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**Russian Political Leaders
“The Strategies of Putin and Medvedev,
and Judo”**

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Tokai University Club33th floor, Kasumigaseki Building



Hello, everyone. My name is Kazuo Kobayashi. Thank you for inviting me here today.

There was a time when I didn't know anything about judo. But when I found out that Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin practiced judo, I sought out the acquaintance of [judo Olympic gold medalist] Mr. Yasuhiro Yamashita. With the benefit of Mr. Yamashita's wisdom and support, I wrote a book (published in Japanese by the *Asahi Shimbun*) about Putin and his practice of judo. The book was titled, *Putin to Judo no Kokoro* (“Putin and the Heart of Judo”).

People in Japan seem to have this image of Putin as an “ex-KGB bad guy.” But the real Putin isn't like that at all. There are many sides to Putin that the majority of Japanese don't know about. Mr. Yamashita and I are always talking about how we wish more Japanese people were aware of this. It's Japan's loss as well.

Regardless of what you think of Putin, I bet a lot of people have an image of Russia as a terrible country, unworthy of respect. I just heard someone in the audience say, “That's not true.” Well, if that isn't a minority opinion in this audience, we're in an unusual

situation (laughs). At an event such as this, even if there is one person interested in Russia, in most cases 99 percent of people dislike the country. This seems to be a special situation, which I'm actually very pleased about.

A Country Often Misunderstood

Today, I'd like to leave the topic of judo and talk about how we should think about this country called Russia. I'd like to start off by expressing my own opinion and talking about one aspect of the country. If my speech today can get you to open your eyes or to change the way you look at Russia, I'll consider this visit to have been a meaningful one for me.

What I'd like to say, first of all, is that Putin enjoys extremely high approval ratings in Russia, and his successor Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also gets high ratings.

Many of you may think that Medvedev is merely Putin's puppet. Most people believe that Putin *is* behind the scenes pulling the strings of young 43-year-old, as if he were a marionette.

I just heard someone in the audience say, “It's true, isn't it?” Well, now we're really getting into my topic for today (laughs).

Well, let's find out the truth. Two weeks ago, I came back from Reykjavik in Iceland. Reykjavik is where Mikhail Gorbachev, then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and then U.S. President Ronald Reagan met in October 1986 and began the talks that led to the end of the Cold War.

If you'll allow me to brag a little, I'd add here that the talks had actually hit a stalemate. I was the one who got Gorbachev to say, “This is the start of a new dialogue.” This is on record, and the comment was aired during an *NHK Special* program at the time.

I visited Reykjavik two weeks ago because this year marks the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War.

The dialogue that began on October 1, 1986 concluded on December 1, 1989, when Gorbachev met with U.S. President George H. W. Bush (the 41st President of the United States) on the island of Malta in the Mediterranean and confirmed the end of the Cold War.

So what has happened there in the intervening 20

years? My trip to Reykjavik this year was triggered by my own sentimentality, my wanting to see what happened and by the desire to reaffirm my own sense of pride in myself.

Actually, the end of the Cold War set the stage for the establishment of Putin's behind-the-scenes government. It is also related to the coming into being of President Medvedev's current administration, which I will explain later.

Understanding Russia's Present and Future

To understand the current state and near future of Russia, we have to analyze Putin's techniques, methods and tactics. The reason the Medvedev administration currently exists is because Putin served as president for eight years, then appointed the young (he was then 42 years old) Medvedev as his successor, showing him enormous support.

Medvedev, who became president with Putin's backing, is like a bear. Bears are very popular in Russia. They even had a created a bear named "Misha" to be the mascot for the Moscow Olympics, which Mr. Yamashita could not participate in due to the West's boycott of the Games that year.

Medvedev assumed the office of president in May 2008. In his first speech he said that he would adopt former President Putin's policies. That was his declaration and his public pledge. If we think about it like that, regardless of whether Putin is creating a situation in which he controls the government from behind the scenes, we realize that in thinking about Russia's future, we have to analyze what Putin did during his eight years as president and what methods and tactics he used.

To put it another way, we need to understand Putin's methods not only to learn about Russia's current situation but also to see where Russia is headed. So I'd like to start with that topic.

