CHAPTER 7

The Policy of Russia toward Japan 1992–2005

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From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

After the Soviet Union ceased to exist, before the new Russian leadership loomed the problem of forging a foreign policy course for the new government, both conceptually and in relation to a wide circle of concrete countries. Japan was not excluded from this plan. Already in the period when Russia still was part of the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), showing great interest in the development of Russo-Japanese relations, began actively to mend bilateral ties. In the leadership of MID Russia were a number of specialists on Japan, among whom those who had transferred from MID USSR. To the extent that the Russian Federation, finding itself a part of the USSR, had a border with Japan, they assumed that it would be impossible without Russian leadership to discuss questions of relations with Japan, above all the territorial problem. In their opinion, the leadership of the Soviet Union, including President M. S. Gorbachev, was taking an unjustifiably harsh position on the territorial question; it followed that showing flexibility and a willingness to compromise on this matter could lead to a path to its quick resolution and, thus, to begin building principally new relations with one of the most important states not only in Asia, but also in the world.

In the second half of 1991 the Russian leadership repeatedly sent the Japanese leadership signals of its readiness to take a “new approach” to the resolution of the territorial problem; however, there was no specific
plan or even conception of what concretely it should consist. At the beginning of September 1991, as chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, Ruslan Khasbulatov visited Japan and transmitted a personal message from President Boris Yeltsin at a meeting with Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki. In the message the Russian president spoke in favor of the maximum possible development of Russo-Japanese ties in all areas. The readiness of the Russian leadership, unlike the example of the Soviet one, was underscored to accelerate the negotiating process for concluding a peace treaty, conducting it under the guiding principles of law and justice, and refraining from any concept of a division between the victor and vanquished in the Second World War.

At the beginning of November 1991 President Yeltsin gave an address to the citizens of Russia dedicated exclusively to the theme of Russo-Japanese relations. In this address he repeated the intention of the Russian leadership to find a solution to the problem of a peace treaty with Japan, the “presence of which interferes with the development of Russo-Japanese relations, not permitting the new democratic Russia to overcome the legacy of its past.” Determination was declared to approach the question of a peace treaty with Japan, guided by the principles of justice, legality, international law, and humanism. Among the specialist-internationalists and in a wide circle of Soviet public opinion such an extraordinary address by the president of Russia to Russian citizens was perceived as a signal of the readiness of the Russian leadership for territorial concessions to Japan. Meanwhile, events moved rapidly, and already at the end of 1991 the collapse of the Soviet Union occurred.

The Initial Year after the Emergence of a New Russia

After the emergence of a democratic Russia its leadership was faced with deciding an enormous quantity of problems, among which were those connected to the practical realization of a new foreign policy course. However, at the first stage there was no holistic, conceptual view of this course, and a foreign policy doctrine for the new state was absent. Not coincidentally, it was precisely in this period that the diplomacy of Russia was distinguished by lack of follow through, impulsiveness, and competing approaches. All of these inadequacies appeared in the activity of Russian diplomacy in the Asian–Pacific direction as a whole and also in relations with the critical countries of the region.

It was not decided how to build relations with Russia’s great neighbor China. On the one hand, China was viewed as a communist state, different from democratic Russia, but on the other hand, there was also