



ANALYSIS

## CHINA-RUSSIA “ALLIANCE” LESSONS FROM JAPAN’S FAILED “DETACHMENT” STRATEGY

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Cover page photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping, with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seen in the background, during a session of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia September 12, 2018. Donat Sorokin/TASS Host Photo Agency/Pool via REUTERS/Scanpix

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## INTRODUCTION

The prospect of a Sino-Russian alliance, currently put under the microscope by European policy makers and analysts, has been a matter of concern for years in Japan, a leading Asian democracy and a US ally, for which both China and Russia have been close but uneasy neighbours.

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To understand what a potent Sino-Russo alliance means for Japan, two important points of context come into play and therefore must be assimilated by European observers. First, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 made European countries, especially those with vivid historical memories of Soviet occupation, more vigilant about threats from their eastern neighbour, Tokyo's security concern continued to revolve around China with its growing military capabilities and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> Second, in 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who later set a record for being the longest serving Japanese prime minister, declared Russia relations as a new priority for Japan's diplomacy with a view to solving the problem of the "Northern Territories", which has been a major legacy issue in the bilateral relations and a prerequisite, at least in Tokyo's thinking, for the conclusion of a peace treaty with Moscow after the World War II. During Abe's visit to Russia in 2013, both leaders expressed their

<sup>1</sup> China's rise has been perceived by Tokyo as its ambition to challenge the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region. Since 2008, China has sent its official vessels to the area around the Senkaku Islands, part of Japan's Okinawa Prefecture, making occasional incursions into Japan's territorial waters. In 2013, China heightened tensions by locking a fire-control radar on a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel as well as unilaterally declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea. China also built a new military base near the Senkaku Islands. In the South China Sea, China accelerated the reclamation work and construction of military bases in the Spratly Islands contested between China, the Philippines, Vietnam and others.

determination to conclude a peace treaty, recognising that the lack of such a treaty 67 years after the end of the war is "an unnatural state of affairs".<sup>2</sup>

In these circumstances, Tokyo's dilemma – which it sought to finesse – was artfully reflected in its official rhetoric that condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea as "an attempt to change the status quo by force". It thereby employed the same phrase used to respond to China's assertive actions in the East and South China Seas. Thus, Tokyo avoided the appearance of concentrating on Russia's wrongdoings while implicitly linking the Ukraine crisis to Japan's main concern – China.

In fact, multiple Japanese observers warned that the Crimea case might set a precedent for Beijing to pursue similar scenarios in the East and South China Seas, and that China might be emboldened by Washington's response that ruled out use of force by the US in the issue over Crimea. Japan was also quick to seek security reassurances from Washington, leading to President Obama's statement during his Asia tour in April 2014 that the US-Japan security treaty does apply to the Senkaku Islands, Japan's sovereignty over which is challenged by China.

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The deterioration of relations with the West led Moscow to strengthen its strategic partnership with China. In April 2014, Putin hailed the level of trust and cooperation between the two countries as "unprecedented", although rejecting the possibility of "a military and political alliance".<sup>3</sup> Russia's official discourse

<sup>2</sup> In November 2013, when the protest rallies started in the centre of Kyiv, Tokyo launched a security dialogue with Moscow in "two-plus-two", a format of bilateral consultations of foreign and defence ministers which, prior to this, Japan maintained only with the United States and Australia. Further, in February 2014, despite the boycott of other G7 leaders after the passing of Russia's controversial anti-gay legislation, Prime Minister Abe attended the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympic Games.

<sup>3</sup> President of Russia, "[Direct Line with Vladimir Putin](#)," The Kremlin, 17 April 2014. All links cited in this article are valid as of 21 October 2021.

on China apparently has shifted from a passive explanation that “China is not a threat” to proclamations of “trust” and “friendship”, portraying its eastern neighbour positively.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, Japanese experts have been actively discussing possible scenarios and consequences of the development of Sino-Russo relations for Japan. Observers agree on the emergence of an increasingly close relationship between Russia and China after the Ukraine crisis, but the important question is how to interpret and describe these dynamics. Is it a robust “alliance” or a so-called “axis of convenience”? The choice of a narrative invariably entails certain political consequences that will shape the behaviour of policy makers and how they view relations with the two countries in the international arena. Indeed, analysts who see something closer to an “alliance” between them suggest to the EU policy community that other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea should engage Russia to decrease its dependency on China.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to give a clear-cut answer to this question. My attempt is rather to illuminate the issue from a somewhat different angle – from the perspective of strategic narrative. Although the storytelling and persuasive power of narrative have long been acknowledged as an important component of “soft power” in international politics, the concept of strategic narrative adds value by bringing to the fore the potential competitive aspects and malign influence of narratives.<sup>6</sup> Narratives can be instrumentalised by states to shape and influence, or as Russians say “control”, the decision-making process of target countries.<sup>7</sup> In Soviet/Russian influence operations called “active measures”, such narratives including disinformation are often

interpreted and delivered by experts – or so-called “agents of influence” – to target audiences ranging from a general public to a particular politician.<sup>8</sup>

*The case of Sino-Russo relations is an excellent illustration of the practical use of strategic narratives*

As Japanese experiences show, the case of Sino-Russo relations is an excellent illustration of the practical use of strategic narratives. Thus, this analysis highlights the discussions among Japanese experts and intellectuals on China-Russia cooperation triggered by the Ukraine crisis by conducting content analysis of the articles published in Japan.<sup>9</sup> It further examines how the narrative encouraging Japan to detach Russia from China has been intertwined with negative narratives about Ukraine and Tokyo’s aspiration to improve its relationship with Russia under the Abe administration in 2014–20, and how the “detachment” strategy ended up in failure.

