

Kuril Islands: The Unresolved Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute

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The Kuril Islands, an archipelago stretching from Japan's Hokkaido Islands to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, are pivotal to both nations due to their strategic, economic, and historical significance. The islands hold enormous strategic value for Russia, primarily in military terms. Located at the northern entrance of the Sea of Okhotsk, they act as a natural barrier, safeguarding Russia's Pacific Fleet and providing a strategic advantage in naval operations. This positioning allows Russia to exert influence over maritime trade routes and maintain a strong defence posture in the North Pacific, which was historically crucial during the Cold War and continues into the present geopolitical landscape.

Economically, the Kuril Islands are rich in natural resources, particularly fisheries and potentially valuable minerals. The surrounding waters are abundant in fish stocks, supporting a significant fishing industry contributing to local economies and Russia's broader economic interests. Moreover, geological surveys indicate the presence of mineral resources that could further bolster Russia's industrial and energy sectors, enhancing self-sufficiency and economic stability.

Historically, the islands were acquired by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II under agreements like the Yalta Agreement, cementing their status as Soviet territory. This historical context reinforces Russia's narrative of rightful territorial possession and national sovereignty, shaping its contemporary policies and strategic outlook in the Far East.

Geopolitically, control over the Kuril Islands enhances Russia's regional influence, allowing it to project power into East Asia amidst complex power dynamics involving China, Japan, and the United States. By maintaining sovereignty over the islands, Russia asserts itself as a key player in regional security architectures and balances competing interests to safeguard its strategic objectives.

Finally, the islands hold immense symbolic value for Russia. They embody not only the sacrifices of Soviet forces during World War II but also serve as a testament to Russia's territorial integrity and national identity. Any discussion of relinquishing control over the islands faces fiery public and political resistance, underscoring their deep-rooted significance in Russian historical consciousness.

In conclusion, the Kuril Islands represent a multifaceted asset for Russia, encompassing strategic military advantages, economic resources, historical narratives, geopolitical leverage, and national identity. These factors underscore Russia's unwavering commitment to maintaining sovereignty over the islands despite ongoing diplomatic challenges and international scrutiny.

Where are the Kuril Islands, and why are they important to both Russia and Japan

The Kuril Islands, an archipelago in the North Pacific, stretch from the northeastern tip of Japan's Hokkaido Islands to 750 miles (1,200 km) from the southern tip of Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. Consisting of 56 islands, it covers an area of 6,000 square miles (15,600 sq km) and, together with Sakhalin Island, forms an administrative region of Russia. This chain of islands, known for its volcanic activity and rich natural resources, has been at the centre of a long-standing territorial dispute between Russia and Japan.

For Russia, the Kurile Islands are the rightful spoils of war. For Japan, they are stolen land, taken due to Soviet aggression and Western meddling. Over 70 years after World War II, both countries are still deadlocked over these four islands.

Japan argues that the four islands closest to its mainland are not part of the Kurile chain; thus, the USSR had no right to seize them. A 2016 poll revealed that 78 per cent of Russians opposed returning the islands to Japan. Military strategy also ties Russia to these islands, as deepwater channels between them provide Russian submarines a stealth route to the Pacific Ocean. If returned to Japan, there is the possibility of a U.S. military presence on the islands, so Russia is unlikely to hand them over. However, as described by Russian President Vladimir Putin, a possible resolution could be a "hikiwake" (a draw in judo).

The most acceptable solution for both nations might be the "two islands plus alpha" approach. Japan would receive Shikotan and Habomai islands, plus another concession from Russia, in exchange for renouncing claims to Kunashir and Etorofu. The "alpha" could include fishing rights near the larger islands or rights for Japanese citizens to visit and conduct business there. If a mutually acceptable "alpha" can be found, a peace treaty might finally end World War II for these two countries. In November, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Putin agreed to accelerate peace treaty negotiations based on the 1956 joint declaration. Russia has insisted that Japan ensure the U.S. will not deploy troops on the islands. Russia currently controls the islands, which Japan claims as its own, arguing they were illegally occupied after World War II.

On December 13, 2018, Russia stated that the 1960 Soviet memo calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan must be considered in peace treaty talks. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova noted that all diplomatic documents, including the Soviet memo, would be part of the discussions.

