

Analysis

The Kuril Islands Dispute Between Russia and Japan: Perspectives of Three Ocean Powers

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Abstract

Japan and Russia have never come to an agreement over the ownership of the four southern Kuril Islands and therefore have never signed a peace treaty at the end of World War II. Russia currently occupies the islands, but Japan claims them as Japanese territory. The Soviet Union exerted firm control over the islands. Under Yeltsin, Russia's position seemed to weaken, but no progress was achieved in signing a peace treaty. Since Putin's rise to power, neither side has been willing to make concessions and the situation remains stalemated.

Introduction

The fighting in World War II ended on August 14, 1945 when Japan capitulated to the American Pacific forces. Subsequently, the September 8, 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference officially ended hostilities between the United States and Japan. However, in the 62 years since the end of the war, Japan and Russia have failed to sign a peace treaty ending the conflict between them.

The main reason for this failure is a border dispute over four small islands in the Kuril chain off the northern coast of Japan's Hokkaido Island. The Japanese refer to these islands as the Northern Territories.

The Kuril Archipelago extends for 750 miles (1,200 km) from the southern tip of Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula to the northeastern coast of Japan's Hokkaido Island. The 56 islands cover 6,000 square miles (15,600 sq km) and, together with Sakhalin Island, form an administrative region of Russia. The Kurils were originally settled by the Russians in the 17th – 18th centuries. Japan initially seized the southern islands and in 1875 obtained the entire chain. After World War II, they were ceded to the Soviet Union, the Japanese population repatriated and replaced by Soviet citizens. Japan still claims ownership of the four southern islands and has tried repeatedly to regain them.

An associated controversy concerns the status of Sakhalin Island, a large island northwest of Hokkaido (approximately 589 miles or 948 km long). It had been settled by Russians and Japanese for centuries but in 1875 Japan and Russia agreed that Japan would give Sakhalin Island to Russia in exchange for 18 Kuril Islands. Then, following the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, Japan regained control of Sakhalin Island south of 50° latitude. Japan then took control of the entire island following the Russian Revolution of 1917, but abandoned the island in 1924. Finally, at the end of World War II, the Soviet Union took control of the entire island, along with the Kurils, and forced the Japanese population out.

Both the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island are tectonically and volcanically active. A large earthquake in 1995 killed approximately 2,000 people on Sakhalin, whose total island population is about 680,000. The Kurils are home to about 35 active volcanoes.

The Kuril Islands are administered by Russian authorities on Sakhalin Island. Never large, the population declined to about 16,000 following a major earthquake in 1994. Currently, some 3,500 border troops, far fewer than in Soviet times, remain to guard the territory. During the Soviet period, the islands were considered a vital garrison outpost. The military valued the island chain's role in protecting the Sea of Okhotsk, where Soviet strategic submarines were located. The major industries are fish processing, fishing, and crabbing, much of which is illegal. Once pampered and highly paid by the Soviet government, the Kuril islanders were neglected by Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Of necessity, the inhabitants are developing closer ties with northern Japan.

The Japanese Claim

The dispute between the two countries centers on controlling the four southernmost Kuril Islands, which were taken over by the Soviet Union in 1945. Japan claims that these islands are part of Japan, as they have always been visible with the naked eye from the Japanese island of Hokkaido and appear on centuries-old maps of Japan as being part of Japan.

At the San Francisco Peace Conference, Japan agreed to give up any claim to Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands north of the four closest to Japan – Shikotan, Etorofu, Kunashiri and the tiny Habomai island group. At the time, Japan also agreed to give up control of Korea, Taiwan, the South China Sea islands, Penghu, and its Antarctic territory.

The Soviet Union refused to agree to these terms and did not sign the peace treaty. Since that time, the Russian Federation replaced the Soviet Union and has agreed to re-examine the issue of the Kurils.

Fig 1. Map of Kuril Claims



The US Perspective

There are two prevalent misconceptions about the U.S. government's policies on the Kuril – Northern Territories – Islands dispute. The first is that President Roosevelt agreed at the Yalta Conference to cede “all” of the Kurils to the Soviet Union. In fact, the Yalta agreement never used the word “all” and it was only during August 1945, in a series of exchanges between Stalin and Truman, that Truman agreed in General Order No. 1 to grant the USSR occupation rights to “all” of the Kurils, including the southernmost islands traditionally considered to be part of Hokkaido. The Department of State's interpretation of the Yalta agreement and General Order No. 1 was that the Soviet occupation of the southernmost Kuril islands was intended to be a temporary military occupation only, until a Soviet-Japanese peace treaty transferred sovereignty of the Kurils to the USSR.

The second misconception concerns the so-called “Dulles Threat Incident” of 1956, when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu that if Japan gave up its claim against the USSR for the southern Kurils, then the United States might feel obliged to retain Okinawa in perpetuity. A large number of scholars, and especially Soviet scholars, have claimed that Dulles's “threat” was intended to torpedo the renewal of friendly Japanese-Soviet relations. Newly declassified documents show, however, that Dulles was actually trying to help the Japanese negotiators by offering them American-backed leverage against the Soviet Union. Contrary to many scholarly criticisms, the United States government's policy on the Kuril Island dispute has been consistent in stat-

ing that in the absence of an official peace treaty, the disputed islands remain Japanese territory.

