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January 17, 2016 1:01 pm

Japan's Abe calls for Putin to be brought in from the cold

Lionel Barber and Robin Harding in Tokyo

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Shinzo Abe

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe is pressing for President Vladimir Putin to be brought in from the cold, saying Russian help is crucial to tackling multiple crises in the Middle East.

In an interview with Nikkei and the Financial Times, Mr Abe said he was willing to go to Moscow as this year's chair of the Group of Seven advanced economies, or to invite the Russian president to Tokyo.

Pointing to tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the war in Syria, and the threat of radical Islamism, Mr Abe said: "We need the constructive engagement of Russia."

The former G8 excluded Russia following its annexation of Crimea and military support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. But while Japan has joined in sweeping economic sanctions, Mr Abe made clear he wants to work with Mr Putin.

"As chair of the G7, I need to seek solutions regarding the stability of the region as well as the whole world," he said, noting Japan's ongoing territorial dispute with Russia over the Kuril Islands. "I believe

appropriate dialogue with Russia, appropriate dialogue with president Putin is very important."

As the only Asian nation in the club of rich democracies, Japan prizes its G7 membership, and Mr Abe is determined to make the most of the Ise-Shima summit he will host in May.

Mr Abe's call for engagement with Russia came despite his lauding the G7 as "a gathering of the champions of universal values like freedom, democracy, basic human rights and the rule of law". He

also voiced strong criticism of China's attempt to "unilaterally change the status quo" in the South China Sea.

Potential security threats to Japan were highlighted earlier this month when North Korea tested a nuclear weapon. Despite his efforts to secure the return of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea, Mr Abe vowed to toughen sanctions, saying it is no time for him to visit Pyongyang.

"The nuclear test unilaterally conducted by North Korea is a clear violation of United Nations resolutions," said the Japanese prime minister. "We must make clear to North Korea that as long as they resort to these activities, it will not be business as usual."

Mr Abe piled moral pressure on South Korean president Park Geun-hye to implement their recent settlement over wartime "comfort women" — his biggest diplomatic achievement last year. He said it was "a commitment and promise made between leaders" that had been welcomed by countries around the world.

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