

All Quiet on the Eastern Front?

Japan and Russia's Territorial Dispute

DR. DAVID SACKO

MICAH WINKLEY

Abstract¹

Japan has disputed Russian ownership of the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils since the end of World War II. Security analyses of Asia-Pacific border disputes generally focus on the multilateral South China Sea or bilateral East China Sea disputes, with only occasional attention paid to the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories disagreement. Should this decades-long territorial dispute between Japan and Russia escalate or become resolved through a stable condominium, strategic stability in Northeast Asia would be affected. Given the numerous failures to resolve the dispute since the end of World War II, this continuing dispute remains overlooked despite clear implications for regional US national security interests. An escalation of this disagreement could affect the implementation of regional ballistic missile defense infrastructure, maintenance of an effective deterrent against North Korea, and China pressing claims on US allies as part of its rise as a regional power. What is the likelihood that Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and President Vladimir Putin's elevated discussions will positively resolve the dispute? Through a two-level game analysis of this territorial dispute, this article argues that while the elite circumstances have never been better to resolve this dispute, popular forces remain significantly divisive, such that the status quo over the Northern Territories will remain in place.

Introduction

At the close of World War II, the Soviets seized the four southernmost Kuril Islands from Japan. In 1951, the Soviet Union rejected conditions set forth by the San Francisco Peace Treaty that would have provided a process to resolve this territorial dispute. High-level negotiations between the two states ensued until the early 1970s, when Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev declared that there *was* no territorial issue.² Lack of traction ensued over signing a peace treaty, with the territorial dispute remaining the chief obstacle to improving relations between Japan and the Russian Federation. Remarkable events since 2016 indicate renewed and positive efforts, however, the likes of which have not been observed in decades. In December 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe welcomed

Russian President Vladimir Putin to Japan for the first time in 11 years, hosting Putin as the first-ever foreign leader in Abe's home prefecture. The two leaders subsequently unveiled a new agreement for the joint economic development of the four disputed Northern Territories under a "special arrangement." While the specifics of such an agreement continue to be negotiated over successive meetings, the potential economic activity under consideration could herald the arrival of a condominium arrangement (shared sovereignty). As negotiations continue over the border dispute, Abe has demonstrated his willingness to move ahead in drawing Russia closer to Japan through other economic ventures. Just one year after the 2016 meeting, Abe's administration had encouraged private-sector investment in the Russian Far East through a cooperation plan that spurred 21 projects, worth over 16 billion USD.³ The high volume of meetings between Abe and Putin, coupled with incremental progress on the dispute, has fostered optimistic expectations on the Japanese side for a major breakthrough.⁴

Recent events since 2016 appear to present a distinctively new "window of opportunity"⁵ for resolution of the territorial dispute. Japan experts observing each encounter and statement by Putin, Abe, and their close advisers have renewed hope for a resolution. This position expresses optimism that the Northern Territories dispute may be resolved through a condominium territorial arrangement⁶ or even bilateral security cooperation.⁷ For much of the territorial dispute's history, however, severely circumscribed bargaining room prevented Japanese leaders from moving past an initial stage of asserting claims. As Putin and Abe now plumb the linguistic incertitude of previous bilateral statements on the territorial dispute,⁸ creative bargaining maneuvers have become necessary to achieve a solution that can satisfy the important audiences in each country. While recognizing the significant obstacles that have derailed success in past negotiations, the optimistic camp tends to emphasize the positive developments as evidence that there is space for resolution before Abe leaves office. In contrast, this article argues that powerful barriers will likely impede Abe's desire to take major steps toward resolution, given the time constraints and other important regional security challenges.⁹ Putin may also lack the incentives to soften the shock to Russian citizens of ceding Russian land gained victoriously from the Japanese in World War II.¹⁰ In the end, there may simply be no room for acceptable compromise.¹¹ Using Robert Putnam's two-level game analysis, this article finds that, despite the recent favorable conditions for resolution of the territorial dispute, popular forces in Japan—and especially Russia—will foreclose the possibility of overall successful diplomatic efforts before Mr. Abe leaves office in 2021.

Two-Level Game Analysis

Putnam's "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics"¹² analyzes the interrelationship between domestic politics and international diplomacy as a "two-level game." Putnam explicitly considers the process in which state leaders negotiating an agreement with their foreign counterparts and the subsequent process of submitting the agreement for ratification by their particular domestic "selectorates," whether democratic, autocratic, or semidemocratic. As Putnam states:

The politics of many international negotiations can usefully be conceived as a two-level game. At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments. Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision-makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign.¹³

Each "sovereign" ignores one of the two "levels" of the negotiation at its peril. Negotiators, on behalf of their sovereign leaders, need not only secure agreement with their foreign negotiating counterparts (the Level I tentative agreement, in Putnam's parlance) but also with their authoritative domestic constituency (the Level II legal ratification). For any likely agreement, the respective negotiating parties' "win-sets" (space for negotiation) must overlap.