<sup>4</sup> Radityo Dharmaputra, “[Limited at best? Changing discourses on China in Russia’s identity structure before and after the 2014 crisis](#),” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (9 August 2021).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Alexander Gabuev, “[A ‘Soft Alliance’? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis](#),” *ECFR Policy Brief* 126.

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Szostek, “[Defence and promotion of desired state identity in Russia’s strategic narrative](#),” *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 573.

<sup>7</sup> For Soviet/Russian “reflexive control”, see Sanshiro Hosaka, “[Putin the ‘Peacemaker’?—Russian Reflexive Control During the 2014 August Invasion of Ukraine](#),” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 3 (2019): 325.

<sup>8</sup> My use of the term “agent of influence” is based on KGB textbooks. This category of agents is significantly different from other types of agents in that its relationship with Soviet/Russian intelligence is defined neither by complete ideological closeness nor by financial remuneration, but by the latter’s assistance in the achievement of personal goals, e.g. in case of scholars and experts, privileged access to Soviet/Russian information sources including “the opportunity to regularly visit the Soviet Union and communicate with Soviet colleagues”. Agents of influence obtained from among “sophisticated” foreigners “often view cooperation with intelligence not as intelligence work, but as an independent political activity”. These agents should ostensibly “act from the standpoint of national interests of their country”. *Rabota s agenturoj* [Work with Agents’ Networks] (Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopastnosti SSSR, 1970), 26–27; *Osnovnye napravleniya i ob’ekty razvedyvatel’noi raboty za granitsei* [Fundamental Directions and Targets of Intelligence Work Outside the Country] (Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopastnosti SSSR, 1970), 56; *Politicheskaya razvedka s territorii SSSR* [Political Espionage from USSR Territory] (Moscow: Krasnoznamennyi institut KGB SSSR imeni YU. V. Andropova, 1989), 40.

<sup>9</sup> This analysis is part of my ongoing PhD research “Who Delivers Russian Strategic Narratives on the Ukraine Crisis? The case of Japan (2014–19)” which includes the content analysis of about 400 texts published in 2014–19 on the Ukraine crisis and the consequences of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. To date, of 285 articles coded, 65 pieces mention Japan-Russia relations, 42 pieces mention China’s threat to Japan’s security and 52 pieces mention China-Russia relations (these categories may overlap). The data collection was conducted within the framework of the project “Individual Project-Based Collaborative Research” of the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University, Japan.

## 1. CHINA-RUSSO ALLIANCE – A NIGHTMARE FOR JAPAN?

It is noteworthy that the initial wave of the coordinated narratives on a China-Russo alliance was orchestrated by a group of ex-diplomats and politicians known for the “two islands first approach” which was criticised as a concession in the territorial negotiation with Russia in the early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> As early as April 2014, Kazuhiko Togo, a former high ranking diplomat and professor of Kyoto Sangyo University (Director of Institute of World Affairs) argued that the strong condemnation

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by the G7 of Russia’s annexation of Crimea would push Russia towards China which may lead to “a China-Russia alliance”, a “nightmare” for both Japan and the US. Further, citing an article from *Voice of Russia* that links Moscow’s closer moves towards Iran with Western sanctions against Russia,<sup>11</sup> the former diplomat argued that Japan should convince the United States of the danger of “a new tripartite pact”, now between Russia, China and Iran, and that the West should not only criticise Russia but work together with it towards a solution to the Ukraine problem. Togo believes that Japan and Russia have “a common civilizational

foundation” for mutual dialogue.<sup>12</sup> Togo’s fantasy regarding Moscow might have come from his grandfather Shigenori, Japan’s wartime foreign minister who pinned his last hope on Stalin’s USSR as a possible peace broker in the final months of WWII, failing to foresee the Soviet unilateral denunciation of the Neutrality Pact with Japan and subsequent invasion of Manchuria, Korea, Sakhalin and the Kuril islands including what later became disputed as the Northern Territories.<sup>13</sup>