Why Putin Receives Such Support

In Japan, Putin is not very popular because the *Asahi Shimbun* and other newspapers call him a "murderer" or play up scandals involving women. But as you know, his approval ratings in Russia never fell below 60 percent during his eight years as president. Even

now, he enjoys a 75 percent approval rating as prime minister.

I would like to ask the women in the audience a question: What criteria do you use when deciding who you will vote for?

I can see you're perplexed by this question. As we can see from the fact that you can't immediately think of an answer, Japanese people are very content. How can I say that? Because when it comes time to elect a leader, you may complain about all of them—you might say Aso isn't very good, or Ozawa won't be any better, or that Hatoyama isn't anything special—but I don't think you seriously worry about your future. That's why you don't know what criteria to use when deciding who gets your vote. This is proof that you, like most Japanese people, enjoy a life of extreme safety and affluence.

When I ask again, "What criteria do you use when deciding who to vote for?" after saying what I've just said, many people cite "beliefs and philosophy." This again, is evidence of how content Japanese people are with their lives.

Well, what would the people of Russia have said if I asked the same question during the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin administration? The economy was in a shambles, and the people had nothing. What would be the criteria for choosing a leader under these circumstances? They would say, "Someone who can bring stability and prosperity," wouldn't they?

This is why Putin is so popular. The secret to his popularity is that he brought stability and prosperity to the people. If you don't know this, you would look at him the way the *Asahi Shimbun* or NHK does—as a "murderer" or someone who is "using his authority to boost his popularity."

I myself lived in Russia during times of economic turmoil, so I understand how badly Russians wanted economic and political stability. That's why I can understand why Putin is popular: it's because he made the people more prosperous.

Astounding Economic Growth

I don't have much time today, so I'll keep my stories short.

So what exactly happened during Putin's eight-year

presidency?

Every year, actual wages in Russia jumped by between 10 and 30 percent. During Japan's annual spring labor talks, it's extremely difficult to raise wages even by 100 yen. But Russia's wages grew at an average of 14 percent in real terms, even including the mere 6 percent of growth seen in 2004.

A politician who puts money into the pockets of the people is doing a good job, wouldn't you say?

And what about the national wealth? Do you know the term, "foreign reserves"? Well, China currently has the largest amount of foreign reserves, followed by Japan. Russia now ranks third.

Nine years ago, however, when Putin first took office, Russia had as much foreign reserves as I did: close to none (laughs).

When Putin became president in May 2000, Russia had just 10 billion dollars worth of foreign reserves. That vast country, with all its oil and natural resources, with a population of 140 million, had only 10 billion dollars worth of foreign reserves. In other words, Russia's wallet was almost empty.

But while Putin was president, do you know how rich Russia became? By the time Putin stepped down from the presidency after eight years, Russia's foreign reserves had jumped 56-fold to 560 billion dollars. If a political leader could increase the wealth of both the country and its citizens, wouldn't you support him?

Reducing the Debt to Germany

So now the question becomes, "How did Putin enrich both the nation and its people?" There are two factors.

First, he skillfully took advantage of international affairs to further Russia's national interest. This sounds abstract, so let me give you a specific example.

After about two years in office, politicians tend to try and garner support by proving that they can achieve certain goals. The U.S. mid-term elections are a prime example of how this timing works. The same goes for Russia. After two years in office, Putin headed off to Germany for a summit meeting with then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The agenda of that meeting was the negotiation of debt reduction.

The former Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed, Russia took on all of its

debts and rights. Russia took responsibility for all the money the U.S.S.R. had lent and borrowed, but of course, the U.S.S.R.'s debts exceeded its loans. As of 2000, debts far exceeded 20 billion dollars. The largest debt was owed to Germany. In 2002, this debt totaled 6.5 billion dollars. This might not be a large sum considering Russia's current economy. But back then it was a huge amount for Russia.

So, Putin headed off to Germany to get an advantage in the debt reduction talks and, in that one-off meeting with Schröder, ended up really showing off his negotiation skills.

So how much of a debt reduction will qualify someone as a highly skilled negotiator?

Someone in the audience just said, "a reduction of half." Well, reducing a nation's debts by half during just one meeting is a bit too much, wouldn't you say? Well, actually, Putin reduced Russia's debt to Germany to one-eighteenth - from 6.5 billion dollars to 350 million dollars - after just one summit meeting.