Putnam makes two key counterintuitive points on the dynamics of these win-sets, however. First, while more room to maneuver at Level 1 makes an accord more likely, negotiators will be fixated on the "deliverability" of the accord at the domestic level. As Putnam describes it, the fear of involuntary defection with the respective domestic political processes completely undercuts the practical realities of the delivered accord—a factor that we will return to in the Japan–Russia negotiations over the disputed Northern Territories. Second, Putnam cautions us to consider how the size of the Level II win-set (the conditions the domestic constituency will accept to ratify) affects the distribution of the joint gains from the international accord reached in Level I. That is, the more limited a negotiator is by the prospects of ratification, the less her position can reasonably change—as Putnam says, the less she can be "pushed around."

The successful negotiator will have a firm grasp on both her own Level II political constraints as well as her opponent's. Win-set uncertainty can be a stumbling block to overcome (in terms of evaluating the likelihood of "unintentional defection") as well as a useful bargaining device (in overstating one's political constraints). Japan's territorial dispute with Russia fundamentally involves the type of territorial

sovereignty claims that have invoked nationalism on both sides, but it also includes potential access to resources, along with strategic military positioning. This analysis thus employs Putnam's two-level game framework by focusing on the interaction between governments and domestic nationalist concerns—specifically how domestic institutions interact with the strategies of negotiators. We explore how Japanese and Russian political preferences, economic priorities, risk assessments, historical memories, potential side payments, and institutional constraints affect the likelihood of a near-term successful international accommodation.

Historic Japanese–Russian Relations and the Disputed Territory

A Century of Shifting Control: 1850s–1950s

Prime Minister Abe's opening comments to the 2018 Diet reflect an important reality: Japanese–Russian relations have much potential. Tense bilateral relations have historically derailed prospects for cooperation, instead encouraging competition for land, resources, and regional power. Ambitious British and American efforts at expansion into the Far East in the 1850s motivated Russian officials to build good relations with then-isolationist Japan.¹⁴ The Russian fears were not ill-founded, as Great Britain and the United States each signed treaties with Japan in 1854. Both agreements encouraged diplomatic and economic interdependence between each state and Japan by facilitating easier port access and granting most-favored-nation treatment.¹⁵ Russian and Japanese officials subsequently adopted and expanded similar conditions in their 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, setting in motion the process for discussing other potential areas of disagreement. Among these was the important issue of territory demarcation. The Treaty of Shimoda drew a boundary between Etorofu and Uruppu, allotting the four currently disputed islands south of Uruppu to Japan and the remaining islands north of Etorofu to Russia.¹⁶ Sakhalin remained under joint control for another 20 years, until the 1875 Treaty of St. Petersburg settled the issue by giving Russia complete possession of Sakhalin and Japan complete possession of the Kuril island chain.¹⁷

The newly established borders between Russia and Japan, both now expansionist powers, changed once again—this time through force—during the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–05; the victorious Japanese gained the southern half of Sakhalin through the Treaty of Portsmouth.¹⁸ By the outbreak of World War II, Japan had solidified its position as a major regional power in the Far East. While Japan agreed to sign a Neutrality Pact with the Soviet Union in April 1941, both powers continued to maneuver in anticipation of major territorial shifts that could result from the war. These expectations became a reality on 8 August 1945, when

Soviet troops abruptly abrogated the Neutrality Pact by swooping in with a massive offensive in Manchuria, circumventing Japanese fortifications.¹⁹ Soviet fighting persisted after Japan announced its surrender on 15 August, leading to the Soviet takeover of all of the Kuril Islands, including the four currently disputed ones, by 5 September.²⁰

Japan's shock over this episode profoundly shaped its perceptions about Soviet intentions and trustworthiness by the beginning of the Cold War. The US-crafted San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 formally ended the war between Japan and the Soviet Union, though the Soviets withheld assent over certain treaty stipulations. On the other hand, Japan signed the treaty with Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida verbally affirming the status of Kunashiri and Etorofu being "of the South Kurils" and Shikotan and the Habomais as part of the Japanese territory of Hokkaido.²¹ Yoshida took this stance knowing that Article 2(c) of the treaty stipulated that Japan "renounces all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands" and all other territory gained through the Treaty of Portsmouth. At this crucial juncture, then, the official Japanese position acknowledged only two islands as inherent territory. Operating in light of this principle, Japan today seems justified in requesting rightful ownership of perhaps only the smallest two of the four disputed territories.