The fear of a China-Russo alliance was echoed by Masaru Sato, Togo’s former colleague and senior analyst in the Japanese MFA and now a prolific writer on Russia topics.<sup>14</sup> He suggested that, to avoid “a full-scale strategic alliance between China and Russia” which may tempt China to seize the Senkaku Islands – part of Japan’s Okinawa Prefecture – by force, “keeping Russia away from China is a strategic task for Japanese diplomacy”.<sup>15</sup> Citing the Russian state media that favourably covered Japan’s slow move in joining the western sanctions on Russia in early March 2014, Sato suggested, “if Japan continues to retain its own diplomatic position toward Russia, a dramatic development of negotiations on the Northern Territories is possible”.<sup>16</sup> In September 2014, Muneo Suzuki, a well-known pro-Russian parliamentarian and ideological ally of Togo and Sato and a main architect of the “two islands first approach”, questioned the sanctions on Russia, arguing that harsh attacks may provoke Moscow into “strengthening relations with China and

<sup>10</sup> According to the “two-island-first-approach”, Japan’s unofficial tactics, both countries should first agree on the two smaller islands (Habomai and Shikotan), the transfer of which was stipulated in the 1956 Japan-USSR Joint Declaration, and then continue a negotiation on the remaining two bigger islands (Kunashiri and Etorofu). However, many experts saw such a sequence, especially the shift to the latter, unviable. Natasha Kuhrt, *Russian Policy towards China and Japan: the El’tsin and Putin Periods* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 141–146.

<sup>11</sup> This dubious statement was made by Igor Korotchenko, editor-in-chief of the *Natsionalnaya Oborona* [National Defence] magazine at the roundtable of *Rianovosti*. Korotchenko is a regular participant of Kremlin’s “expert meetings”, where journalists and experts are given specific instructions to disinform target audiences. His participation in such meetings chaired by Putin’s aide Vladislav Surkov and prepared by Oleg Bondarenko in 2015–16 can be confirmed in the Surkov leaks. See Sanshiro Hosaka, “Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War,” *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 761–762.

<sup>12</sup> Kazuhiko Togo, “Ukuraina kiki ga maneku churo domei to iu akumu [The nightmare of the China-Russia alliance caused by the Ukrainian crisis],” *Gekkan Nihon* 18, no. 5 (2014): 28–33.

<sup>13</sup> Haruki Wada, *Hopporyoudomandai: Rekishi to mirai* [The Problem of the Northern Territories: History and Future] (Tokyo: Asahishimbunsha, 1999), 154–157. See also Kazuhiko Togo, “Potsudamu sengen judaku to gaisho togo shigenori no kuto [Acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration and the struggle of Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo],” *Sandai hogaku* 51, no. 3/4 (2018): 29–65.

<sup>14</sup> For Sato’s popularity in the Japanese publishing industry, see Gavan McCormack, “Ideas, Identity and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: The Sato Masaru Phenomenon,” *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 8, no. 44 (2010).

<sup>15</sup> Masaru Sato, “‘Puchin hazushi’ ga yukisugireba ‘churo no teikei’ to iu akumu o yobu [The removal of Putin will lead to a nightmare of China-Russia alliance],” *Sapio* 26, no. 5 (2014): 34–35.

<sup>16</sup> Masaru Sato, “Chi no giho shusse no saho (dai 335-kai) Ukuraina josei ni miru nihon to roshia to no kankei [Techniques of knowledge, successful practices (335th): Japan-Russia relationship through the situation in Ukraine],” *Shukan Toyo Keizai*, 22 March 2014, 110–111.

Iran”.<sup>17</sup> Suzuki, accused of personalising Japan’s humanitarian assistance to the Northern Territories and convicted of bribery in the 2000s,<sup>18</sup> still continues to be consulted by Prime Minister Abe on Russia relations.

*Another characteristic of pundits who organically promoted narratives of a Russo-Sino alliance is their active participation in the Kremlin-organised international conference “Valdai Discussion Club”*

Another characteristic of pundits who organically promoted narratives of a Russo-Sino alliance is their active participation in the Kremlin-organised international conference “Valdai Discussion Club”. Nobuo Shimotomai, an influential scholar of Russian history and a Valdai member since 2007, during his lecture to the Japanese energy sector elite in summer 2014, argued, “Unstable Japan-Russia relations will drive Russia further toward China. It is against the national interests of Japan and the US.” Calling the attention of his audience to Putin’s “important message” at the International Economic Forum in St Petersburg in May 2014, the Japanese scholar pointed out that the Russian president mentioned for the first time that the subject of territorial negotiation may include all “four” islands for which Japan has been claiming its sovereignty. Shimotomai concluded that “for a stable energy supply mechanism in East Asia, dialogue with Russia will be inevitable” and that Japan should not be captivated by the Ukraine issue.<sup>19</sup>

Simultaneously, another Japanese participant of the Valdai Club, Taisuke Abiru, citing “several Russian experts with whom [he] exchanged opinions” during his visit to Moscow just after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, pointed out that the deterioration of relations with the West would accelerate