The 1960 memo protested the revision of the Japan-US security treaty and demanded the withdrawal of foreign forces from Japan, setting a new condition for the handover of two of the islands. Japan rejected this demand, stalling peace treaty negotiations.

On December 15, 2016, Putin and Abe discussed joint economic activities on the South Kuril Islands, among other issues. The unresolved territorial dispute has prevented a permanent peace treaty between Moscow and Tokyo since World War II. At a summit on December 15-16, agreements worth 300 billion yen were signed, including joint investment platforms and Mitsui's acquisition of a stake in Russia's R-Pharm. Putin was welcomed in a G7 capital for the first time since the Ukraine crisis began. A recent poll showed 51 per cent of respondents who lived on the islands before WWII believe Tokyo should reconsider its immediate return demand, which 82.3 per cent prefer. Russia's defence minister announced plans for a military base on the islands, which are strategically important.

The Kuril islands, just north of Japan's Hokkaido, have been under Moscow's control since Soviet troops seized them at the end of WWII. That Japan claims the southernmost islands prevents the signing of a peace treaty, which, in turn, hinders closer political and economic ties.

In 2012, Japan and Russia were still technically at war due to Moscow's refusal to sign the 1951 peace treaty, primarily because of the territorial dispute. The Kremlin viewed the Northern Territories as a price Japan paid for its WWII alliances, and there was no plan to return the islands. In 2008, Russian officials strongly rejected any possibility of returning the islands, viewing the situation as Japan's penalty for its wartime actions. Most Japanese academic debate on the issue remains stagnant, focusing on nuances of historical declarations without practical solutions.

The territorial dispute has kept the two countries from signing a peace treaty. In 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited the disputed islands, sparking Japanese criticism and a

temporary recall of its ambassador. The return of the two islands mentioned in the 1956 declaration has been periodically considered and dismissed by Putin's administration. The islands' economic value lies largely in their fish-rich waters, and their return is a matter of national pride for both countries.

Historical background of the conflict

It consists of over 56 islands and islets, divided into three main groups: the northern, central, and southern Kurils. The southernmost four islands—Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and the Habomai group—are the focal point of the dispute. These islands are known as the Northern Territories in Japan.

The origins of the territorial conflict date back to the mid-19th century when the Treaty of Shimoda (1855) was signed between the Russian Empire and Japan, establishing formal relations and delineating the boundaries between the two nations. According to this treaty, Japan's sovereignty extended to the southernmost islands of the Kuril chain. However, the Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875) complicated matters further by granting all the Kuril Islands to Japan in exchange for Sakhalin Island, which became Russian territory.

The situation drastically changed in the aftermath of World War II. In 1945, as part of the Yalta Agreement, the Soviet Union agreed to enter the war against Japan in exchange for territorial gains, including the Kuril Islands.

The ownership dispute over the four southern Kuril Islands has prevented Japan and Russia from signing a peace treaty since the end of World War II. While Russia currently administers the islands, Japan asserts its sovereignty over them. The Soviet Union initially secured control of the islands, and under Yeltsin, Russia appeared willing to negotiate, but no treaty materialized. Since Putin assumed power, both sides have maintained firm positions, resulting in a longstanding stalemate. World War II hostilities ended on the 14th of August, 1945, with Japan's surrender to the American Pacific forces. Subsequently, the September 8, 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference officially concluded the war between the United States and Japan. However, despite 62 years passing since the war's end, Japan and Russia have yet to sign a peace treaty, primarily due to a territorial dispute concerning four islands in the Kuril chain,

known to Japan as the Northern Territories. Japan initially seized the southern islands and acquired the entire chain in 1875. After World War II, the islands were ceded to the Soviet Union, and the Japanese population was replaced by Soviet citizens. Japan continues to claim ownership of the four southern islands and has persistently sought their return.

Sakhalin Island, located northwest of Hokkaido and approximately 589 miles (948 km) long, is also contested. Initially settled by Russians and Japanese, an 1875 agreement saw Japan cede Sakhalin to Russia in exchange for 18 Kuril Islands. Following the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan regained control of Sakhalin south of 50° latitude, eventually taking over the entire island after the Russian Revolution in 1917. The Soviet Union subsequently took full control of Sakhalin and the Kurils at the end of World War II, expelling the Japanese population.