Yoshida's comments notwithstanding, the San Francisco Peace Treaty's imprecision aggravated the territorial dispute in two important ways. First, the treaty failed to delineate the borders between the Kuril Islands and the territory belonging to Hokkaido. Second, the treaty avoided designating the rightful owner of the Kuril Islands after Japan ceded this territory. The Soviet Union's decision to avoid signing the treaty and submitting to its dictates thus complicates Russia's rightful claims to the territory, according to the Japanese position. This territorial dispute quickly became known as the "Northern Territories Problem" (*hoppo ryodo mondai*) in Japan, gradually deepening into the most inveterate thorn in the relations between the two states today. Although the two sides still have not signed a peace treaty, the 1956 Joint Declaration relieved much of the postwar tension.

The Soviet–Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956 poses significant questions about what could have led to a different regional power alignment had the United States not intervened in negotiations. Beginning only a decade after the Soviet takeover of the Kuril island chain, Soviet–Japanese negotiations nearly resolved the territorial dispute. Still recognizing Etorofu and Kunashiri as part of the Kuril Islands, the Soviets nonetheless prepared to return Shikotan and the Habomais while tabling discussion of the remaining two islands for "future discussion."²² Importantly, the proposal guaranteed conclusion of a peace treaty before "the Soviet Union would benevolently return Shikotan and the Habomai Islets to Japan."²³ Such a prospect generated fears in the Eisenhower administration of

closer Japanese–Soviet relations. Due to these fears, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pressed his Japanese counterpart to take a stronger stance on all sovereignty claims northeast of Hokkaido. US support augmented efforts by conservative Japanese political elites, who strove to fixate national policy on grouping the four islands as a single issue endowed with an indivisible nature. Instead of two islands being the starting point in negotiations, then, the Japanese side soon demanded the return of all four disputed territories from the Soviet Union.

In return for Japan's newly delimited bargaining room, the United States agreed to the eventual return of Okinawa to Japan. A stalemate ensued thereafter in Japanese–Soviet negotiations, hardening the future stances of both parties. Japan's renewed security treaty with the United States in 1960 prompted the Soviet Union to proclaim that no territory would be returned to Japan until after the withdrawal of all US military forces from Japanese territory.²⁴ In 1961, the Soviet Union declared that “territorial issues between Japan and the Soviet Union are resolved,” closing off the opportunity for further negotiation.²⁵ The Soviet Union continued publicly asserting that no dispute existed, even after private comments during 1973 negotiations between Secretary-General Brezhnev and Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka indicated otherwise.²⁶ Both sides failed to make any progress throughout the remainder of the Cold War.

Formation & Entrenchment of Japan's “Inherent Territory” Rhetoric: 1950s–Present

In the years leading up to the Soviet Union's collapse, the official Japanese narrative on the Northern Territories problem crystallized, as the islands became endowed with greater symbolic worth. Such discourse cemented the status of these islands in the minds of the Japanese people, setting the stage for difficult bargaining in the future. Maps produced by Hokkaido government officials and individual explorers prior to 1945 treated only the Habomai archipelago as an integral part of Hokkaido and the other islands as integral to the Kuril Islands.²⁷ Gradually, the Japanese government began to consider all four islands as “inherent territory.” This position originated in a grassroots movement initiated by Nemuro mayor Ishisuke Ando shortly after Soviet occupation of the islands.²⁸ The city of Nemuro originally served as the hub of economic activity for northeast Hokkaido and the southern Kuril Islands. After the islands transitioned to Soviet control, most of the former Japanese inhabitants moved to Nemuro. Consequently, concerns over economic pragmatism formed the basis for Nemuro's irredentist movement, which petitioned the central government in Tokyo only for the return of the four islands closest in proximity to Nemuro. The other Kuril Islands, like Sakhalin

Island, lacked the same emotional connection for these Japanese citizens, who had spent their entire lives on the four Northern Territories. Nemuro-based activists thus made their demands while acknowledging Kunashiri and Etorofu as part of the Kuril island chain and claiming both the Habomais and Shikotan as part of Hokkaido.²⁹ The first two islands stood a lesser chance of being transferred back to Japan compared to the other two, but the irredentists committed themselves to securing the return of all four islands.

Political considerations joined economic considerations over the “inherent territories” when the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) identified a means to counter its political rivals. The language of *inherent territory* initially became manifest on the national level during the Soviet–Japan negotiations of 1955–56. Halfway through the negotiations, Japanese diplomats argued for the first time that “the four islands are inherently part of Japanese territories,” going so far as to label all four islands “Northern Territories” instead of “Southern Kurils.”³⁰ As such, Japan would no longer consider any of these disputed islands part of the territory ceded after signing the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. A subsequent national directive by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in 1964 repudiating the term “Southern Kurils” in reference to the disputed territories cemented the official status of the “Northern Territories” among the public.³¹ The Japanese government later established a holiday to commemorate the “Northern Territories” on 7 February, the anniversary of the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda. Necessity soon propelled the LDP to embrace a strong position on the “Northern Territories” issue for domestic political reasons as well. The LDP co-opted and emphasized the language used by the grassroots irredentists in Hokkaido to shift domestic focus away from the rival socialist party’s opposition to the LDP’s Okinawa stance of allowing American bases to remain after the island’s reversion to Japan.³² Perceived worldwide Soviet aggrandizement needed to be countered, whether on Japan’s northern border or within its borders in the form of dangerous ideologies opposed to Japanese national security.