Putin’s pivot to the East, with China as “the most promising partner” in this direction. The more Russia depends on China, the higher the strategic value of Japan for Moscow. In his opinion, Prime Minister Abe has established “a personal relationship” with Putin after multiple meetings, with a view to restraining China as well as finding a breakthrough in the territorial negotiation with Moscow, and Tokyo’s softer, compared to the EU and the US, position on the sanctions signalled to Moscow its intention to “maintain a good relationship”. The Japanese expert hinted, with a reference to “a Russian expert”, that Putin who came to portray himself as a “nationalist politician” by the annexation of Crimea and achieve a high domestic approval, would be able to “take a dramatic decision on the Northern Territories”<sup>20</sup> (whereas many other experts saw the opposite: it was least likely that a nationalist Putin would compromise on the territorial issue). Later, in early 2015, raising the question of what alternative Japan can offer to Russia to deter the further deepening of China-Russia cooperation in the military sphere, Abiru argued that Tokyo has an option to persuade the United States of its need to strengthen its relationship with Russia despite the western sanctions. He stressed, “China is purchasing most of whatever it wants” from Russia, including the S-400 anti-aircraft system and SU-35 jet fighters, and “joint research is underway between the two countries to meet China’s high demand for sophisticated equipment”.<sup>21</sup>

*Japanese military observers agree that Sino-Russian cooperation is intensifying*

Japanese military observers agree that Sino-Russian cooperation is intensifying but come up with different recommendations. Shinji Hyodo, a senior Russia expert of the National Institute for Defense Studies, maintained in 2014 that Russia’s attempt to approach China would continue as long as Russia and the West are

<sup>17</sup> Muneo Suzuki, “Ukuraina kiki de kironitatsu nichiro kankei [Japan-Russia Relations at the Crossroads in Ukraine Crisis],” *Gekkan Nihon* 18, no. 9 (2014): 100-103.

<sup>18</sup> For details of the “Suzuki affair”, see Kuhrt, *Russian Policy towards China and Japan*, 141–146.

<sup>19</sup> Nobuo Shimotomai, *Nyuenerugi koen: Ukuraina mondai to sekai seiji no henyo* [New energy lecture: The Ukraine problem and transformation of world politics] (Tokyo: Toshi enerugi kyokai, 2014), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Taisuke Abiru, “Roshia ‘toho shifuto’ de nitchu tenbin [Russia’s ‘east shift’ balancing between Japan and China],” *Facta 9*, no. 5 (2014): 63-64.

<sup>21</sup> Taisuke Abiru, “Ukuraina kiki go no Rochu kankei [Russia-China Relations after the Ukrainian Crisis],” in *ERINA Report* 123 (Niigata: The Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia, April 2015).

in dispute over Ukraine. At the same time, the enlarging economic imbalance with China and the fear of becoming a “junior partner” would prompt Russia to strengthen its relationships with other Asian countries that keep a distance from China, namely, India, Vietnam and Japan, thus preventing the transformation of the “axis of convenience” to a more stable partnership.<sup>22</sup> Hyodo, therefore, suggested that Japan should not accommodate Moscow’s needs for fear of seeing a China-Russia alliance.<sup>23</sup> As predicted by him, after 2014, Russia started to engage other traditional regional partners, such as India and Vietnam to counterbalance China’s influence.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, given the frequent joint military exercises conducted between the two countries, Hiroshi Yamazoe, a Russia expert of the NIDS, argued in 2018 that the Russia-China strategic partnership was getting closer to an alliance, suggesting that Japan and the US refrain from measures that may motivate China and Russia to unite. For example, Yamazoe maintained that the US and Japanese support for Ukraine should not call for “[Ukraine’s] permanent detachment from Russia”.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. SINO-RUSSO ALLIANCE AND “BAD” UKRAINE

Narratives of Sino-Russian joint threats tend to coincide with a call for the Japanese government to maintain good relations with Russia. And more importantly, both types of narratives often coincide with negative narratives of Ukraine which are mostly outputs of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. For example, Togo stressed that the Ukraine problem required observers to understand what Ukraine and Crimea mean to Russia historically. He refused to call the

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military operation to seize the Crimean Peninsula a Russian invasion, instead implying it was the operation of the “self-defence force” controlled by the “prime minister of Crimea”. According to Togo’s narrative, facing the result of the “referendum”, in which the vast majority of Crimeans sought integration with Russia, Putin had no option but to annex the peninsula.<sup>26</sup> Togo further perceived that Ukraine was undergoing a civil war between the radical west and the pro-Russian east, while, like his grandfather, he was looking for an intermediary in the Russian leader: “If Ukraine becomes stable, Russia will not invade militarily. If the conflict is avoided through talks between Ukrainians, Putin will not lose face.”<sup>27</sup> His colleague Sato argued that Tokyo should stay away from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, scaring the Japanese audience with a catchy but bizarre comparison: “if Russia is a viper, Ukraine is like a poisonous scorpion”. He emphasised that the new Ukrainian government includes “not a few anti-Semitists and Ukrainian nationalists” who “do not share human rights, freedom and democratic values”.

