

Russia's gunboat diplomacy against Japan

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Japan's "postwar regime" based on its war-renouncing constitution is collapsing under the weight of the reality of the international environment. We have been reminded of the utter ineffectiveness of Japan's diplomacy by the uproar over a Chinese fishing boat's collision with patrol ship 5 of the Japan Coast Guard off the Senkaku Islands, which are at the heart of a Sino-Japanese territorial dispute. As if to rub salt into Japan's wounds after the Chinese provocation, Russia has started saber-rattling.

Military buildup around the Northern Territories

Just before Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara's visit to Moscow on February 10, Russia revealed a plan to strengthen its military presence around the Northern Territories (comprised of four Russian-controlled islands Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan and Habomai over which Japan claims sovereignty; the former Soviet Union seized these islands from Japan at the end of the Second World War after breaking a bilateral non-aggression treaty). Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared the Kurils (including the Northern Territories) as a strategic region for Russia in outlining the military buildup plan. Specifically, Russia plans to deploy in its Pacific fleet Mistral-class amphibious-assault ships (each with a displacement of more than 20,000 tons), which it will purchase from France.. The Sankei Shimbun newspaper featured this matter in front-page articles for two consecutive days, on February 10 and 11. This Japanese daily deserves praise for a keen eye for newsworthy events.

Foreign Minister Maehara's meeting with his Russian counterpart did not yield any fruitful results. Speaking in a TV program, a former Japanese Foreign Ministry official made an appalling comment with an air of complacency: that Russia has stiffened its stance because of what he said was an irresponsible remark by Prime Minister Naoto Kan. At a rally to press Japan's claim of sovereignty over the Northern Territories on February 7 (designated in Japan as the "Northern Territories Day"), Prime Minister Kan described Russian President Medvedev's visit on November 1, 2010 to Kunashiri island as an "unforgivable outrage." The diplomat-turned-commentator's seemingly plausible characterization of Kan's remark as a diplomatic gaffe represents nothing but the stance of the Russian side. It completely ignores the gunboat diplomacy that Russia has been exercising on the strength of its military force.

Constitutional amendment is the only solution

This is no occasion for nitpicking over diplomatic protocols. In June and July last year, Russia conducted the Vostok 2010 large-scale military exercises in Siberia and the Far East, including Etorofu island. It designated September 2, the date of Japan's signing of a formal statement of surrender after the end of the Second World War, as the victory over Japan day. Thus, Russia blatantly acted to distort the history so as to justify its illegal control of the Northern Territories. Since then, there has been a succession of visits to the Northern Territories by senior Russian officials, such as First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, Regional Development Minister Viktor Basargin and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. These visits are intended to perpetuate Russia's effective control of those islands. Unusually for Prime Minister Kan, he reflected the just voice of the Japanese people when he condemned the Medvedev visit as an "unforgivable outrage." This issue has nothing to do with diplomatic niceties.

What should Japan do in the face of the Russian diplomatic offensive backed up by military force? Isn't it obvious that Japan is quite helpless under the straitjacket of its postwar regime? Strengthening defense capability through constitutional amendment is the only solution. Japan's "pacifist constitution" is utterly meaningless under the menace of the Chinese and Russian diplomatic saber-rattling backed up by military force.

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