Just before the Soviet Union collapsed, Japanese officials believed the time was finally ripe for settling the dispute. One particular Japanese diplomat played a crucial role in orchestrating an event never before seen in Japan. On 18 April 1991, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev became the first leader of either Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union to visit Japan.³³ The diplomat Gorbachev traveled to meet was the LDP secretary-general, Shintarō Abe. Using a new approach that he termed “creative diplomacy,” Abe focused on building mutual trust with Gorbachev. This concept accentuated a feature of the bilateral relationship noticeably absent since the nineteenth century.³⁴ Emblematic of this approach, Abe’s USSR visit to meet with Gorbachev the year before eschewed talk of “territorial dispute”

in favor of more general reforms.³⁵ Recognizing the potential for fruitful discussion after decades of failed progress, Abe viewed trust building as possible only within a broader framework of Japanese–Soviet relations. Enlarging the sphere of constructive dialogue would gradually pave the way for expanding future bargaining room on the territories.

During this meeting, then, Shintarō Abe only indirectly referred to “the difficult issue” while insisting on cooperation to solve the issue with “sagacity” and “prudence.”³⁶ In taking this stance, Abe implicitly acknowledged constraints that simultaneously limited the meeting’s possible outcomes and obliged him to display political acumen in ways hitherto unseen in Japanese diplomacy. Abe’s softened stance in this meeting reciprocated a similar response from Gorbachev, signaling a modification in the Soviet stance on the territorial issue. Official Soviet acknowledgement of the dispute reemerged after being shelved decades earlier.³⁷ To cement the foundation of this new relationship, Abe unveiled an eight-point cooperation plan that centered on establishing economic, cultural, and academic projects within the disputed territories and the USSR more generally.³⁸ Both states would carry out these projects in a long-term manner, constantly evaluating the intentions and trustfulness of the other side, en route to eventual negotiations over the territories.

Unfortunately for these prospects, Shintarō Abe died in May 1991, one month after Gorbachev’s visit to Japan. Without the dedicated efforts of this eminent statesman, Japanese diplomacy toward Russia returned to a position that reaffirmed the inseparability of economics and politics. Japanese skepticism about the possibility for true Russian reform undergirded this position. As much of the West became optimistic about Russian integration into the liberal international order, Japanese policy makers and citizens hazarded a more cautious view. The prevailing Japanese narrative about Russia emphasized the “original form” of an essentially Russian “paradoxical, traitorous, cunning, and calculating character [that] was contrasted with Japanese consistency and integrity.”³⁹

In many ways, the advent of Russian President Putin opened the most important chapter in the territorial dispute’s history. During his first term as president, in March 2001, Putin signed the Irkutsk Declaration with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori. This document explicitly reaffirmed the Joint Declaration of 1956 as the starting point for negotiating a peace treaty, adding that attribution of the four disputed territories must be resolved in this process.⁴⁰ Holding the weight of a written statement instead of verbal promises, this declaration announced the official resumption of efforts that had been tabled four decades earlier. Putin’s hold on power nearly two decades later provides additional hope to the similarly

stable Shinzō Abe administration in Japan. Still, progress between the Russian and Japanese governments remains largely incremental.

Russia's Newly Energized Asia Policy: Necessarily a Pivot?

Russia has had high hopes for rapprochement with Japan. While the primary object of Russia's own Asian pivot has been China, a successful Asia policy fundamentally involves Japan. In September 2012, newly re-elected President Vladimir Putin hosted the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit meeting in Vladivostok. Later, in June 2013, he announced a series of economic initiatives at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum to integrate the Russian economy into the Asia-Pacific region rather than in European markets.⁴¹ Taken together, analysts equated these actions with the US "Asian Pivot," declaring it "Russia's Pivot."⁴² A key difference, however, is that Russia faced east to *cooperate*, not *compete*, with China in both economic and security terms. Also, it is wrong to say that Russia was *pivoting* to Asia, especially since they are already geographically present there. Most of the Russian land mass is Asian, and the Russian Federation already had key economic and political interactions with Asian states.

Asia has much to offer Russia: close customers for its gas and oil exports, investment to develop Russia's energy infrastructure in Siberia and the Russian Far East, and an alternative to Russian economic dependence on the West. Yet Mr. Putin's words forecasted the trajectory of Russian policy for the next five years. China, not Japan, was the primary object of Russia's newly energized Asia policy. However, new possibilities would emerge in the Russia–Japan relationship. Russia explicitly sought to mitigate the dependence on China this "pivot" might create by pursuing a trilateral relationship involving Japan.