<sup>22</sup> In 2014, Hyodo saw Russia’s distrust towards China in that Russian military drills in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Far East became increasingly directed not only at the United States and Japan but also at China. He also argued that some of Moscow’s military moves, including its desire for intermediate-range nuclear missiles, cannot be explained without taking into account Chinese factors. Yoko Hirose, Shigeo Mutsushika, Fujio Ohnishi, Shinji Hyodo, “[The Crisis in Ukraine and International Relations](#),” *Russian and East European Studies* 2014, no. 43: 58; see also Shinji Hyodo, “[Roshia no anzen hoshō ni okeru ‘Chugoku yoin’](#) [China factors in Russia’s security],” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs “China Report”*, 33 (27 March 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Shinji Hyodo, “[Roshia ni yoru Kurimia hen’nyū ga chūro kankei ni ataeru eikyo](#) [Influence on the Sino-Russian Relations by Russia’s Annexation of Crimea],” *Yurashia kenkyū* 51 (2014): 53–58.

<sup>24</sup> Mihoko Kato, “[Geopolitical Changes in Russia’s Eastward Pivot: The Russia-US Confrontation and its Impact on the Regional Order](#),” *Russian and East European Studies* 2019, no. 48: 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> Hiroshi Yamazoe, “Sino-Russian Cooperation from the Perspective of the US-Japan Alliance,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 32–38. Later, Yamazoe modified his view on this point, admitting that Russia would be motivated to display its cooperation with China to intimidate the Western countries into taking into consideration Russian interests. Hiroshi Yamazoe, “[Roshia no taichū gunji kyōryoku kankei no tenbo](#) [Prospects for Russia’s Military Cooperation with China]” in *Posuto Puchin no Roshia no tenbo* [Prospect of Post-Putin Russia] (Tokyo: The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2020), 73.

<sup>26</sup> Kazuhiko Togo, “[Ukuraina no gekishin to nihon gaiko no kiro: Kokusai josei no dai tenkan o do miru ka](#) [Ukraine shock and Japanese diplomacy: a view to major shifts in international affairs],” *Sekai* 857 (June 2014): 50.

<sup>27</sup> Togo, “[Ukuraina kiki ga maneku chūro domei to iu akumu](#),” 32.

Sato also cited his “friend close to Presidential Aide [Vladislav Surkov]” who justified Russia’s deployment of troops to Crimea as an “unavoidable measure” to protect the life of Crimean people from the military crackdown of the new Ukrainian government.<sup>28</sup>

Shimotomai, a Valdai member, revealed to his audience “the truth that media did not cover” during the Euromaidan, saying, “Western Ukrainian nationalists hired snipers to shoot both the people and government-affiliated security forces”. Shimotomai called Ukraine “a failed state”, proposing “federalisation” as a solution to the crisis,<sup>29</sup> whereas other analysts assessed that it was not at all about regional autonomy but Moscow’s “Trojan Horse” to subordinate Ukraine to itself.<sup>30</sup> Abiru who labelled the new Ukraine government after the Euromaidan as “neo-Nazis” – Russia’s worst propaganda point – and aforementioned Russia specialist Sato also supported the “federalisation” of Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>

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Of the many Russia experts in Japan, very few publicly expressed sympathy with this idea.

It is evident that for these messenger boys of the Kremlin, the so-called “strategy” for improving Russia relations to keep it away from China is not based on a sober assessment of Sino-Russia synergy, but quite the opposite. Those who believe in stronger ties with Russia *a priori* instrumentalise narratives of Russia-China threats. This is demonstrated by the fact that most discussions on the Russo-China alliance are led by experts on Russia,

*Japanese sinologists expressed scepticism about the presumably robust China-Russia alliance and were equally sceptical about the wisdom of driving a wedge between Russia and China*

especially those whose viewpoint is close or identical to that of the Kremlin. What’s more, their aspirations to improve relations with Russia, thus colouring all their thinking, appear to precede their analysis of Russo-China relations. As will be discussed below, there is a sign that this kind of prescriptive “analysis” has pervaded the attitudes of some of Japan’s top policy makers.

### 3. WHAT CHINA EXPERTS SAY

Although the contribution of Japanese sinologists to this topic is apparently less than that of the Russianists, some expressed scepticism about the presumably robust China-Russia alliance and were equally sceptical about the wisdom of driving a wedge between Russia and China. In 2014, Toshiki Kanamori, a China expert, argued that the two countries’ attempts to form a strategic partnership might be hindered by the long history of border conflicts, as well as their ideological and geographically derived differences. Given China’s intention to turn Central Asia into a buffer zone and Russia’s frustration with the trade structure with China in energy exports, Kanamori saw it as unlikely the two countries would build a long-term and stable relationship

<sup>28</sup> Sato, “‘Puchin hazushi’ ga yukisugireba ‘churo no teikei’ to iu akumu o yobu,” 34–35. As Sato once wrote in his autobiography, this friend is most likely Alexander Kazakov, Latvian-born Russian nationalist and Kremlin agent. Kazakov was a participant of Surkov’s “expert meetings” at least since May 2014 and worked as adviser to the “prime minister of Donetsk People’s Republic” Aleksandr Zakharchenko in 2015–18. For Kazakov’s disinformation operations against western audiences, see Hosaka, “Welcome to Surkov’s Theater,” 764.

