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## Research Paper

## THE KURIL DISPUTE

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## ABSTRACT

**T**his paper discusses the incessant conflict between Russia and Japan over the disputed Kuril Islands. Since 1905 and the Russo Japanese war, the perception of Japan and Russia have been of a militaristic and self interested nations. The world last year witnessed the much controversial South China Sea dispute. The conflagration between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands also becomes important part of polemical debates as both are powers in their respective horizons. While Russia is a country of vast land mass, rich natural resources particularly natural gas, ahead of the USA in nuclear weapons, Japan on the other hand is a tiny territory, with negligible natural resources, prone to volcanic eruptions, is a nuclear weapons free state but only blessed with a strong human resource which is ageing fast. This paper talks in length about the nature and origin of the dispute over the Kuril islands and also tries to give some plausible solutions to amicably resolve the issue. The paper further tracks the recent development in terms of initiative by the parties concerned to resolve the issue. If the dispute is settled peacefully it can set an example for many nations that are facing border disputes. Also, many precious lives that are affected by this process can lead a normal life.

**KEYWORDS:** Russia, Japan, Realism, Kuril Islands

## RELATIONSHIP CRISIS, IS IT?

The realist paradigm of international relations speaks about war and victory. For realists the real actor is the state. It basically tells us how countries engage in war with one another and form alliances against opponents too; they can go to any length to emerge victorious. They talk about self help, statism and survival. The realists rightly reflect the phrase 'everything is fair in love and war'. The state's first law of motion is *raison de etat* which tells what a statesman must do in order to protect his state and people (Bayles and Smith 2001). With this logic one can safely place Russia and Japan in the realist frame of international politics.

To begin with, Russia is a huge country with eleven time zones. Hard power and soft power are both being explored to a great length in Russian politics. While Russia is a nuclear capable nation with a plethora of sophisticated arms and ammunitions it no where undermines its capacity in experimenting with its soft power skills. This has been evident in the recent USA Presidential elections where Russia has been charged with influencing the elections in favour of Donald Trump. Russia is also a resource rich nation with huge reserves of natural gas and other minerals. Russia under Putin has been meticulously clear with its objectives and its realizations of being a world power. Rozman (2000) is of the opinion that the major aim of the Soviet Foreign

Ministry was to educate the outside world about it. The process of image making or image correction had begun during the Soviet days itself. The attack on Syria, the annexation of Crimea, the prestige of being a nuclear weapon state are all an important aspect of Russian political life. Japan on the other hand, speaking candidly, is a peace loving nation. The Japanese Constitution firmly believes in the peace clause and also relies on amicably solving the dispute. The biggest asset of Japan is its human resource that is laborious, diligent and creative. The year 2006 marked the fiftieth anniversary of a joint declaration signed by Japan and the then Soviet Union normalizing bilateral ties but certainly not a peace treaty. The year 2005 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Portsmouth that brought Russo Japanese war to an end. However, the feeling of mistrust has not evaded completely and is reflected from the disputes over the Kuril islands. For the Russians, in the words of Semyon Verbitskii, Japanese was synonymous with “*samurai* and spy” (Kuhrt 2009). Similarly, the feeling of mistrust is also prevalent among the Japanese for the Russians. So, how this feeling of mistrust has continued over the ages and has been reflecting in many areas of bilateral ties is quite intriguing. The Kuril Island dispute is one such deterrent in bilateral relations. In the 1990s only Japan and Russia were the only two powers that had yet to normalize their relations. Also, much of their relations is seen in the light of USA and China relations. It therefore becomes important to see things as it is and not from the vantage point of someone else’s lens. Things become necessarily flawed. Russia and Japan should be clear about their relation with one another and about the nature of the disputes between them. They should have a clear cut understanding of whether they are friends or enemies. Realists argue that international relations are not grey; they are either black or white. Its only when we understand our relations we are able to solve our problems. It’s time Russia and Japan reflected over this in order to solve the Kuril dispute.

### AND THE CONTROVERSY IS

Also called as the Chishima islands, the Kuril islands form a part of volcanic archipelago in the Russia’s Sakhalin Oblast region stretches from Hokkaido islands of Japan to the Kamchatka region of Russia. The Kuril separates the Sea of Okhotsk from the North Pacific Ocean. It consists of the Greater Kuril Ridge and the Lesser Kuril Ridge. While Russia claims it to be part of its far east region, Japan calls it as Northern Territories. They form part of the Ring of Fire belt in the Pacific territory. Due to its location in the sub Arctic belt the