In 2003, Dmitri Trenin's *End of Eurasia* thesis attempted to answer the prevailing question of Russia's alliances. Trenin argued that Russia, given its myriad regional challenges, should integrate with the European Union and pursue cordial relations with the United States, thereby essentially joining the West.⁴³ Since independence in 1992, the Russian Federation had been struggling with how best to integrate with Western political and economic institutions. Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov's foreign policy from 1996 to 1998 abruptly rejected US leadership; his airplane's sudden turnaround after the US bombing of Belgrade was named the "Primakov Loop." His "statist" view of the national interest attempted to reconfigure Russia's presence in the international system as a great power, this time in a multipolar world. He opposed Prime Minister Andrei Kozyrev's "liberal westernism" that emphasized integration into Western institutions and non-interference in former Soviet states.⁴⁴

Mr. Putin's first presidential term would attempt to cooperate with the United States and the West in pragmatic rather than ideological terms. As he moved into his second term, he sought to renew Russian assertiveness. Despite the Russian invasion of Georgia, Dmitri Medvedev's presidency would attempt a new pragmatism with the United States, as he sought Western economic support for his modernization program. His program included the "reset" of relations with the United States, the conclusion of the new START treaty that limited strategic nuclear missiles, a unified front to contain Iran's nuclear program, and cooperation on US efforts in Afghanistan. President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin certainly emphasized the Asia-Pacific region as well but not at the expense of Russia's relation to the West—at least not until 2013.

Underlying Russia's economic vision for investment in its Far East are its national security concerns. Upon returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin declared development of this region one of his chief priorities. The massive Far East is rich in resources but lacks the infrastructure to harness those resources. High levels of bureaucratic corruption and interference dimmed the prospects for attracting investment, leading to Putin's decision to establish a "Free Port of Vladivostok" in 2015. Seen as the bridge to connect Russia to Asia, Vladivostok represents the key to unlocking access to Asian economic markets and security partnerships as Russia turns its gaze from Europe. Vladivostok, which is protected by the Kuril island chain to its east, also serves as Russia's point for eastern power projection, housing the Pacific Fleet headquarters.

The ascendancy of Mr. Putin in 2012 also saw the marginalization of pro-Western elites in the Russian government. Elites who favored defending Russia's sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness returned. There was also a renewed emphasis on Russia's Orthodox Christian cultural distinctiveness. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that there would be a fundamental Russian break with Western institutions. After Putin emphasized Russian conservative values—national unity, sovereignty, and the traditional family—he was at odds with the liberal Western principles of minority rights, democratization, and institutional human rights. States along Russia's eastern border required no such compliance with international norms. Mr. Putin's return marked a reinvigoration of Russian efforts to move the international system closer to multipolarity and away from the US-led liberal international order.

Russia had been nurturing a closer relationship with China since 1994, when the two countries legally resolved their border disputes. Since then, whenever Russia has moved away from the West, it has made greater diplomatic, economic, and military cooperative overtures to China. Still, despite treaties and good relations, Russia's 2013 Asia policy was driven by its continuing anxiety about the

vulnerability of its southeastern border and by its desire to boost its economic and political presence in the Pacific. Though Russia was once again drifting from the West in 2013, there was still the possibility that it might backtrack, in accordance with *Trenin's* admonition to integrate westward. A series of actions, however, culminating with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, would forestall any westward movement in the near term. The invasion represented a fundamental shift in Russia's departure from Europe and entrance into Asia.

Russia headed east primarily for economic reasons—its prosperity would be better served by Asia's more dynamic economies—but it also has strong geopolitical considerations for the move. It needs to develop its Russian Far East (RFE) and Eastern Siberia regions into manufacturing hubs and reroute its energy transportation infrastructure to supply energy to the rest of Asia. In order for *Medvedev's* own reset to be successful, he needed to deliver a security framework acceptable to the United States, Europe, and Russia. It was his failure that compelled Russia in another direction. Since then, Russia has attempted to build an eastern multilateral security framework that is more multipolar rather than centered on US power.⁴⁵ The strategic and economic constraints imposed by US and EU sanctions after the Ukraine invasion enhanced Russia's relations with China. Since 2014, Moscow hoped to counter the sanctions primarily by strengthening its energy and defense alliance with China. Russia's international aspirations, however, are at odds with dependence on China. Their relationship is already an unequal one; Russia's Asian strategy thus necessarily includes cultivating ties with other Asian states such as India, Vietnam, and Japan. These states have historically had discordant relations with Russia.

Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept fundamentally postulates that the center of the world is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region away from the "traditional western powers."⁴⁶ As in previous versions, Russia emphasizes its geographic position as the key transit zone between Europe and Asia as well as its desire to integrate with the Asia-Pacific region to develop the RFE and Siberia. Russia maintains a leading role in the Eurasian Economic Union and envisions a similar role within the Shanghai Cooperative Organization and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations to facilitate such "integration." Since 2012, and especially 2016, Mr. Putin has increased the pace of his official visits to China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Trade with Asia has certainly increased with the opening of new oil and natural gas pipelines along with liquefied natural gas shipments.⁴⁷

Japan has a key place in Russia's energized Asia policy. Russia has reached the limit of its political and economic expansion. This is a constraint in its relationship with Japan. As discussed above, the key obstacle to Russia's more cordial relationship with Japan is the disagreement over the ownership of the Northern

Territories/Southern Kuril Islands. Japan and Russia remain far apart on the issue of sovereignty of these islands, preventing a final agreement like the one reached by Russia and China in 1994. The US–Japan security relationship has been reinforced by the resurgence of China, particularly given China’s muscular foreign policy position over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute. If a peace treaty could be concluded, Japan would become Russia’s partner—an even more logical partner than China. Japan poses no threat to Russian security, and Tokyo would be a more accommodating economic partner. Japan’s technology would be a greater boon than China’s.

Seven years after Russia’s Asian Pivot,⁴⁸ most analysts consider this move to be either only a partial success or a failure.⁴⁹ Russia was able to conclude a 400 billion USD natural gas deal with China, but China is paying less than what Russia was getting from Western Europe. Furthermore, Chinese investment in the RFE and Siberia has not materialized like Putin had anticipated.⁵⁰ China has many energy options, soon to include Iran, whereas Russia has fewer and fewer hydrocarbon customers. Beijing still has a more similar worldview to Russia than Europe (and vice-versa), but Russia remains in a disadvantaged position in its relations with China.

An Unmistakable (and Final?) Window of Opportunity: The Abe–Putin Relationship

Since the end of 2016, the convergence of a remarkable number of events suggests considerable potential for resolution of the territorial dispute and conclusion of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia. Mr. Putin and Mr. Abe have often publicly declared support to resolve the Northern Territories dispute, and the conditions for doing so have rarely been better. Nonetheless, popular forces likely remain sufficiently opposed to any terms of a resolution such that the status quo over the Northern territories will remain between Japan and the Russian Federation.

The relationship between Putin and Abe represents perhaps the greatest opportunity for resolution in the territorial dispute’s history. Recognizing the need to directly work with Putin on the dispute, Abe orchestrated the Yamaguchi Summit at a hot springs hotel in his hometown on 15–16 December, 2016.⁵¹ As Putin’s first visit to Japan in 11 years as president, Abe planned an extravagant setting for their sixteenth official meeting to make significant progress on securing denouement of the territorial dispute. Highlights of the summit included the unfolding of proposed Joint Economic Activities (JEA) to be initiated in the Northern Territories under a “special agreement.”⁵² Last proposed in 1998 by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in talks with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the

previous JEA plan failed over lack of agreement on issues of jurisdiction and sovereignty.⁵³ While the specifics of this “special agreement” to create a type of condominium agreement remain undeveloped, Japanese officials view the JEA as an indispensable means to soften Russian nationalistic sentiment.

Diplomatic events in 2018 accompany progress made on the economic front between Japan and Russia, thereby encouraging prospects for resolving the territorial dispute. National elections in May and September 2018 cemented the legacies of both President Putin and Prime Minister Abe as the longest-serving leaders of their countries since the end of the Cold War and World War II, respectively. After parliamentary elections in October 2017, Abe’s LDP holds a two-thirds supermajority in both houses of Japan’s Diet.⁵⁴ Further, Abe retained his position as LDP president with support from 70 percent of his party parliamentarians in the September 2018 leadership election, highlighting strong support of his policy agenda from within the government. Overwhelming LDP power in the government helps provide ample room for Abe’s negotiations with Putin, pending public support for this and other issues, like constitutional revision.

Favorable events notwithstanding, Russia’s military modernization on the disputed territories poses a challenge to resolution of the issue. In January 2018, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev approved Etorofu’s civilian airport for war-plane deployment just prior to exercises held on the four disputed islands by 2,000 Russian troops.⁵⁵ Taking place around Japan’s holiday commemorating the Northern Territories, these exercises stung Japanese politicians. Since 2015, Russia has concentrated its efforts to modernize its military capabilities on the Northern Territories. Indeed, post-2014 Japanese sanctions on Russia after the Crimea annexation led Russia to step up “military maneuvers, new infrastructure, and military modernization” on and near the Northern Territories.⁵⁶ Then-President Medvedev’s visit to the disputed territories in 2010 initiated the Russian buildup, but the process accelerated after his second visit following Russia’s annexation of Crimea.⁵⁷ In December 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russia planned to actively develop military facilities to support its tanks, self-propelled artillery, multiple launch rocket system, surface-to-air systems, and helicopters that defend the islands.⁵⁸ The Japanese Ministry of Defense also reported that Russia equipped its forces on Etorofu and Kunashiri with Bastion and Bal coastal defense missiles in November 2016 before Etorofu’s civilian airport received Su-35 air-defense fighters in March and August 2018.⁵⁹ In fear of increased militarization, Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera has asked his Russian counterparts in 2+2 security talks to reduce Russian military activities on the islands.⁶⁰

Finally, the US–Japan security alliance’s answer to the North Korea missile threat poses another challenge to resolution of the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan. Criticism from Russia on the heels of a 2+2 meeting between Japanese and Russian foreign and defense ministers in July 2018 characterized Japan’s then-decision to initiate deployment of the Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system as a “deployment of the US global missile defense.”⁶¹ Even though many within the Japanese government argue defensively against Russian opposition to this technology, some Japanese experts contend that Russian officials believe that US-produced technology will never be controlled completely by those nations to whom Washington sells the equipment.⁶² Moreover, Japanese Defense Minister Onodera explicitly stated the need to counter “cruise missiles approaching Japan” in a January 2018 visit to Aegis Ashore systems in Hawaii.⁶³ With cruise missile capabilities employed more by China and Russia than North Korea, Russia portrays Japan’s actions as another step away from developing a relationship based on trust. Without such a relationship, no significant progress may be made to resolve the territorial dispute. Japan’s recent decision to cancel its Aegis Ashore purchase, prompted largely by domestic and budgetary considerations,⁶⁴ thus does little to allay Russian concerns about the ultimate direction of the US–Japan security alliance.

Japan and Russia’s Two-Level Game

In Japan, developments since 2016 have created perhaps the largest potential win-set size since the initial stages of Japan’s 1955–56 negotiations with the Soviet Union. As described earlier, Level I and II negotiations historically faced constraints due to the high symbolic worth of the Northern Territories and concomitant challenges in dividing “inherent territory” of Japan. This narrative gradually united politicians from all parties eager to contrast a Japan respectful of the rules-based international order with an aggressive Soviet Union actuated primarily by *raison d’état*. To divert scrutiny from pre-1945 Japanese “authoritarianism, militarism, and imperialism,” conservative politicians in particular juxtaposed Japan with the Soviet “other.”⁶⁵ When post-communist Russia began transforming from a threatening “otherness” through increased global engagement and decreased troop presence in the RFE, Japanese leaders built trust with their Russian counterparts through greater socialization.⁶⁶ Greater cooperation between the two states has not been substantively derailed by Russian aggression in 2008 and 2014. Prime Minister Abe is personally committed to resolving Japan’s territorial dispute and looks to take advantage of relatively recent major shifts in both levels of negotiations.

As the chief Level I negotiator on the Japanese side, Abe’s decision to emphasize his support of the 1956 Joint Declaration risks running afoul of political

opposition groups. In November 2018, the head of the main opposition party remarked that “our predecessors were striving to get the four islands back together, so I hope the negotiations will be headed for that.”⁶⁷ Abe’s return to the Joint Declaration as a starting point with Putin raises the perennially intractable questions of attribution for each of the four islands. Even the process of ascribing the term “return” or “transfer” of Shikotan and the Habomais leading to a peace treaty becomes problematic when discussing future sovereignty of these islands, as President Putin has pointed out.⁶⁸ Even so, Abe has the potential support he needs from LDP parliamentarians after recent elections in order to overcome elite opposition to more creative negotiations. Furthermore, sizeable support in public opinions polls from 2013 indicate Level II support may be open to a compromise.⁶⁹ Whereas tremendous opposition to compromise existed until recently, weariness over lack of progress coupled with increasingly pressing strategic concerns permit Abe to expand his win-set size.

The major shift in Japan’s acceptance of territorial divisibility comes on the heels of its changing perceptions about the symbolic worth of the islands. As memories of the Soviet Union recede into the annals of textbook-based history, the public knowledge of the Northern Territories dispute also subsides. The younger generation of Japanese come to understand geostrategic challenges stemming from the east and south without understanding the issues surrounding the dispute with Russia.⁷⁰ Furthermore, James Brown notes that “while 81.5% have at least some knowledge of the dispute, only 3.2% would campaign actively for the islands’ return, according to Cabinet Office data.”⁷¹ Taking advantage of the essentially democratic attribute of short-term memory, Abe conspicuously avoided using the language “inherent territory” in advance of the 2019 celebration of Northern Territories Day.⁷² Without extensive coverage of the territorial dispute, particularly in branding the four islands “inherent,” Abe further expands the Level II wiggle room he needs to achieve compromise with Putin.

The final obstacle that narrows Abe’s win-set is the reputational cost to Japan in negotiating its other territorial disputes with South Korea and China. The Takeshima/Dokdo dispute with South Korea surfaces from time to time, with South Korea recently lodging a complaint in response to the Japanese government’s 2018 decision to sponsor an exhibition exerting its territorial claims in a newly opened museum in Tokyo.⁷³ Japan’s territorial dispute with China rightly receives more attention, given the greater likelihood of gray-zone conflicts quickly escalating into armed ones. Japan’s strategic documents orient the state toward such a prospect. For this reason, a second F-15 squadron added to Okinawa in 2016 enabled the Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) to conduct an average of two intercepts of Chinese aircraft per day beginning in April 2016.⁷⁴

Additionally, Chinese Coast Guard vessels have “intruded at least a few times a month into Japanese territorial waters around the disputed Senkaku islands.” Japan has grown increasingly concerned after China’s 2018 decision to transfer administrative control of its coast guard from civilian to military authority.⁷⁵ Among these concerns is the perception that China continues to move away from pursuing a “non-militarized, peaceful and stable environment” near disputed territories.⁷⁶ Conversely, the bilateral Maritime and Aerial Mechanism was launched in June 2018 after 11 years of talks about its proper functionality.⁷⁷ This arrangement encouragingly provides a direct communications link between Japan and China to deescalate potential tensions that may threaten an outbreak of conflict. Despite these positive developments, the Senkaku and Takeshima disputes provide a moderately significant barrier for reputational costs to a Japan in pursuit of resolution with Russia. Abe would need to be mindful both of Level I negotiators involved in these other disputes as well as Japanese interest groups that may seek to politicize an agreement with Russia for their benefit. The latter would include political opposition groups and business interests tied to the vast natural resources in the East China Sea.

President Putin’s effective management of the Russian Federation’s political system ensures that the Russian Duma and Federation Council, along with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and the Russian judiciary, will pose little domestic Level II threat to any accommodation with Japan over the Northern Territories/Southern Kurils. Institutions in competitive authoritarian systems, as described by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, are incentivized by leadership to support the critical initiatives of the state with no meaningful political opposition.⁷⁸ The meaningful opposition in the Russian case would come from the citizens of the Russian Federation. Putin’s basis for legitimacy rests on the Russian people, not institutions, with his idea of “sovereign democracy.”⁷⁹ Any surrender of Russian territory is likely to erode domestic support for Putin’s regime. Russian experts have suggested that any decision of this type is “certain to provoke fierce protests in Russia and undermine public support for Putin’s government.”⁸⁰ Mr. Putin started 2018 with an 85 percent approval rating, yet in mid-2020 he has seen his support decline to 59 percent.⁸¹ In the face of declining earnings from oil exports and the growing indeterminacy of the Ukraine crisis, amid Russia’s struggle in containing the coronavirus, Putin has little domestic capital to expend on resolving the dispute with Japan—even in handing over the smaller Habomai islets and Shikotan.

Conclusion

Longstanding territorial disputes can unexpectedly escalate into the deadliest of conflicts. Currently the dispute between Russia and Japan over the Northern

Territories/Southern Kurils is not militarized, is not escalating, and lacks the imminent danger of the East and South China Sea disputes. Yet resolution of this Russo–Japanese dispute would change northeastern Asian strategic stability. This article has demonstrated the range of complex issues facing elite (Level I, in Two-Level Game terms) resolution of the conflict between Japan and Russia. Domestic pressures, however, compound the low probability that this dispute will be resolved in the near term, forestalling Japan and Russia’s drawing closer and keeping Japan nearer to the United States and further from Russia. As time runs out for the long-serving Japanese prime minister, Abe may explore a greater number of novel solutions to achieve breakthrough on an issue that has eluded both his father and him. To what extent, then, can Abe successfully leverage this electoral limitation in his negotiations with Putin? The Russian side hesitates on rushing the process, instead offering a unique interpretation to Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka’s 1973 poetic remarks to Brezhnev: “Although man is not eternal, the human kind will exist always.” Elite circumstances have never been better to resolve this dispute; however, domestic pressure within both Japan and Russia will continue to prevent fundamental dispute resolution—the status quo over the Northern Territories will remain in place. Contrary to Tanaka’s intended meaning, Russian elites may be patient enough to delay the territorial dispute’s resolution to future generations more disposed to benefit. ♣

Dr. David Sacko

Professor Sacko has taught in the Department of Political Science at the U.S. Air Force Academy since 2002 where he currently serves as International Relations and Defense Policy Division Chief. He currently researches Eurasian security affairs, integrating persistent engagement into irregular warfare, and how U.S. hegemony affects international governance.

Micah Winkley

Mr. Winkley is an instructor in the Department of Political Science at the U.S. Air Force Academy. His research has focused on international security, geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, and Islamic political thought. Previously, he worked with the World’s Greatest Wild Weasels in northern Japan

Notes

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