How on earth did he do this? I heard someone in the audience say, "Provide resources like oil in exchange for debt reduction." I see that people who work in this field are pretty sharp. That is exactly right. But Putin also made the state of international affairs work in his favor when offering to provide resources.

What global issue were people focusing on in 2002?

The answer is terrorism. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2002, numerous countries, including Russia, invaded Afghanistan with the goal of "destroying the Taliban." Then U.S. President George W. Bush led this effort. But what did Bush start doing on top of that?

It is a real problem when a coward becomes a leader, and this is a good example of why. George W. Bush tried to attack Iraq, which his father—George H. W. Bush, the 41st president—had failed to succeed at during the Gulf War of 1991.

The U.K. joined with the U.S. on the issue of attacking Iraq, but French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Schröder and Russian President Putin fiercely opposed the idea. They raised questions about whether there was in fact link between the terrorist attacks and Iraq, and insisted that UN inspectors in Iraq be left to continue their inspections

for weapons of mass destruction. They also insisted that any attack could be made after the inspections were completed.

But President Bush, prodded by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney—who are both kind of grim reaper figures—pushed hard for an attack on Iraq.

By April 2002, President Putin knew that an attack on Iraq was inevitable. So did German Chancellor Schröder. Obviously, this topic was discussed at the summit meeting between the two leaders. I assume Putin said something along the lines of, “Mr. Schröder, this is a problem, isn’t it? Mr. Bush is going to attack Iraq no matter what.”

An attack on Iraq would destabilize the Middle East. This would disrupt the energy supplies and raise oil prices. Germany has no oil or natural gas. So Putin suggested, “Mr. Schröder, you must be concerned. But don’t worry. We have plenty of oil and natural gas. Even if the U.S. attacks Iraq, we promise to provide you with a steady supply of energy.”

And then he would have brought up the subject of Russia’s debt to Germany. “By the way, we don’t really have the funds to repay our debt at the moment ...”

Well, despite how it may sound, I wasn’t actually there. But Putin succeeded in reducing Russia’s 6.5-billion-dollar debt to 350 million dollars (or one-eighteenth of the original amount) in just one summit meeting on April 14, 2002.

Why did Germany accept this proposal? The comment Schröder made to the people of Germany soon after left a strong impression. “Rather than worry about debts which we’re not sure will ever be repaid, let’s think about the future of the German people.” By this, he meant securing a stable energy supply. Chancellor Schröder convinced the public, gained the approval of the German parliament, and reduced Russia’s debt from 6.5 billion dollars to 350 million dollars.

Using International Affairs to Further Russia’s Interests

From a squeaky-clean Japanese perspective, you may think, “It’s dishonorable to reduce your own debt by taking advantage of someone else’s weakness.” But from the Russians’ point of view, Putin is a great president, KGB or no KGB, because he could—after a single meeting—reduce to one-eighteenth the amount of debt Russians had to work hard to repay. This helps prove the case that politics is all about results.

On March 20, 2003, the U.S. commenced its attack on Iraq. Do you remember how much crude oil prices were before that? Just as you forget the heat when you drink a cold glass of water, we tend to forget anything negative as soon as it doesn’t affect us any more. Crude oil was somewhere between 20 and 30 dollars a barrel. Then prices began rising, just as Putin and Schröder had predicted, peaking at 145 dollars a barrel last year.

The surge in oil prices and natural gas prices benefited Russia and made the country rich. This was a miscalculation on Bush’s part, or something he just didn’t factor in at all.

So the point of this story is that Putin’s method is to turn international affairs to benefit his country. Well, what about Japan? If you think about it, Japan often gets taken advantage of in the name of international affairs, and ends up paying. Japan provided funds for Afghanistan, Iraq and the Gulf War.

Putin does the opposite, skillfully using the state of international affairs to further his country’s interests. Please keep this in mind because it leads to my next story.

Developing Long-term Strategies

The other characteristic of Putin’s tactics is that he develops strategies for the extremely long term.

If you look at what is happening now, you can see why Putin did what he did three or four years ago.

Let me give you a few specific examples. A typical story is how he returned Russia’s energy into the hands of the state. When he became president, Putin posed a question: “How could the state *not* be involved in energy resources, which are considered part of the national wealth?”