Both the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin are tectonically and volcanically active. Sakhalin's 1995 earthquake claimed approximately 2,000 lives among its 680,000 inhabitants, while the Kurils' 35 active volcanoes pose ongoing hazards. Administered from Sakhalin Island, the Kurils' population, once over 16,000, dwindled after a major 1994 earthquake to approximately 3,500 border troops, a fraction of Soviet-era levels. Historically vital as a military outpost guarding the Sea of Okhotsk and Soviet submarines, the islands' major industries include fish processing, fishing, and crabbing, despite illegal fishing activities. Once well-supported by the Soviet government, Kuril islanders faced neglect after its collapse, fostering closer ties with northern Japan.

Japan's Claim is that the dispute centres on Japan's claim to the four southernmost Kuril Islands, occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945. Japan asserts these islands have always been part of its territory, visible from Hokkaido and appearing on centuries-old Japanese maps. At the San Francisco Peace Conference, Japan renounced claims to Sakhalin and the Kurils north of the four closest islands to Japan—Shikotan, Etorofu, Kunashiri, and the Habomai island group. Japan also relinquished control over Korea, Taiwan, South China Sea islands, Penghu, and its Antarctic territory. The Soviet Union rejected these terms and did not sign the treaty. Following the USSR's dissolution, Russia succeeded it and has since considered revisiting the Kuril issue.

Misconceptions about US policy on the Kuril Islands include the belief President Roosevelt agreed to cede "all" Kurils to the Soviet Union at Yalta, which was not the case. In 1945,

Truman's General Order No. 1 granted the USSR occupation rights to all Kurils, including the traditionally Hokkaido-linked southernmost islands. Subsequently, Soviet forces occupied the islands, and the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951) saw Japan renouncing its claims to the Kurils. However, the Soviet Union did not sign this treaty, leading to differing interpretations and unresolved claims. The State Department's interpretation views Soviet occupation as temporary, pending a peace treaty transferring Kuril sovereignty to the USSR. Another misconception concerns the "Dulles Threat Incident" of 1956, where Secretary of State John Foster Dulles allegedly pressured Japan regarding the Kurils to retain Okinawa. However, declassified documents show Dulles aimed to aid Japanese negotiators, not sabotage relations with the USSR. The US maintains the islands remain Japanese territory absent a peace treaty.

According to the Russian view under Yeltsin, negotiations showed promise in resolving the Kuril dispute. Kremlin documents suggested readiness to recognize Japan's claims to Iturup, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and Habomai, that is, to cede them to foster trust between the nations. Putin's administration, however, firmly asserts Russian sovereignty, citing historical agreements and strategic considerations. Despite diplomatic efforts, signing a peace treaty remains elusive, maintaining a stalemate.

Japan argues that the four southernmost islands were never part of the Kuril chain and thus were not included in the territories renounced in the San Francisco Treaty. Conversely, Russia maintains that these islands were lawfully acquired as spoils of war. The dispute has hindered the signing of a formal peace treaty between the two nations, leaving them technically still in a state of war. Over the decades, both nations have made attempts to resolve the dispute. In the 1950s and 60s, occasional talks brought no significant progress. More recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe engaged in extensive negotiations. They explored joint economic activities on the islands and potential frameworks for resolution, yet a final agreement remained elusive.

The Kuril Islands dispute also involves strategic and economic dimensions. The waters surrounding the islands are rich in marine resources, and the islands themselves are believed

to possess valuable mineral deposits¹. Furthermore, their geographic location holds military significance, providing strategic advantages for control over the North Pacific.

Public opinion in both countries adds another layer of complexity. In Japan, public sentiment insists on reclaiming the Northern Territories, viewed as an integral part of national identity. In Russia, the islands are seen as a rightful part of their post-war gains, with any territorial concession perceived as a sign of weakness.

In summary, the Kuril Islands dispute is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical treaties, wartime agreements, and national pride. Despite numerous diplomatic efforts, a resolution remains challenging due to the intricate blend of legal, economic, strategic, and emotional factors involved. As such, the Kuril Islands continue to symbolize a significant and enduring point of contention between Russia and Japan.