The Russian View

Japan and Russia made some progress in negotiating the Kuril problem during the Yeltsin era. During the 1990s, the Kremlin seemed ready to recognize Japan's territorial claims to the islands of Iturup, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and Habomai and cede them to Japan, as documented by several intergovernmental documents. These texts include the Tokyo and Moscow declarations of 1993 and 1998 and the “Agreement on cooperation in fishing for living marine resources” signed also in 1998. These documents expressed both countries' willingness to conclude a peace treaty in 2000 and to “...enter the 21st century as trustworthy and efficient partners.” However, under Putin, the Kremlin was firm in asserting Russian sovereignty over the islands and the problem remains unresolved.

The Soviet Union's position rejecting Japan's territorial claims to the southern Kuril Islands was firm and based on “corresponding international agreements”. These islands constitute more than 50 percent of the land surface of the whole archipelago and include the two largest islands, Iturup and Kunashiri. The Soviet view was last officially expressed in 1989.

The major points of the Soviet position were that:

- a) The USSR holds the exclusive right to develop the southern Kurils;
- b) When these islands were part of Japan, they were used as a springboard for aggression toward neighboring countries, in particular to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Soviet civilian ships during World War II, when a neutrality pact between Russia and Japan was in force;
- c) Japan was an aggressor state in World War II. It was deprived of a part of its territory, including all Kuril Islands, as punishment by the winning countries, for its aggression against many nations.
- d) Revising these international arrangements is tantamount to questioning the results of World War II.
- e) The Soviet Union demonstrated its intention to promote cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual benefits as well as to “secure post-war borderlines between Russia and Japan.”

The problem seemed to be closed as Japan, by signing a variety of agreements, de facto recognized the Russian occupation of the four islands. However the general weakening of the state in the late Soviet period and internal frictions between Gorbachev and Yeltsin in their race for power made Soviet foreign policy and the “Kurils issue,” in particular, a weapon of this struggle.

During the final days of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin's allies began to speak in support of a proposal to cede, or to sell, the islands to Japan at the cost of US \$20–50 billion. During his visit to Japan in 1990, Yeltsin proposed a “five-staged program for settling territorial claims”. The plan consisted of:

- 1) officially recognizing the “Kuril problem”,
- 2) demilitarizing the islands,
- 3) declaring the territory a zone of free enterprise,
- 4) signing a peace treaty and establishing “unified management” over the islands, and
- 5) a complete overview of the Kuril issue by a future generation of politicians.

During his presidency, Yeltsin never removed his five-point plan from the governmental agenda, but, at the same time, he never made it public at the official level. Nevertheless, this plan might have been, and still may be, a “secret” foundation for the Kremlin's policy toward the Kurils. Besides, these islands were never mentioned as a part of Russian territory, which was seen by many Russian specialists as absolutely inadmissible in such documents.

The Yeltsin-era Tokyo and Moscow Declarations both recognize the claim of Japan to the four islands. The Joint Soviet-Japanese Declaration of 1956, to which Tokyo regularly refers as the basis for its bilateral relationship, talks about a probable transfer of Habomai and Shikotan, the two smaller islands, and does not mention the larger islands of Kunashiri and Iturup. This transfer would take place only after the signing of a peace treaty.

Unlike similar documents of the past, neither the Tokyo nor Moscow Declarations have been ratified as intergovernmental agreements by the Russian parliament. Some have speculated that Yeltsin's administration did not submit these documents for ratification because it was aware of their disadvantageous content for Russia, leading to their ultimate rejection by the legislators.

Even though Yeltsin's five-stage plan was never officially approved, key components of it have been implemented. Thus, the first stage, recognition of the problem, was accomplished quickly and without any serious problems in 1994–1996.

The second stage, demilitarization of the islands, was implemented with no less success. As a result, there

are only frontier posts and small naval units based on the Kurils at present. However, Russians claim that the Japanese armed forces in Hokkaido have increased in number and strengthened their combat capabilities due to additional state-of-the-art armament.

Japan interpreted the Russian military drawdown in the 1990s as a sign of Russia's weakness and exerted unprecedented pressure on this part of Russia's territory by authorizing Japanese fishing boats to operate in Russia's 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone around the southern Kurils. As a result, the number of fishing violations grew to ten thousand. Under these circumstances, the then-commander of the Federal Frontier Troops General A. Nikolayev received permission to use force to protect Russian waters, including firing at Japanese ships.

The subsequent confrontation threatened Yeltsin's entire plan. Prompt diplomatic arrangements were made and negotiations to allow Japanese boats to fish in Russia's territorial waters were held between the two countries.

The third stage, encouraging free enterprise, was implemented by allowing Japanese citizens to visit the Kurils without a visa, negotiation of the fishery agreement in 1998, Japan's humanitarian aid to inhabitants of the islands, and an appeal by Russian authorities to Japanese business circles to invest in the region.

The fourth stage of the plan, signing a peace treaty, has yet to be achieved. In 1999, Yeltsin's team rejected the idea of signing a peace treaty for the first time, even though this idea had been proclaimed in the 1993 and 1998 Declarations. This treaty was to define comprehensive approaches for future Russian-Japanese cooperation in all areas including “the issue of a boundary solution”.

Unfortunately, Putin has made no progress in signing a treaty. His attitude toward Japan's territorial claims is clearly expressed in his repeated statements about the integrity of Russia's territory and especially in his statement in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on September 3, 1999: “Does anyone say that the government plans to cede the Kurils? We negotiate, we acknowledge the problem, but transfer of the Kurils is out of the question”. With neither side willing to make territorial concessions, the situation is stalemated.

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Further Reading

Viacheslav K. Žilanov and Aleksei Plotnikov, “The Old Legacy and Ways to Solve It,” *Severnaya Patsifika*, 2002.