<sup>29</sup> Shimotomai, *Nyuenerugi Koen*, 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Shigeki Hakamada, “Ukuraina mondai to Roshia taigai seisaku no tenkan [Ukraine Problems and the Change of Russian Foreign Policy],” *Yurashia kenkyu* 51 (2014): 41–42.

<sup>31</sup> Taisuke Abiru, “Ukuraina kiki o kaibo: Ro ni tobu shinko no senryaku-teki rieki nai: ‘Renritsu seiken koso o kowashita yato amerika seiken to neokon, zantei seiken ni neonachi [Anatomy of the Ukrainian Crisis: No strategic benefits for Russia to invade the east: the ‘coalition’ plan was undermined by the opposition and the US Administration and Neocon, Neo-Nazis in the interim government],” *Media Tenbo* 631 (July 2014) :12–19; Masaru Sato, “Shinroha no jittai to Nihon no tachichi [The reality of pro-Russian forces and Japan’s position],” *Wedge* 26 (9) (September 2014): 17.

based on common interests. Instead, he saw it as more likely they would retain the pragmatic relations, each using the bilateral relationship to maximise its own gains, depending on circumstances as well as the overall relationship with the West, especially the United States.<sup>32</sup>

*The inner substance of Sino-Russia relations, as in other bilateral relations between undemocratic states, largely remains hidden from public view*

China watcher Terumasa Nakanishi has warned that the inner substance of Sino-Russia relations, as in other bilateral relations between undemocratic states, largely remains hidden from public view. He also has cautioned that “China-Russia divide” tactics are based on the illusion that friendly dialogue between the Japanese prime minister and the Russian president would persuade Russia to distance itself from China.<sup>33</sup> In 2017, Emi Mifune, expert on China’s foreign policies, maintained that, given the expanding position of China in the Russian economy and trade, the idea of “using Russia as a deterrent or restraint against China” claimed by some Japanese experts is “unrealistic”. She argues that for Russia, the China-Russo alignment is an “axis of opposition”, designed to show the West that Moscow is not isolated, whereas for China, cooperation with Russia is merely one option to expand its influence, along with the development of relations with the US and the deepening cooperation with European countries through “One Belt, One Road”.<sup>34</sup> Jun Kumakura, an expert on China and former Soviet countries, also pointed out that despite the economic asymmetry with China and propaganda on the “Russia-China

<sup>32</sup> Toshiki Kanamori, “Ukuraina mondai o chansu ni shitai Chugoku, kanetsu suru Roshia to no kakehiki [China wants to take advantage of the Ukraine issue, bargaining with Russia],” *Ekonomisuto*, 27 May 2014, 44-47.

<sup>33</sup> Terumasa Nakanishi, *Ukuraina kiki to sekai chitsujo no yukue* [The Ukraine crisis and the perspective of world order] (Tokyo: Nihonkogyokurabu, 2014), 18–19. Nakanishi also pointed out that the aligned positions of China and Russia in narratives on WWII derive from a secret agreement on historical archives negotiated between two countries in the early 2000s.

<sup>34</sup> Emi Mifune, *Beichuro pawashifuto to nihon* [Japan and Power shifts between the United States, China and Russia] (Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 2017), 75–86.

honeymoon”, Russia keeps a politically safe distance from China (e.g. Russia’s mediator role in the Sino-Indian border conflict).<sup>35</sup>

## 4. ABE’S DREAMS AND HIS FAILURE

In addition to Japan’s position in international politics, former prime minister Abe’s enthusiasm for improving Russia relations was often explained by his personal determination to follow in the footsteps of his father, Shintaro, Japan’s foreign minister in the mid-1980s, who was also devoted to a resolution of the territorial issue and the conclusion of a peace treaty with Gorbachev’s USSR. Thus, during his premiership until mid-2020, Abe held bilateral talks with Putin 27 times including multiple tête-à-têtes. His Russia agenda was stalemated for some time due to the Ukraine crisis and the deterioration of US-Russia relations, but it resumed shortly afterwards. In February 2016,

*Former prime minister Abe’s enthusiasm for improving Russia relations was often explained by his personal determination to follow in the footsteps of his father, Shintaro*

it was reported that the US president Barack Obama personally conveyed his concern to Abe regarding the Japanese leader’s planned visit to Russia despite the G7’s efforts to pressure Putin into complying with the Minsk Agreements. Circumventing Obama’s suggestion, Abe went ahead with his visit to Sochi (which Putin termed the “aspirations of Japanese friends to maintain relationships despite the pressures from the US”), where he declared “a new approach” aimed at a breakthrough in the long-standing territorial and peace treaty negotiations. In December of the same year, the Russian president was warmly welcomed in Nagato, Japan – a hot spring resort and Abe’s hometown.

<sup>35</sup> Jun Kumakura, “2020-nen no rochu kankei: ‘Ittai ichiro’ to chuinkokkyofunso ni taisuru roshia no shisei o chushin ni [Russia-China Relations in 2020: Focusing on Russia’s Attitude toward ‘One Belt, One Road’ and the Sino-Indian Border Conflict],” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs*, 3 February 2021.