What he meant is that in around 2000, under the administration of the drunken President Boris Yeltsin,

90 percent of sales of Russia's fossil fuels went to fattening the wallets of robber barons with connections to Yeltsin's family. So, no matter how the nation tried to use its energy resources to further its own interests, it couldn't. In particular, Jewish robber barons, who strongly distrusted the state, sent their profits from oil and natural gas sales to the Cayman Islands, Gibraltar and other tax havens.

Normally, profits from such sales would rejuvenate a country's economy. But that didn't happen in Russia. Under Yeltsin's administration, no matter how high the prices of natural resources soared and how much were sold, the nation saw no money flowing in to stimulate the economy. The country had wealth. But the wealth didn't boost the economy because it was concentrated in the hands of the robber barons.

Getting the Assistance of his Former Employer

When Putin arrived on the political scene, he said, "How can the nation *not* be involved in managing its own resources?" This was quite a smart way of putting it. What he began to do was to smoke out the individuals who were pocketing the profit from energy resources, one by one.

How do you do that? To target certain companies owned by these robber barons, you arrest them for tax evasion. Who was good at this kind of thing? Think about Putin's past. He used to be a member of the secret police. His former unit set to work to collect evidence against these characters. They eventually arrested the executives of Russia's largest petroleum company, Yukos Oil Company, starting with Boris Berezovskii and Vladimir Gusinsky and finally arrested the company's top executive, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in 2005.

The tactics Putin employed were pretty bad. Under the rule of law, there are things that should and shouldn't be done. But regardless, the people of Russia praised Putin's efforts. Now, the state controls almost 50 percent of energy-related resources, with some 40 percent owned by the private sector.

So it is only natural that surging oil prices began profiting Russia. As this story demonstrates, Putin's strategies are focused on the extremely long term.

He used the same kind of long-term strategy for

natural gas as well. Since the 1970s, Russia has been supplying almost 30 percent of Europe's natural gas, which it needs for heating. Russia supplied the gas on its own, but it had a weak point in its operations: 80 percent of Russia's natural gas exports to Europe went via Ukraine. You can see the logic of this if you look at a map.

Ukraine used to be like a brother to Russia. In addition, in terms of spreading Christianity, Ukraine is almost the originator. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed in 1991, Ukraine became an independent country. There were no problems when relations were good. But in 2004, when a young, savvy politician by the name of Viktor Yushchenko took to the political stage under a campaign known as the Orange Revolution, he began saying that Ukraine would join the EU or side with the U.S. instead of Russia. That's when Russia became angry.

Until then, Russia had been selling natural gas to Germany for about 200 dollars per 1,000 cubic meters, while selling to its brother Ukraine for one-quarter of that amount, roughly 45 dollars. So when President Yushchenko took center stage, the infuriated Russia decided in December 2005 to begin charging Ukraine standard international prices.

Ukraine is much too poor to pay such rates, so in January 1, 2006, for the first time since the pipeline was built in the 1970s, it shut the pipeline down. That's what triggered the energy crisis.

Nord Stream Launched as a Strategic Move

Russia was criticized worldwide for "making the energy crisis political," but it's true. It made energy political. Of course it did. No country would supply energy at one-quarter of the market price to a country that was criticizing it.

This energy crisis would pose problems for Europe. But Putin had already laid the foundations for a long-term strategy in terms of pressuring Ukraine. What did he do? He founded a company in Russia in 2005, funded by Gazprom, the world's largest gas company. At a party several days ago, I noticed the chairman of Gazprom following Putin around like a shadow.

Gazprom launched Nord Stream AG, a company that

is 51 percent owned by Gazprom and 49 percent owned by Germany's BASF. As you can see on the map, this company builds and operates a 1,200-kilometer undersea gas pipeline that carries Russia's natural gas directly from a small port town called Viborg, which used to be controlled by Finland, along the Baltic Sea north of Saint Petersburg to a small port town called Greifswald, in what used to be East Germany.

In other words, the company delivers natural gas directly to Europe without going through Ukraine. This way, Russia can say to Ukraine, "You can't get in our way."

