

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 427

Published on 25 October 2013

Updated, 13 June 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Vladislav Zubok. "Lost in a Triangle U.S.-Soviet Back-Channel Documents on the Japan Factor in Tripartite Diplomacy, 1969–1972." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15:2 (Spring 2013): 51-71.

DOI: 10.1162/JCWS_a_00337. http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00337

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR427.pdf>

Reviewed by **Sergey Radchenko**, University of Aberystwyth

In this thought-provoking article, Vladislav Zubok explores the role Japan played in the calculations of U.S. and Soviet policy makers in the lead-up to, and in the aftermath of, the Sino-U.S. rapprochement. Zubok argues that whereas President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger succeeded in playing the 'China card' against the Soviet Union, the Soviet leadership, weighted down by ideological preconceptions and great power arrogance, missed out on a historic opportunity to mend fences with Japan. Its failure in this respect was second only to the remarkable shortsightedness of the Japanese, whose stubborn insistence on the Soviet return of all of the four disputed islands of the Kurile chain placed an insurmountable obstacle in the way of a breakthrough in Soviet-Japanese relations that could have left both countries better off in the long term.

Zubok's main source is the volume on the Soviet-U.S. backchannel published by the U.S. State Department and the Russian Foreign Ministry, which includes records of meetings between Kissinger and the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatolii Dobrynin.¹ The two rarely broached Japan in their conversations. Kissinger was carried away by geopolitical manipulations centering on China. Dobrynin, and his bosses in Moscow, did not see Japan as an important player. They were much more interested in advancing the cause of détente and Nixon's recognition of the Soviet Union's superpower status, something Brezhnev in particular anxiously craved. Instead of seeing Japan for what it was – a first-rate economic power that could yet become a source of much needed credits and technology for the struggling Soviet economy, the Soviets, with Brezhnev at the forefront, succumbed to irrational fears of an alliance of the 'yellow races,' China and Japan, against the West and the USSR.

¹ Edward C Keefer; David C Geyer; Douglas Eugene Selva (eds.), *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 2007).

The author is correct to point to the limitations of his analysis. In contrast to the wealth of declassified sources on Soviet-American relations, documents on Soviet-Japanese relations remain hidden behind a veil of official secrecy. Inquiries at Russia's Foreign Policy Archive (AVPRF) return with apologies to the effect that with the territorial problem still unresolved, nothing of importance can be released to the public domain. The situation is even worse with respect to the archives in Japan, where, despite recent progress with declassification of the Gaimusho documents, the record of Japanese talks with the Soviets are kept out of sight, and the Japanese government has put pressure on the U.S. to do the same. This lack of documentation tends to exaggerate the probable extent of the Soviet neglect of the Far East, especially Japan. Nevertheless, Zubok's argument that Moscow prioritized the West over the East is generally convincing. Brezhnev, a self-proclaimed 'European,' perceived Asia as a menace, not as an opportunity.²

Still, as Zubok shows, there was more to Moscow's policy than meets the eye. He draws attention to Foreign Minister's Andrei Gromyko's visit to Japan in 1972, when Gromyko allegedly offered the Japanese a compromise on the territorial problem – to return Shikotan and the Habomai isles – but met with Japanese insistence on the return of the rest of the disputed islands. Zubok argues that the episode was a significant missed opportunity for the two countries to improve relations. Gromyko's offer was as far as Moscow was willing to go in the attempt to play the 'Japanese card' in response to Nixon's shocking rapprochement with China. This was largely the problem. Instrumentalizing Japan as a card in its global strategy, Moscow neglected the importance of improving Soviet-Japanese relations for their own sake. Soon, détente with the U.S. relegated Japan even further down the list of Soviet priorities. At the same time, Tokyo's self-defeating insistence on an all-or-nothing solution to the territorial problem helped ensure that the Soviet Union and Japan would remain at loggerheads, a situation that suited China and the United States.

The article raises more questions than it answers; we are still very far from understanding the inner dynamic of relations between the Soviet Union and Japan, and can only infer reasons for their repeated failure to mend fences. Nevertheless, it is a well-argued piece that will be of considerable interest to scholars of the Cold War, Soviet foreign policy, and international relations of the Asia-Pacific region.³

Sergey Radchenko is Reader in International Politics, University of Aberystwyth, UK. He is the author of *Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-67*

² On Brezhnev's "European mind," see National Archives and Records Administration, HAK Moscow Trip—April 1972, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files Europe-USSR, Box 72.

³ For the readers' benefit, I would like to correct two typos in the article. References to Mao Zedong on pp. 54 and 58 should instead read "Zhou Enlai."

H-Diplo Article Review

(Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Stanford UP, 2009), co-author (with Campbell Craig) of *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (Yale UP, 2008), and the author of the forthcoming *Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (Oxford UP, 2013).

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).