temperature here is mostly very cold with dominant tundra vegetation. The native people are called as the Ainus who are generally humble and hard working people. The Japanese claim that they have known the island since the time of the Edo period while the Soviets got control over the Kuril islands under the Yalta Agreement in accordance with the Cairo Declaration of 1945, which stated that Japan should lose all islands in the Pacific which it has taken possession of or occupied since the start of the First World War in 1914 (Yulia and Steele 2008). Today, Japan asserts that the Yalta decisions on the Kurils and Sakhalin are not binding in international law, as it signed the Postdam Declaration in ignorance of the Yalta decisions. Furthermore, the San Francisco peace treaty with Japan of 1951 was not signed by the Soviets, which implies that any territory with Japan of 1951 was not signed by the Soviets, which implies that any territory seized by the latter at the end of the war remains unconfirmed in law. By signing this treaty, Japan renounced all rights to the Kurils and parts of Sakhalin, but which islands belong to the Kuril remain unspecified. According to the Japan Times, the Russian Empress Catherine the Great in 1786 claimed territory over the Sakhalin islands after exploration was carried out. In 1855 a treaty was signed between the two countries where Russia controlled the frontiers north of the four islands of Japan. In the crushing defeat of Moscow in the Russo Japanese War of 1905 Japan gained control of South of the Sakhalin islands. US President used the Sakhalin card to lure Russia into World War II after which Russians could take away the group of islands and which was done by force on part of the Russians.

### WHO IS AT STAKE?

Once the nature of our relationship has been decided it becomes pertinent to analyse the situation. Analysing a problem means the disputed territory has to be weighed in terms of importance for both the countries, importance in terms of area of the territory, resources which a country can forgo, international prestige associated with it but most importantly the mandate of the people must be accepted. The Kuril is of immense importance to both the nations. According to the Russian news agency Sputnik, there are five reasons why Russian cannot forgo the Kurils. Russian President Putin was quoted saying that ‘we don’t trade territories, but we would like to find a solution to this problem’. Secondly the Treaty of San Francisco 1951 Tokyo’s sovereignty is limited to Japanese islands only. It no where mentions the Kuril islands. Also, giving the islands

to Japan would be a gift to the USA and a psychological blow to the Russians. Russia's Far East is protected by the Kuril islands which hosts a strategic base of the Russian military. Finally, as mentioned before, the native of the islands are Russian whose consent is equally important for the Russians.

From the Japanese view point things are different. As Japan is bereft of minerals the island produces rhenium useful in aircraft production. It is also the place where hot and cold currents meet which is ideal location for fish industry, staple diet of the Japanese. A major discomfort for Russians would be the placing of the US military in Sakhalin in case Japan takes over some islands. Japan lay claims to four islands: Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashir, and Iturup. Being a major capitalist nation in the Asia Pacific region, Japan is acting as a mediator between the developed and the developing nations and this poses a threat to Moscow (Robertson 1988). The most important stakeholders are the locals who bear the brunt of both the government. Undoubtedly, the island is under the Russian jurisdiction. The locals have a tough time due to the cold climatic conditions there. Harvesting fish roe is an important occupation. Gydrostroy is the major company working there which has constructed roads, the airport and other developmental activities. The local have a tough time as not much developmental activities have been undertaken and the employment is basically seasonal in nature. People need a good level of assured income and a decent standard of living too. This can be done when solving the territorial dispute is on the cards. Some locals are taken to Japan without visa in order to boost relations but not much has been achieved.

### THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

After briefing the problems of the three stakeholders and their insecurities it becomes important to throw some light on the solutions to the problems. One, people to people talk should continue between Japan and Russia. The Russian government should continue its efforts to bolster trade, free tourist visits across borders. Second, as the local people are the crucial agencies here with emotional and hardworking faculties. The idea must certainly not be to dislocate them from their homeland but the Russian government can allow more Japanese ventures and FDI into this area. Third, a joint jurisdiction can be possible over this territory but only with the consent of both the governments. Fourth, seminars and conference should be conducted by both the governments to find solutions to the problem. Fifth, confabulations and not confrontation should be the

agenda as the sufferers are the common people, mostly women and children. The consent of the people is important and the as both the governments are democratic they must uphold the values of a sustainable democracy.

### CONCLUSION

As a point of conclusion one must understand that international politics is dynamic. It's not stale water. Solving disputes needs patience, right acumen and honest intentions. Enemies can become friends, friends can become allies. The right to self determination should never be underrated. At the end it has to be the people's mandate and not the forceful application of outdated treaties and conventions. It's certainly with the people of the Kuril Islands to decide and decipher their fate in accordance with the laws of the present time. A democracy is mature only when it listens and acts in accordance with the people. The Russians and Japanese must behave amicably, evade their trust deficits by putting in the right resources to create employment for the people so that they can lead a better life and try coexist mutually with one another.

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