In 2019, a close aide to Abe, Katsuyuki Kawai, stated in a speech at a Washington think tank that Japan would continue to engage Russia in order to deal jointly with the threat posed by China. This public statement embarrassed Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov who refuted it instantly and the Japanese foreign ministry had to disavow Kawai's views as unrepresentative of the government. Later, however, Kawai's controversial statement turned out to not be his personal opinion, but a "strategic view" fully discussed and shared in Abe's administration. In January 2021, in a journal interview, Abe, who resigned as prime minister, openly stated:

The essence of Japan-Russia relations is the conclusion of a peace treaty and the resolution of the Northern Territories issue, which is the premise of the treaty. However, the reason why the Abe administration actively worked on it is not only in the context between Japan and Russia, but also because China is strengthening its military power in East Asia and attempting to unilaterally change the status quo in the East and South China Seas. As a strategic decision, there was a basic idea that Russia should not be driven to the Chinese side and that relations with Russia should be improved.<sup>36</sup>

The logic Abe and his entourage used when elaborating on a kind of "detachment strategy" appears similar to that employed by the pro-Russian experts quoted above, who instrumentalised a "Sino-Russia alliance" as a pretext to justify their long-standing agenda: stronger ties with Russia.

Another common element underlying these narratives is geopolitical "strategic" thinking. In spring 2014, former diplomat Togo quoted American strategist Edward Luttwak saying that preventing Russia and China from allying is "a goal of grand strategy on the Eurasian continent" and that Tokyo should be even ready to give up the Northern Territories to strengthen relations with Russia.<sup>37</sup> Since 2014, Abe invited the US strategist to the Prime

Minister's Office to consult about China-Russia relations several times.<sup>38</sup> Luttwak later praised the Japanese prime minister as "a rare strategist" in his book. These "strategists",

*Abe's "strategy" produced a total debacle. Not only did it fail to delink Russia from China, but it also forced Tokyo to take a series of "friendly" steps towards Russia, exhausting Japanese diplomatic resources with little tangible progress in the territorial issue*

however, seem strangely unaware that this kind of "strategy" turns into vulnerability once it is sensed by a target — all the more so when it is articulated publicly.

Abe's "strategy" thus produced a total debacle. Not only did it fail to delink Russia from China, but it also forced Tokyo to take a series of "friendly" steps towards Russia, exhausting Japanese diplomatic resources with little tangible progress in the territorial issue: 27 meetings with the unpunctual Russian president during Abe's seven-year premiership, along with regular participation by Abe in the annual Economic Forum in Vladivostok. Putin demonstrated his superiority over Abe by arriving almost three hours late to the summit meeting in Nagato.

*There are multiple indications that Abe has been strongly indoctrinated by Putin*

Furthermore, there are multiple indications that Abe has been strongly indoctrinated by Putin. For example, recalling the 2013 June G8 summit, Abe stated that he had been "especially impressed" by Putin's "realistic" approach toward Syria, saying, "given the later emergence of ISIL, Putin's power politics view that 'who is powerful and cruel will win in the Middle East' accurately reflected the reality of the Middle East". Asked why numerous meetings with Putin didn't resolve the territorial issue, Abe simply answered, "above all, the domestic backlash in Russia was very strong".<sup>39</sup> A rhetorical question arises: what

<sup>36</sup> "Abe Gaiko 7-nen 8-kagetsu o kataru (chu): 'Jiyude hirakareta indotaiheiyō ni miru senryakuteki shiko [Interview about Abe's diplomacy for seven years and eight months: strategic thinking in 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific']," *Gaiko* 65 (Jan/Feb 2021): 97.

<sup>37</sup> Togo, "Ukuraina kiki ga maneku churo domei to iu akumu", 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Kieta yonto henkan* [The return of the four islands disappeared] (The Hokkaido Shimbun Press, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> "Abe Gaiko 7-nen 8-kagetsu o kataru (chu)," 97.

kind of “domestic backlash” did Abe see in Putin’s authoritarian Russia?

Some observers have speculated that Abe might have offered concessions on the territorial issue and others during his tête-à-têtes.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the Abe administration not only inaugurated the whole economic cooperation program with Russia (“Eight Items”), but went as far as appointing an unprecedented “Minister for Economic Cooperation with Russia” (which Abe left behind as a legacy when he resigned as prime minister).<sup>41</sup> The prime minister’s annual speech on the Day of Northern Territories (7 February) in 2019 and 2020 and Tokyo’s Diplomatic Bluebook of 2019 even refrained from presenting Japan’s basic stance on the territorial issue (“the four Northern Islands belong to Japan”) as if Abe had signalled to Putin that the negotiation could be settled by returning only two of the four islands, Shikotan and the Habomai islet group.<sup>42</sup>

*Moscow has learnt that narratives on Russo-China threats can be weaponised to influence the decision-making of its targets and leverage concessions from countries alarmed by China’s growing influence*

## CONCLUSION: NARRATIVES INCREASINGLY WEAPONISED BY MOSCOW

After 2014, Moscow has learnt that narratives on Russo-China threats can be weaponised to influence the decision-making of its targets and leverage concessions from countries alarmed by China’s growing influence (however, it remains to be discovered why another story,

<sup>40</sup> Akiyoshi Komaki, *Abe vs. Puchin: nichiro kosho wa naze ikidzumatta no ka?* [Abe vs Putin: Why did the Japan-Russia negotiations get stuck?] (Tokyo: Chikumashobo, 2020), 141–143.

