

Russian shooting of Japanese fisherman heightens tensions over Kuril islands

John Chan**31 August 2006**

The killing of a Japanese fisherman on August 16 by a Russian patrol boat in waters near the southern Kuril Islands has highlighted ongoing tensions between the two countries over the disputed territory.

The Russian coast guard opened fire on a Japanese crab fishing boat near the islet of Habomai, killing Mitsuiro Morita, 35. Russian authorities seized the boat and three other crew members, who have been charged with poaching, smuggling and border violations.

The Japanese government protested the shooting as “absolutely unacceptable” and demanded the immediate release of the three fishermen. Tokyo also demanded that Russia apologise for the death and punish the individuals responsible. Moscow handed over Morita’s body on August 19, but continued to hold the three remaining crew members.

While expressing “regret” over the death, Russia defended the coast guard’s actions, saying that warning shots had been fired to stop the Japanese vessel from escaping. “Obviously, the responsibility totally rests with the direct culprits, and also with those representatives of the Japanese authorities who turn a blind eye to poaching in Russia territorial waters by Japanese fishermen,” a Russian foreign ministry statement declared.

Tokyo claimed the boat had been in Japanese territorial waters, but Moscow insisted that it had crossed into Russian territory. The Japanese Fishery Agency admitted that crab fishing was illegal at this time of year under an agreement signed between the two countries.

Dozens of right-wing Japanese extremists dressed in World War II uniforms demonstrated outside the Russian embassy in Tokyo, shouting the name of the dead fisherman and demanding the return of the

southern Kuril Islands. For decades, the return of Japan’s “Northern Territories” has been a cause célèbre among these fascistic layers.

Within days, two Russian citizens were murdered in Japan—a Russian woman working in a cabaret club and a Russian businessman. Their deaths may be unconnected to the Habomai incident, but the involvement of right-wing extremists, who have a long history of such violence, cannot be ruled out.

During his five years in office, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has deliberately encouraged the growth of right-wing nationalism. Just a day before the death of the Japanese fisherman, he provocatively visited the Yasukuni Shrine—a symbol of Japanese militarism—on the anniversary of Japan’s surrender in World War II. He has also taken a more aggressive stance on territorial disputes, not just with Russia, but also China, South Korea and Taiwan.

In the case of the Kuril Islands, definite economic and strategic interests are at stake. The disputed waters have significant fish stocks and are believed to contain offshore gas and oil reserves. Deposits of rhenium, an important rare metal, have been found. The southern Kuril Islands on the doorstep of northern Japan have an obvious strategic importance for the Russian military.

Japan and Russia both explored the Kuril Islands from the 17th century. Under the Treaty of St Petersburg signed in 1875, Japan retained control of the Kuril Island chain, while Tsarist Russia took over large Sakhalin Island to the north. By the outbreak of World War II, 17,000 Japanese resided on the three main southern Kuril Islands.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and occupied the Kuril Islands as part of the agreement with the US and Britain at the Yalta conference in 1945. The Soviet Union displaced

the Japanese residents in the islands. Under the San Francisco Peace Treaty signed in 1951, Japan renounced ownership of the Kurils. The Soviet Union, however, did not sign the treaty and Japan never considered the four southern islands as part of the Kuril chain.

In 1955, Moscow agreed to hand back two of the southern Kurils, but Tokyo insisted on the return of all four. No further negotiation took place during the Cold War. Japan restored diplomatic relations with Soviet Union in 1956, but no formal peace treaty was signed due to the outstanding territorial dispute.

After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, Japan launched an aggressive campaign to reclaim its so-called Northern Territories. In 1992, Japan offered economic aid to Russia for the return of the four southern Kuril Islands, but Moscow insisted on the withdrawal of US troops from Japan.

Despite the risk of being seized by Russian patrols, poor Japanese fishermen continue to operate in the area.

According to Japanese statistics, Russian authorities have detained 30 Japanese boats and 210 sailors between 1994 and 2005. Seven Japanese have been injured during the incidents.

The Koizumi government has been actively pushing for the return of the “Northern Territories”. In 2004, Koizumi provocatively toured the waters aboard a Japanese coast guard vessel, prompting strong protests from Moscow. The southernmost rocky islets of the Habomai group are just a few kilometers from Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido.

In 2004 and 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed the return of two smaller Kuril Islands, if Japan renounced its claims to the other two. Putin included other incentives, including Russian support for Japan’s bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council and preferential access to Russian oil and gas. Despite support for Putin’s proposals in sections of the Japanese establishment, Koizumi rejected the offer and insisted on the return of all four islands.

On August 3, the Putin government announced a development plan for the period 2007-2015 for the entire Kuril chain. Moscow plans to invest 17.9 billion roubles (about \$US630 million) in infrastructure, including airfields and port facilities, and to boost the

population from 19,000 to 30,000. Currently many residents leave for Japan and South Korea to escape the poor conditions and lack of opportunity on the islands. Russian military personnel and their dependents make up about half the present population.

Japan is also engaged in maritime territorial disputes with South Korea over the island of Dokdo, and with China and Taiwan over Diaoyu. Tensions are particularly sharp with Beijing over control of gas fields in the East China Sea.

In these cases, the Koizumi government has taken an even more aggressive stance. Japanese coast guards have harassed and detained Taiwanese fishermen in the contested waters near Diaoyu. Tokyo has ignored protests from Taiwan and China and continues to threaten any foreign fisherman or vessel approaching its “exclusive economic zones”.

The Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* recently accused the Japanese government of encouraging fishermen to violate Russian waters. It also pointed out that in December 2001 Japanese coast guards chased and sank a so-called North Korean “spy” ship for entering Japan’s “exclusive economic zone”, adding that Japan had no reason to protest against the Russian coast guard trying to stop a Japanese vessel breaching Russia’s maritime border.

If Japan has been somewhat more restrained in its dispute with Russia than with China and South Korea, the prospect of gaining access to Siberian oil and gas is a significant factor. Seeking to diversify its energy sources, Japan is competing with China and other countries for a major share of Russia’s reserves.



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