The importance of the Kuril Island in Russia's strategic thinking

The Kuril Islands hold an indispensable role in Russia's strategic calculus in the Far East, owing to a confluence of historical, economic, and geopolitical factors:

- strategic military advantage
- economic significance
- historical and geopolitical context
- geopolitical influence
- national identity and sovereignty

Firstly the islands' historical context further underscores their importance to Russia. Acquired by the Soviet Union following World War II, the Kurils were part of the strategic territorial gains negotiated under the Yalta Agreement and subsequent post-war settlements. The Soviet capture of these territories from Japan in the closing days of the war solidified Soviet control over the region and established a new geopolitical order in East Asia. This historical precedent

shapes contemporary Russian policy, reinforcing the narrative of rightful territorial possession and national sovereignty.

Moreover, geopolitically, the Kuril Islands enhance Russia's regional influence and security posture. By maintaining control over the islands, Russia asserts its presence in East Asia, a region characterized by complex power dynamics involving China, Japan, and the United States. The islands serve as a strategic pivot, allowing Russia to project power into the North Pacific and exert influence over maritime trade routes and security architectures. This influence is particularly significant in the context of regional security partnerships and geopolitical alignments, where Russia seeks to balance competing interests and safeguard its strategic interests.

The islands also provide Russia with crucial strategic advantages, particularly in naval operations and defence. Situated at the northern entrance of the Sea of Okhotsk, they act as a natural barrier, controlling access to this vital maritime region. Historically, this control has been pivotal in safeguarding Russia's Pacific Fleet, allowing it to operate freely and securely in the Pacific Ocean. During the Cold War, the Kurils served as a forward defence post against potential naval threats from the United States and its allies, emphasizing their strategic significance in maintaining Russian military dominance in the region.

Economically, the Kuril Islands are rich in natural resources that contribute significantly to Russia's economy. The surrounding waters teem with fish stocks, supporting a thriving fishing industry crucial for local economies and food security. Moreover, geological surveys suggest the presence of substantial mineral resources, including rare metals and hydrocarbons. Control over these resources is not only economically advantageous but also strengthens Russia's overall self-sufficiency and strategic independence.

Finally, the Kuril Islands hold immense symbolic and nationalistic value for Russia. They are viewed not only as a testament to Soviet sacrifices during World War II but also as a cornerstone of Russia's territorial integrity and national identity. Any discussion of relinquishing control over the islands is met with strong public sentiment and political resistance, reflecting their deep-rooted significance in Russian historical consciousness and collective memory.

In conclusion, the Kuril Islands represent a multifaceted asset for Russia, encompassing strategic military advantages, economic resources, historical narratives, geopolitical leverage, and national identity. These factors collectively underscore Russia's unwavering commitment to maintaining sovereignty over the islands, despite ongoing diplomatic challenges and international scrutiny.

Militarizing the Kuril Island

Amid the overshadowing focus on the Ukraine conflict, Russia's recent and rapid militarization of islands claimed by Japan has largely evaded widespread attention. These islands—Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan, and the Habomai group in the Kuril chain—have been a longstanding point of contention between the two nations since World War II.

Less than a decade ago, there was optimism that some of these islands might be returned to Japan. During former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure, Japan made continuous efforts to enhance relations with Russia, hoping to pave the way for the return of the closest islands. Japan collaborated on local economic initiatives, joint tourism projects, and diplomatic negotiations.

However, Abe's outreach appears to have failed in persuading Russia to consider returning the islands. Instead, since at least 2015, Russia has significantly bolstered its permanent military presence on these islands. Reports and satellite imagery reveal the construction of Russian barracks, airstrips, and other infrastructure, located as close as 14 miles from Hokkaido. Russia's actions suggest a future where these islands will continue to play a troubling role in Russo-Japanese relations, underscoring the need for Japan and the United States to intensify consultations regarding Russia's activities in the region.

In the last five years, Russia has conducted extensive construction on Kunashiri, Etorofu, Matua, and Paramushiri in the Kuril chain, marking a new phase in the islands' development. This chapter began with the deployment of the Soviet-era Tor-M2U surface-to-air missile system to the Northern Territories in late 2015¹. Subsequently, in 2017, Russia stationed a Bastion anti-ship missile battalion on Etorofu and a Bal anti-ship missile battalion on Kunashiri.

