

Russia's Leadership Transition and Its Implications in East Asia

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Speakers: Alexander Lukin, Diplomatic Academy, MFA of Russia (moderator)
Iwashita Akihiro, Hokkaido University
Andrey Ivanov, Moscow State Institute of International Relations
George Kunadze, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Russian Federation
Han Byung-Jin, Keimyung University

Panel Short Summary

Rebecca Graebner, The Heritage Foundation
Kim Jiseon, Ewha Womens University

Next month, Vladimir Putin will begin his third term as President of Russia. He will trade positions with the current president, Dmitry Medvedev, who will replace Putin as Prime Minister. The panelists elaborated on how changes in Russian leadership could affect foreign policy and relations between Russia and its neighbors.

George Kunadze argued that even with the change in leadership, relations with North East Asia will be low priority to Russia. The new Putin regime will initially be preoccupied with domestic issues, and any foreign policy, he argued, will focus on those countries that express concern with Russia's path to democracy. Neighbors in North East Asia will not be of specific interest. China and Japan are both engaged in their own struggles and North Korea continues to be a problem that can be put off until the Middle East crisis is settled. Conversely, China, Japan, and Korea, have little interest in the Russian democracy.

Iwashita Akihiro discussed relations between Russia and Asian countries after Putin's victory. As for Russia-Japan relations, he argued that the impact of Putin's re-election would be limited because Putin declared the same policy as he did six years ago. Russia continues building business-oriented relations with Japan, and the two countries may attempt to resolve several issues such as energy and maritime security. According to Iwashita, even though the relationship between China and Russia is considered positive, focus should be on

sensitive factors, such as territorial disputes. China was granted control over two islands and approximately 50% of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island (Heixiazi Island). China is constructing infrastructure on its side of the island, but the Russian side has lagged behind in terms of development, which shows the isolation of Russia in the region.

Han Byung-Jin argued that Putin's new presidency showed his strong presence in the Russian government and political circles. Even though protests broke out against the election, Putin is in a strong position. The stable political circumstances of Russia will allow the Putin administration to focus on Central Asia and Northeast Asia. According to Han, Putin's re-election will be beneficial to North Korea. North Korea relies on the Special Economic Zone in the northern part to mitigate economic difficulties, and China also has interests in developing this region. Russia will consider involvement if China and North Korea begin to develop the region. Due to Putin's strong presidential power, Russia will be able to implement long-term strategies and invest in developing the border area.

Andrey Ivanov spoke on Russia's struggle to find its place within the Asia-Pacific region. Growing competition between China and the U.S. has fueled Russia's desire for new Asia-Pacific cooperation; however, other countries have not viewed these ideas as either interesting or necessary. Russian experts dispel these ideas of "new models," favoring the strengthening of current structures. Russia has large potential for development, but this also means potential for great destabilization. Ivanov argued that Russia should offer opportunities for investment and cooperation honestly and be willing to compromise. By strengthening ties with neighbors and attracting investment within its own borders, Russia is certain to find its place in the Asia-Pacific.

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