



## JAPAN-RUSSIA TERRITORIAL DISPUTE: PEACE TREATY POSSIBLE?

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For more than 70 years, Russia and Japan have been locked over disputed islands — Kunashiri, Etorofu and Shikotan, and the Habomai islet group. These are called the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kurils in Russia. The islands were seized by the Soviet Union after Japan's World War II surrender in August 1945. Japan claims these islands, which it believes Russia occupied illegally. Russia, which took possession of them under Stalin in the mid-1940s, has expressed no intentions to give them back.

The Kuril Islands are home to 20,000 people, living along 13km (8 miles) of paved roads.<sup>1</sup> One ferry a week connects them to Sakhalin, a larger Russian island. According to sources, these islands were inhabited by Japanese communities practising fisheries and agriculture. Remnants of ancestral graves and shrines and temples prove this fact today.<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary times, Japan is actively engaged in developing security cooperation with

Russia. After coming to power in 2012, PM Abe has met President Putin 22 times over the islands, though with little apparent progress. Recently, Abe expressed hope that the upcoming meeting with the Russian President, which is scheduled in November 2018, will help to settle the long-standing territorial dispute with Russia and sign a post war peace treaty. Further, he expressed the hope Japan-Russia ties will be “next-generation ties”.<sup>3</sup> Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook too has recently described the Japan-Russia relationship as “the bilateral relationship with the greatest potential,” It states that “building appropriate partnership relations with Russia in the region will contribute to Japanese national interests and regional peace and prosperity.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Russia's militarization of Kuril Islands**

Meanwhile Russia's military presence on the Kuril chain has also increased. Two years back in November 2016, just ahead of President Putin's visit to Japan, Russia announced the deployment

of new anti-ship missiles to Iturup and Kunashir. In 2017, Japan scrambled its jets fighter 390 times to intercept approaching Russian aircraft. At the start of 2018, Moscow ruled that combat jets could be deployed to Iturup. The construction of a naval facility is also beginning on Matua in the Northern Kurils, at the site of an old Japanese base.<sup>5</sup>

Increasing Russian military activities on the disputed islands are seen in response to Moscow's concern over the possible procurement of two U.S.-made land-based Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence batteries by Japan. As the Russian ministers officially stated their concerns over the deployment of these BMD systems during the two-plus-two dialogue held in Moscow on July 31, 2018.<sup>6</sup>

Japan's long-time ally the United States sees Russia's military presence on the disputed islands as a major security threat. The challenge that Japan faces now is the need to negotiate a fine line of pushing its interests, pushing a peace treaty, but at the same time trying to maintain strong relations with the United States which itself currently has difficult relations with Russia. This is going to be a complex situation face for the Japanese.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

In the recent past, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has stated his desire to revise the Japanese constitution, more specifically the peace clause that denounces Japan's rights to possess the

means to wage a war. With Japan's security environment becoming ever increasingly severe with the shift in the global power balance and, the emergence of new threats such as terrorism and cyber-attacks, as Japan feels that it needs to contribute more actively to the peace and stability of the region and the international community.

In addressing the challenges that it perceives, Japan is looking to diversify Japan's security partners, primarily by deepening defence ties with Australia, India, and some European powers. When it comes to Russia, Japan's goal is more specific. Japanese strategists see Russia as a country in long-term decline with an unfavourable economic outlook. On its own, it does not pose a threat to the status quo in East Asia. Japan's concern, however, is that Russia's isolation from the West since the annexation of Crimea has caused Moscow to increasingly make common cause with Beijing. In the event of a regional crisis, such as clashes over the disputed Senkaku Islands, Tokyo's nightmare is that it would face a Sino-Russian united front, while support from the United States would be equivocal.<sup>8</sup> The two countries have signed an armistice — like North and South Korea — but no peace treaty. That makes geopolitical negotiations in the region extremely delicate, complicated and urgent too.

Abe has said he plans to hold talks with Putin on at least two more occasions before the end of this year. He is looking for a peace treaty

with Russia. But the unresolved issue of the disputed islands stand in the way of a possible peace treaty. The upcoming meeting between Abe and Putin promises to be interesting but it remains to be seen whether it will deliver the peace treaty.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Japan says no to Russia's surprise offer of a peace treaty, 12 September 2018, Available at <https://qz.com/1387639/japan-rejects-russias-surprise-peace-treaty/>, accessed on 17 October 2018

<sup>2</sup> Why Russia and Japan never declared peace after World War II, 12 September 2018, Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-12/russia-and-japan-never-declared-peace-after-wwii-heres-why/10234028>, accessed on 17 October 2018

<sup>3</sup> Abe describes upcoming meetings with Putin as 'extremely important', 12 October 2018, Available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/10/12/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-describes-upcoming-meetings-putin-extremely-important/#.W9IDf2gzbDc>, accessed on 17 October 2018

<sup>4</sup> Japan Seeks to Neutralize the Threat of a China-Russia United Front—And It's Not Working, 8 July 2018, Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/japan-seeks-neutralize-threat-china-russia-united-front%E2%80%94and-its-not-working-25217>, accessed on 17 October 2018

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Japan Asks Russia to Reduce Militarization of Disputed Kuril Islands, 1 August 2018, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/japan-asks-russia-to-reduce-militarization-of-disputed-kuril-islands/>, accessed on 31 October 2018

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid