that China and Russia would closely monitor the situation in Afghanistan and cooperate on regional peace and stability. On July 14, the foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) met and adopted a joint statement

calling for an early ceasefire and a peace process in Afghanistan. At the 21st meeting of the SCO, held on September 16 and 17 after the Taliban had seized power and US forces had withdrawn, President Putin called for the cooperation of member countries to ensure the security and sustainable growth of the Eurasian region and to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and stability.

What stands out more than such political and diplomatic cooperation is military cooperation. On August 9, with the situation in Afghanistan in mind, the China-Russia joint military exercise “Western United-2021” was held in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in inland China, with the exercise scenario based on a response to “terrorist forces” invading the region. In addition, the navies of China and Russia conducted joint exercises in the Sea of Japan off the coast of Vladivostok from October 14 to 17 and engaged in their first joint maritime patrol from October 17 to 23 after the exercises. The joint exercises between the Chinese and Russian navies are believed to be designed to check US naval activities in the western Pacific, including the passage of US naval vessels through the Taiwan Strait, as well as the US-UK-Australia “AUKUS” security framework announced on September 15. China reacted strongly to the announcement of AUKUS, and President Putin showed his willingness to go along with China, expressing concern on October 13 that “it would clearly undermine regional stability”. During the joint patrol, Chinese and Russian naval vessels left the waters off Vladivostok, passed through the Tsugaru Strait, headed south in the Pacific Ocean, and then transited the Osumi Strait into the East China Sea. This is the first time that Chinese and Russian naval vessels passed through these straits at the same time, drawing attention in Japan. On November 19, one month after the joint maritime patrol, the air forces of China and Russia conducted joint patrols over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Thus, the two countries are demonstrating closer military cooperation in the sea and in the air around Japan.

### **Russia’s “World View” and Diplomatic Strategy**

While President Biden has made clear his stance against authoritarian countries such as Russia and China, Russia has also strongly opposed the Biden administration’s policy of “democratic solidarity” as seen in the hosting of the December 9-10 “Democracy Summit”. The US-Russia divergence over worldviews and values is thus widening further.

On June 28, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov published a paper entitled “On Law, Rights and Rules” in which he severely criticized Western countries. According to the Lavrov paper, the West is trying to impose “liberal” values on Russia (and China) in what it calls a “rules-based order”, a hierarchy with itself at the top, and to sanction them for not obeying its wishes. The Western countries should respect that Russia has its own values and should treat Russia as an equal partner, and the West’s view that Russia should change its attitude first in order to improve relations is unacceptable, as Russia will not make any



unilateral concessions. In today's multipolar world, countries must not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and must respect the sovereignty and self-determination of other states, and international issues must be resolved through multilateral consultations centered on the United Nations. These are the basic principles of Russian diplomacy, according to the paper.

The Lavrov paper can be read as follows. Instead of a unipolar world centered on the United States, Russia aims to create a multipolar world in which regional powers cooperate to maintain stability. This requires the United States to be on a par with major powers such as Russia, China and India. Russia does not seek to improve its relations with the United States across the board at the moment but does at least want to maintain a relationship of mutual recognition without mutual interference.

For Russia to compete with the United States, cooperation with China will become increasingly important. However, even though Russia is cooperating with China, it is trying to avoid becoming totally dependent on China. At present, Russia has no intention of elevating the aforementioned Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between China and Russia into a military alliance between the two, as this could embroil Russia in a confrontation between



Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visits Etorofu Island, a part of the Northern Territories, July 2021. (Photo by REUTERS / Aflo)

the United States and China over, for example, Taiwan. Russia's "strategy" for the time being is to cooperate politically and militarily with China in countering the United States, but not to go too far into the US-China conflict itself.

### Perspectives and recommendations

In 2013, the Japanese government adopted a national security strategy that called for expanding Japan's overall relationship with Russia. With China's rapid rise foremost in mind, this approach reflected a strategic view of strengthening relations with Russia, which sought to maintain certain distance from China, while keeping the Japan-US alliance at its core, so as to improve the security environment. However, moves by Russia to provoke Japan, such as joint patrols by the Russian and Chinese navies and air forces around Japan in October and November 2021 and the announcement of a new special zone plan for the Kuril Islands inclusive of the Northern Territories at the Eastern Economic Forum in

early September, are likely to push Japan to reconsider its view of Russia, on which its national security strategy was based.

Against this background, Prime Minister Kishida expressed his intention to review the National Security Strategy in his policy speech on October 8, 2021. Japan's policy toward Russia will require not only addressing the Northern Territories issue but also adopting a new approach that balances security and economy. Some observers may assert that it is no longer possible to separate China and Russia from a security perspective and that, while there is no need to regard Russia as an enemy, Japan must be careful and vigilant in monitoring its movements. Others may argue that, in order to fulfill its international pledge on pursuing decarbonization, Japan should place greater emphasis from an economic point of view on cooperation with Russia, which can provide energy resources such as natural gas and hydrogen. A new security strategy that balances these voices is needed.

Since the second Abe administration, various channels have been established between Japan and Russia, both in the public and private sectors. Creating forums such as the Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations (2+2) where both sides can directly confirm their intentions has been a particularly critical achievement. As the possibility cannot be excluded that the US-China and US-Russia confrontations might heighten tensions in areas surrounding Japan, it is essential to maintain and utilize such channels and keep close communication between Japan and Russia to avoid inadvertent clashes. To improve its security environment, Japan should actively cooperate with Russia through dialogue in areas where it is able to pursue mutually beneficial interests. ■