Being a company, Nord Stream AG needs a chairman and a board of directors. Who is going to serve in these positions? Nord Stream is 51 percent funded by Russia's Gazprom and 49 percent funded by Germany's BASF. Remember when I told you earlier to keep in mind how Putin developed his strategies with an extremely long-term perspective?

Well, in November of that year, Germany held a general election. Schröder failed to achieve a landslide victory and had to step down in favor of his successor, Angela Merkel. Ten days later, Nord Stream AG was launched. And who became chairman? Schröder.

If you look back to the two and a half years earlier, there must have some unspoken reason for Germany to reduce Russia's debt from 6.5 billion dollars to 350 million dollars. Looking now at how Nord Stream developed, maybe this was one of those tactics used behind the scenes.

So, to analyze Russia, you have look back a little into its history, rather than just looking at the present. Then you'll see how long a plan Russia's strategies are built upon.

The Current Plight of Russia:

A Large Ship Led by Skilled Captain

One of Putin's methods is to skillfully use international affairs to further Russian interests. Another is to use long-term strategies to benefit his country. We know these strategies, so we can trust him, can't we?

On my latest trip to Reykjavik, I saw a performance

by a quintet of *balalaika* players. Balalaika is a traditional Russian instrument with a very earthy image. The ensemble included the traditional *byan*, a sort of Russian accordion. The performance was amazing; it sounded like the string section of the Vienna Philharmonic. I had lived in Russia for more than a decade, but I had never heard such a wonderful performance.

Later, I had a chance to talk to the leaders of this group. We talked for quite a long time and the number two told me that they had "formed the ensemble in 1987 during the turbulent years of the Gorbachev reforms." When I asked them how they managed to make a living out of music, the number two said "[we] visited and performed at elementary schools and kindergartens" and "continued to polish [our] technical skills and never stopped trying to improve." That's how the ensemble became "one of Russia's national treasures."

When I heard this story, I got a sense of the underlying strength of Russian culture. I also heard a very good description of Russia today when I asked the members how they feel about "the current plight of Russia."

Many artists, like those in Japan, are critical of the political establishment of their times. But the number two said, "The current plight of Russia is like this: We are on a very large ship with a very skilled captain." This is not surprising considering Putin's strong approval ratings. But people in Japan never hear about this because the Japanese media portrays Russia as a dictatorship that is about to fall apart any minute.

Learning from Gorbachev's Complacency

You might suspect that Putin is pulling the strings of the young, 43-year-old Medvedev. Most Japanese believe this, probably because Japanese newspapers accuse Putin of running the government from behind-the-scenes, or say that Russia is a dictatorship, or that Putin is power hungry.

As I mentioned earlier, this year marks the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War. There is actually a link between this and the Putin-Medvedev alliance.

The end of the Cold War was declared on a small

Mediterranean island called Malta, famous for being one of the bases of the Crusader Knights. On December 1, 1989, a meeting was held between Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush, the father. That day, the biggest storm in 50 years hit the islands, sending waves splashing onto the planned meeting site on the top of a hill. At the time, I called the wind, “The Winds of God,” because the leaders of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were supposed to visit each other’s ships, but the storm made it impossible to use barges. So the two leaders were trapped in a Russian warship and, with no dumb journalists demanding news conferences hanging about, were able to talk in depth. That is how the end of the Cold War was declared in Malta.

By the way, when I saw the footage of the Malta Summit I was shocked. The summit was a meeting that ended a cold war between two rival ideologies, yet the Russian delegation included no military representatives. The three-member Soviet delegation consisted of Gorbachev, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and aide Alexander Yakovlev. On the other hand, the American delegation was made up of President Bush, Secretary of State James Baker as a counterpart to Shevardnadze, and Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs Brent Scowcroft in the capacity as aide, all of whom represented military or security organizations.

I was really shocked to see that the Russian delegation included no representatives of the military or the KGB, despite the fact that the meeting was to end a decades-long battle, even if it was a “cold” war. At the time, I wondered whether Gorbachev would be okay.

Gorbachev was complacent. He was complacent to think that there was no need to represent the military because reforms were progressing and the military was a conservative, money-guzzling institution.

The military and the security forces have power. What do people with power do when they are sidelined? As can be seen from what happened in Russia, they cause problems.