These missile systems, with ranges of up to 310 and 185 miles, respectively, significantly enhance Russia's capability to control sea routes around Hokkaido. Concurrently, Russia sparked Japanese protests in 2018 with announcements of barracks construction and the deployment of approximately 3,500 troops. Satellite images reveal substantial developments, including large-scale compounds and expanded infrastructure on Kunashiri and Etorofu between 2017 and 2022.

The escalation continued with the construction of fenced-off complexes and multi-story buildings on Kunashiri and Etorofu, along with significant military infrastructure expansions on Matua and Paramushiri. The militarization of the Kuril Islands is underscored by Russia's strategic interests, which include securing passage for its Pacific Fleet and establishing forward operating bases for military operations and intelligence.

Recent events have further strained Russo-Japanese relations. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Japan imposed sanctions, leading Russia to suspend peace treaty talks on the Kurils and terminate agreements that protected Japanese fishing vessels in surrounding waters. Tensions escalated further with military exercises and visa policy changes affecting former Japanese residents of the islands, alongside joint naval operations with China in the region.

These developments highlight the urgency for transparent dialogue between the United States and Japan on Russian activities in the region. Strategic consultations should focus on safeguarding shared interests and developing a unified response to prevent further militarization and potential escalation. Diplomatic efforts should also prioritize renewed talks with Russia aimed at diffusing tensions and promoting regional stability.

The conflict's current standpoint

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russia will temporarily halt Japan's seaweed harvesting activities outside Signalny Island in the Lesser Kuril Chain starting on July 15, 2024. This suspension is due to the need for lighthouse repairs, as stated on the ministry's website. Under a bilateral agreement from 1981, Japanese fishermen have been harvesting seaweed in Russia's territorial waters surrounding Signalny Island.

The ministry clarified that the Japanese government recently inquired about a "power outage" affecting the island's lighthouse through diplomatic channels in Moscow and Tokyo. No other reports of malfunctions were received from other navigational entities in the area, the ministry added.

In response to Japan's request for the lighthouse to be restored to full operational capacity to ensure safe navigation, including for seaweed harvesting, Russia has decided to suspend Japan's harvesting activities outside Signalny Island from the 15th of July this year until the completion of the scheduled lighthouse maintenance. This measure aims to prevent potential incidents during this period, the ministry emphasized. The suspension of Japanese seaweed harvesting near Signalny Island in the Lesser Kuril Chain by Russia has significant implications for Japan's economy and food security. Japan is heavily reliant on seaweed, known as "wakame" in Japanese, as a staple food item and an essential ingredient in various traditional dishes such as miso soup and seaweed salads.

Seaweed harvesting is not only a cultural practice but also a crucial economic activity for Japanese coastal communities. According to data from Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, Japan's total seaweed production was approximately 707,000 metric tons in 2020, with wakame accounting for a significant portion. The suspension of harvesting in the waters around Signalny Island impacts Japan's ability to access a key source of wakame, potentially disrupting supply chains and affecting local economies that rely on seaweed harvesting for livelihoods. Moreover, Japan's fisheries industry, including seaweed harvesting, plays a vital role in its domestic food security. Japan is one of the world's largest consumers of seaweed per capita, and any interruption in seaweed supply could have broader implications for food availability and prices domestically. Therefore, the temporary suspension of Japanese seaweed harvesting due to lighthouse repairs on Signalny Island underscores not just a regulatory issue but also a critical economic and food security concern for Japan. Maintaining stable access to seaweed resources is essential for Japan's food culture, economic stability, and the well-being of its coastal communities.

Summarized, the dispute over the Kuril Islands has had implications for various aspects of bilateral relations, including economic cooperation such as fisheries agreements. The suspension of Japanese seaweed harvesting and fisheries cooperation can be seen within the

context of these broader tensions. Geopolitical developments, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine and subsequent international sanctions, have further strained relations between Russia and Japan. This geopolitical backdrop has influenced decisions regarding economic activities and cooperation in disputed territories like the Kuril Islands, impacting industries such as fisheries that rely on stable bilateral agreements and regulatory frameworks.



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Endnotes

¹ Macarthur Boschak, 2024.