<sup>41</sup> Posol’stvo Japonii v Rossii [Embassy of Japan in Russia], “[Plan sotrudnichestva iz 8 punktov \[8-point cooperation plan\]](#)”.

<sup>42</sup> This phrase was returned in the 2020 edition of the Diplomatic Bluebook. “[Japan renews claim on Russian-held isles in foreign policy report](#),” *The Japan Times*, 19 May 2020.

the “Russia-Iran alliance”, did not go viral). In October 2019, during the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin inflated Russia’s relationship with China using every word he could within the limit of not embarrassing Beijing – “an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership” – disclosing with no hesitation that Russia was helping China create a missile attack warning system which “will dramatically increase China’s defence capability”.<sup>43</sup> A year later, again speaking at the Valdai Club, Putin said that there was no need for a Russia-China military alliance,

*For a Sino-Russia alliance narrative to work effectively in each country, it must resonate with a pre-existing, local political myth*

adding ostensibly that it is still “theoretically possible to imagine”.<sup>44</sup> These are examples of the instrumental use of an emotive, discretely coercive and deliberately imprecise narrative in response to the frequent discussions on China’s rise in Europe.

For a Sino-Russia alliance narrative to work effectively in each country, it must resonate with a pre-existing, local political myth. Examples of such myths may be the obsession with French “grandeur”, a foreign policy tradition aimed at reducing the US influence in Europe using the USSR/Russia as a counterbalance,<sup>45</sup> or Germany’s new Ostpolitik, an unjustified belief that closer social and economic ties with Russia will lead to a positive change in Moscow.<sup>46</sup> For instance, in November 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron argued that Europe required its own strategy towards Russia which he believes

<sup>43</sup> President of Russia, “[Valdai Discussion Club session](#),” The Kremlin, 3 October 2019.

<sup>44</sup> “[Russia-China Military Alliance “Quite Possible,” Putin Says](#),” *The Moscow Times*, 23 October 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Oliver Schmitt, “[When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives](#),” *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (2018): 487–511.

<sup>46</sup> Stefan Meister, “From Ostpolitik to Eu-Russia Interdependence: Germany’s Perspective,” in [Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities](#), edited by Kristi Raik, András Rác (Tallinn: ICDS, 2019), 25–44.

should not be a “vassal of China”.<sup>47</sup> In February 2021, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated he was against “burning all the bridges with Russia” to avoid driving Russia and China into an embrace, a scenario that might lead to “the largest economic and military alliance in the world”.<sup>48</sup> In July, Maas repeated the same thesis when discussing Nord Stream 2, saying that if European business does not engage with Russia, this will make China-Russia relations closer, posing “a threat to our security in Europe”.<sup>49</sup> These political remarks are reminiscent of Abe’s rhetoric on Russia.

All of this is not intended to underestimate the China-Russo strategic partnership, but it would be much more challenging to elucidate the real magnitude of the relationship between these non-democracies than those between democracies, e.g. the US-Japan alliance. In conclusion, though, some lessons can be drawn.

First, narratives on Russia-China joint threats are often purposefully biased and may be used as a pretext to justify aspirations to return to “business as usual” with Russia. Second,

*Russia is well informed about the ambitions and apprehensions of western politicians and knows how to disinform them through the multiple channels it has available*

Russia is well informed about the ambitions and apprehensions of western politicians and knows how to disinform them through the multiple channels it has available. For a robust analysis, first of all, it would be advisable to shut out “informational noise” from agents of influence like those of the Valdai Discussion Club.<sup>50</sup> Third, the ominous pictures of a Sino-Russo alliance crafted by Moscow should be moderated by China’s perspectives and other intelligence sources, to the extent that they are available.

<sup>47</sup> “Emmanuel Macron in his own words (English): The French president’s interview with *The Economist*,” *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

<sup>48</sup> “Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to the German Bundestag at the debate held at the request of the parliamentary group of Alliance 90/The Greens on ‘What consequences should the Federal Government draw from violence, arbitrary acts and repression in Russia?’,” Federal Foreign Office, 10 February 2010.

<sup>49</sup> “Maas: Ukraine should not be hit by launch of Nord Stream 2,” *Ukrinform*, 2 July 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Kateryna Smaglyi, *Hybrid Analytica: Pro-Kremlin Expert Propaganda in Moscow, Europe and the U.S.: A Case Study on Think Tanks and universities* (The Institute of Modern Russia, 2018), 18–19.

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