So, what happened on August 19, 1991, a year after the Malta Summit, as expected? The senior authorities of the KGB, security forces, military and the

Communist Party who had been prevented from ending the summit meeting attempted a coup d’état against Gorbachev.

Putin used to be a KGB agent. So he knew first-hand the frustration stirring within the organization, and what was happening. By the time the coup d’état occurred, Putin had resigned from the KGB.

Putin knows better than anyone about what happens when security forces, military personnel and others with power feel neglected or ignored.

Medvedev’s Skills

So what is Putin’s role now? You may think that Medvedev is a president without any real power, but that’s not necessarily the case.

In 2005, Putin appointed Medvedev—still in his 30s at the time—First Deputy Prime Minister, and gave him four portfolios to work on. Three of them were: (1) health care, which was the biggest issue for the Russian people (2) housing, most of which, because it had been built with quality sacrificed to quantity, was deteriorating, which was in turn causing the birth rate to decline and (3) education.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the education system fell apart. No wealthy Russian family educates their children in Russia. They all send their children to the U.K. or Switzerland. In fact, some 300,000 wealthy Russians reportedly live in London.

The last portfolio Putin gave Medvedev was agriculture, considered to be Russia’s Achilles’ heel. Putin gave these portfolios to then First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev and then watched him carefully for the next three years. Although many people would have run away from the issues, Medvedev produced results.

And what we mustn’t forget is that Medvedev was one of the people who created the nation’s energy strategies as chairman of Gazprom. This is a man who can create a national strategy for energy, Russia’s biggest income source. In reality, Russia dominated the energy sector, and Gazprom made 4 trillion yen worth of net profit in 2004. If you think about Medvedev as the man behind this company strategy, you won’t think of him as a young, naïve guy. Medvedev is not being protected by Putin; he is

someone who has made major achievements as a politician.

But the way I see it, he has one weakness. Medvedev has no connections to the military or security forces. He has worked strictly as a lawmaker, so he does not have the KGB connections that Putin does.

What does that mean? Russia attained its current wealth by returning energy to state control. How? By eliminating robber barons, one by one, through tax evasion charges. Russia took extreme measures—such as auctioning off assets to pay for tax bills and then having government-owned entities purchase the assets—but by doing this it furthered the national interest. And the people who did the majority of the work were the security service agents who gathered evidence on their targets' weaknesses.

Now, what would happen if Putin left and was replaced by a young individual who knew nothing about security agents? Remember the Malta Summit between Bush and Gorbachev on December 1, 1989? It would stir resentment, wouldn't it?

So what is Putin's role? I was wrong about one thing. I thought Putin would take a position at Gazprom, because ex-German Chancellor Schröder became the chairman of Gazprom. I had thought that the two would develop the world's energy strategies together. But Putin took the post of prime minister instead.

Putin's Real Role

I was really surprised by this. But if you think about it, there is a need for Putin to take up some kind of post that will enable him the KGB in check and be in charge of the military. Although Gazprom is a state-owned entity, working for a commercial corporation will not put Putin in a position where he can wield control over the nation's military.

I think Putin stayed in power to keep a check on the military and security forces, who would become frustrated if Putin had simply left after installing a no doubt skilled, young man—Medvedev—in power.

Medvedev became the president on May 7 of 2008. Soon after that, he staged a massive military parade in the Red Square. At the time, Japanese newspapers wrote, "Moscow finally shows the true colors of Putin's power-based policies after Medvedev assumes

presidency." Moscow never held a military parade during Putin's reign. So why did it put on a massive military parade in the Red Square after Medvedev became president?

What shocked me on top of all this was that Medvedev allowed large bombers to fly over the Kremlin, which never happened before, even during military parades. The bombers flying formation over the Kremlin were a message from Medvedev to the military, a message that read, "I don't know the military, but I know enough not to treat it lightly."

So the Japanese newspapers that said Russia was "showing off its military might" got it completely wrong. The bombers were a message to the Russian military forces that might have become frustrated under the new administration.

Honest Eyes See the Truth that Lies Behind

So it's okay to read the newspapers, but my message today is please keep an open mind when you do if you want to see the truth behind things.

In other words, there is no point in reporting the news unless we explain why a person portrayed by the newspapers as a "devil" is winning the passionate support of his people.

