James David John Brown PhD

Associate Professor of Political Science

Temple University, Japan Campus

**AN ANALYSIS OF PRIME MINISTER ABE’S “NEW APPROACH” TO RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA**

On 15 December 2016 Prime Minister Abe is scheduled to welcome President Putin to his home prefecture of Yamaguchi. This long-anticipated visit has generated considerable excitement in Japan due to Prime Minister Abe’s announcement of a “new approach” to relations with Russia. This policy, which was unveiled when the leaders met in Sochi in May 2016, involves Japan proposing to increase economic cooperation with Russia. This is intended to generate momentum that will ultimately lead to a breakthrough in the countries’ territorial dispute.

Abe’s adoption of this “new approach” represents a radical change in Japan’s policy towards Russia. Firstly, it is the reversal of the traditional approach whereby Japanese governments have sought to hold back on investments in Russia in the belief that a hardline stance will encourage territorial concessions. In addition, the policy is bold because, while Japanese foreign policy usually closely follows that of the United States, in this case it clearly goes against the wishes of Washington.The “new approach” also comes at a time when relations between the West and Russia are at their worst in many years.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to ask: Why has the Japanese prime minister decided to adopt this far-reaching change in policy towards Russia? It offers an answer based on an analysis of contemporary Japanese politics. To begin with, attention is drawn to perceptions by the Japanese elite that the country is facing an uncertain future with regard to security in the East Asian region. Specifically, there are concerns that Japan cannot permanently rely on the security guarantee of the United States and that it is necessary to develop closer relations with other key players in the region, including Russia.

Secondly, the paper focuses on Prime Minister Abe himself. His broad foreign policy ambition to make Japan great again is emphasised, as is his particular passion for improved ties with Russia. This enthusiasm for strong relations with Moscow is an unusual characteristic amongst Japanese leaders and is explained by a mixture of practical and personal considerations. In terms of practical considerations, Abe clearly believes that a rapprochement with Russia serves the contemporary interests of Japan in terms of both economics and security. He also takes the view that the present moment represents a rare window of opportunity to achieve a breakthrough in the long-standing territorial dispute. Personally too, Abe appears driven by a strong belief that a peace treaty with Russia could secure his legacy as one of the most effective post-war Japanese prime ministers. He also has an emotional desire to complete the work of his father, Abe Shintaro, who, as foreign minister, shortly before his deathenergetically sought to establish better relations with the Soviet Union.

Based on this understanding of the factors shaping Japan’s “new approach”, this paper closes with a prediction of the immediate future of Japan-Russia relations and the prospects of a final settlement of the territorial issue.