When people ask me to give lectures, they often say, "Please explain it in a way that is easy to understand, because we can't work out what's going on in Russia just by reading the newspaper." I always laugh and answer, "That's how I make my living." But this is bad news for newspapers, too. But the newspapers and Japan's public broadcaster, NHK, are not going to suddenly change, so it's important for all of you to keep an open mind when reading or listening to the news.

And you must want to know why Putin, who looks like a fairly unpleasant person, is so popular with his people. Actually, he does not necessarily look unpleasant. He just looks that way when he is serious about something. But as you can see from the picture I included in the book, Putin actually looks pretty good.

It's okay for you to dislike Russia. It may be difficult for me to convince you to like Russia. After all, the country has refused to return the northern territories to Japan. And tens of thousands of Japanese were

victimized when Russia violated the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact and invaded Manchuria in 1945. You don't have to like Russia, but it is a major superpower. And considering the size of the market of this resource-rich nation plus its rich culture, it would be a loss for the Japanese to not understand Russia just because we don't like it.

To avoid this, I would ask you to keep an open mind and if you have any questions, do some research yourself. This may not be the best way to put it, but as a neighboring country, I think we should be able to use Russia to our advantage.

Well, you probably have a lot of questions and there are so many things I didn't talk about today so please feel free to ask me anything.

Q&A

-- I heard that in Russia, children are trained to become military personnel from a very young age.

Kobayashi

Ah-ha. I can see that NHK has a big influence on people. NHK aired a documentary called "Putin's Russia" on its top-rating program *NHK Special*. The main idea being pushed by the program was that Putin is a bad guy, who is trying to turn children into soldiers. But Japan has also conducted military training at elementary schools in the past.

What Russia is trying to do now is modernize its military. The plan is to train people to become professional military personnel, then downsize the military and leave it in the hands of those who know what they're doing. So the training is not aimed at instilling a hostile, aggressive nature in children so that Russia can become a military superpower.

The third episode in the *NHK Special* series was on the topic of Georgia. On August 7, 2008, on the opening day of the Beijing Olympics, Georgia attacked South Ossetia. In response, the Russian military staged a huge attack directed by Putin and Medvedev and recognized the independence of not only South Ossetia but also Abkhazia, on the western tip of Georgia.

Let's check this out on a map as well. South Ossetia, which is next to Georgia, is a small region inhabited by

people with Russian passports. Georgia attacked this region, and then the Russian military attacked eight hours later and voiced its support for South Ossetia's declaration of independence. Russia also supported the independence of another country nearby called Abkhazia, a nice warm place where people grow oranges. The capital is Sokhumi.

The NHK program focused on a Georgian family that had been separated due to the war. The family was separated because the husband stayed in Moscow and the wife returned to Georgia during the summer break. But there was actually a huge amount of disinformation behind this story.

The whole focus of the program was the fact that the family was separated and could not reunite. The program was putting forth the view that Putin shouldn't be forgiven for this tragic situation. But there is a tremendous lie behind this story.

Actually, the husband could easily have gone home to Georgia if he wanted to. How? He could have entered Ukraine, and return to Georgia via Ukraine without any problem. He couldn't go fly directly from Russia to his home in Georgia, but he could have simply gone through neighboring Ukraine. I really can't forgive NHK spreading such disinformation with regard to this story. This shouldn't go unaddressed. It seems like such a sad story: "the children want to see their daddy." But the daddy simply has to get on a train and go home. It's awful, isn't it?

I tried to find out how this happened. It's very difficult to make a documentary, because even if you have an idea for a story, you often find that the actual situation is different when you get on the ground. So you document that, and the story changes. That's what making documentary is.

But it's extremely difficult to change your story. In your head, you already have a great story. "This poor family has been separated. Putin is such a nasty fellow." But now you have to change it to, "They can reunite if the father takes a train back to Georgia through Ukraine." That simply won't make a good story. But many recent TV programs shamelessly do this: they don't reflect the truth behind their stories.

Let me tell you another story related to documentaries. In June, there was an award ceremony for the Japan

Essayist Club Award, for which I served as one of the judges. This year, the award went to Kaoru Ikeya, who made a program with me. Some of his films have been shown in theaters, such as his documentary *Ari no Heitai* (“Ant Soldiers”) for which he walked all over China to basically “take shots of people’s faces.” Anyway, he went off the beaten track to shoot a documentary for over a year and a half, and wrote an essay about it. I strongly recommended his work, which led to his winning the Japan Essayist Club Award. The reason I am so happy about his win is because—as I plan to say during the award ceremony review—Ikeya makes documentaries the way they should be made. He goes on location, captures events as they unfold, even if it is not what he expected, and makes a real documentary.

Compared to Ikeya’s efforts, the three *NHK Special* programs were a product of laziness. The content was so bad that a local Russian staff member working at NHK’s Moscow branch said to me, “If you were still here, you wouldn’t have allowed them to make that.” But I can’t possibly go over everything that gets aired on NHK, and no one likes an ex-employee who tells current employees what to do.

I apologize for going off track. What I wanted to say is that it’s alright to watch TV programs, but when you do, please watch with a questioning mind. Please don’t think that everything NHK reports is true. The same can be said of the *Asahi Shimbun* or the *Nikkei Shimbun*. People working in the media are rarely perfect.

--Thank you for your talk today. It seems to me what you are saying is that it’s better to look at Russia from a perspective different to that of most Japanese people. If you look at Roman history, it seems different depending on whether you see it from a Roman perspective or from the perspective of Carthage, for example. So what I’ve taken away from your talk is that it’s better to look at Russia from several different perspectives rather than just one.

So I have a question regarding the speech Putin made that you talked about on May 12 when you were MC-ing. Based on international rules, I think the official translation is the document translated by a

Russian. But I have some doubts about the translation of Putin’s speech.

Kobayashi

Let’s try translating the sentence exactly how he said it in Russian. I think Putin said, “It is very easy to love the entire world. But let’s love our neighbor.”

--Thank you very much. The official translation from that day was, “Although it’s easy to love the world, it’s difficult to love your neighbor.” I felt that it was slightly different.

Kobayashi

I guess it depends on which part of the sentence you emphasize. He may have meant “it’s difficult.” At that time, I thought maybe Putin was referring to Ukraine or the Baltic States. But since he made the comment during his visit to Japan, he’s probably not referring to those countries. So I believe he meant, “Let’s be friendly.”

--I thought of it as a message from Putin for Russia and Japan to become good friends for their own sake and for the sake of world peace. Is this interpretation correct?

Kobayashi

I think it’s reasonable. But if you look at it from another point of view, it can be interpreted as, “It’s difficult to love our neighbor.”

Translation is very difficult. That’s why I never take on translation work. It can cause a huge problem if you get something wrong. I always use a professional.

I’d like to tell one more story about something that shocked me in the Latvian city of Riga. There are increasing problems between Russia and the Baltic States, of which Latvia is one. Riga is the capital of Latvia. Located in the best spot in town is the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. The purpose of this museum is to portray Russia as an evil occupying force. But from Russia’s point of view, they would say, “But we fought the Nazis together.” In 1940, the U.S.S.R. annexed Latvia under a secret pact signed by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. The museum looks at

the period of occupation under the U.S.S.R. from 1940 until Latvia's independence. Russia is opposed to this museum.

I was shocked when I entered this museum. Very conspicuously right in the entrance is placed the symbol of the Japanese Emperor and Empress, along with their signatures.

I'm a big believer in looking at both sides of the story when dealing with controversial issues. Regarding this issue, the Japanese government clearly took the side of Latvia.

I learned that after this incident Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in July 2008, became the first Russian foreign minister to visit the northern territories. That was after the Emperor and Empress's visit to Latvia. So the Emperor and Empress's signing event at the museum should not have happened. It's not a major problem because no one goes to that museum. But the Emperor and Empress should not visit such political sites. I would like to see the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs weigh in on this debate as well.

--The Emperor and Empress are concerned about the issue of war, and records show that they visited such sites in all the Baltic States.

Kobayashi

Yes, and Okinawa too. But in Riga's case, the museum was called the Museum of the Occupation. It was very disappointing that the Emperor and Empress' signed symbols were installed there.

It looks like our time is up. I would never talk past the scheduled time in a broadcast. I apologize (laughs).

Thank you very much for your attention.