

Japan and Russia in diplomatic row over disputed Kuril Islands

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A visit to Moscow by Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara last week to discuss four disputed islands in the Kuril chain failed to produce any agreement. Instead, the two sides engaged in a diplomatic exchange of fire, each insisting on its own sovereignty over the strategic islands just northeast of Japan's Hokkaido Island. The former Japanese islands, governed by Russia since World War II, are regarded by Japan as part of its "Northern Territories".

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared at a tense joint press conference with Maehara on February 11: "When radical approaches gain the upper hand in Japan and are shared by the country's leadership, of course it is useless to conduct any discussion on this issue." He insisted that no dialogue would be possible unless, "Tokyo gives up its bellicose public rhetoric against Russia."

Maehara replied: "The Northern Territories are indigenous territories of Japan".

Lavrov called for Chinese, South Korean and Japanese investment in the islands, where infrastructure is crumbling. Maehara bluntly declared that investment from "a third country" would "complicate the situation".

Maehara also dismissed Russia's call for the establishment of a committee of historians to debate the dispute. Earlier, Lavrov had insisted that any resolution of the dispute must be based on Tokyo's "unconditional recognition of the outcome of World War II".

Before his departure to Moscow, Maehara had condemned the Russian control of the Kuril as having "no foundation under international law". The hard-line stance of the Japanese government guaranteed that the regime in Russia would not respond kindly.

The long-standing dispute sharpened after Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited the southern Kuril Islands last November—the first visit by a Soviet or Russian leader—despite strong protests from Tokyo. Senior Russian officials followed

in his footsteps, and issued calls for a "free trade zone" in the islands, especially for Chinese and South Korean investors. Russia's campaign was tacitly backed by China, which is engaged in its own diplomatic row with Japan over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. During a visit by Medvedev to China in September, he and Chinese President Hu Jintao issued a joint statement hailing their cooperation against the "fascists" and "militarists" in the World War II. They stated their opposition to any attempt to revise the post-war settlement—an inexplicit warning against Japan's attempts to claim the Kurils or strengthen its control of the Diaoyu islands.

Just before Maehara's trip to Russia, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan delivered a speech on February 7, Japan's official "Northern Territory Day," demanding that Russia return the four islands the Soviet army captured at the end of the World War II. To this day, Tokyo has refused to sign a peace treaty to formally end the war with Russia.

Russia, however, has maintained that its control of the four islands is legitimate, given that the post-World War II Potsdam and Yalta deals between the former Soviet Union, US and Britain had limited Japan's post-war territory to its four main islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku.

In his speech, Kan denounced Medvedev's visit to the Kurils as an "unforgivable outrage". With the latest polling showing Kan's public support had fallen to just above 20 percent, he was desperately seeking to stir up Japanese nationalism and divert public attention from his highly unpopular agenda of doubling the consumption tax on the working class. Small numbers of right-wing activists in Japan responded by burning a Russian flag in front of the Russian embassy and sending it a rifle cartridge.

On February 9, two days after Kan's speech, Medvedev publicly declared the Kuril islands were "an inseparable part of Russia" and ordered the military to beef up the territory's defence. A Russian defence ministry source told the RIA Novosti news agency that the first two of the four Mistral-class

amphibious assault ships that Russia had ordered from France would be deployed to defend Kuril Islands, accompanied by more anti-air missiles, radar stations and anti-ship missiles, and an upgrading of the equipment of 2,000-3,000 troops on the islands. Advanced Su-35 fighters and anti-submarine aircraft would be deployed after an airbase was built on one of the islands.

Behind the conflict between Russia and Japan is the increasing strategic significance of the Kurils, particularly in the light of the mounting tensions between China and the US. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Japan rejected Moscow's offer to return two of the less important islands in exchange for greater Japanese investment and aid. The emergence of China, however, as a major energy consumer and exporter of capital means that Moscow no longer looks to Japan to develop Russia's Far East region.

The four Kuril islands contain an estimated 160 million tonnes of natural gas and nearly 1,900 tonnes of gold and other valuable minerals, such as silver, titanium and rhenium, with total value of \$50 billion. But Russia's move to reestablish its military strength in the Far East is bound up more with the changing global strategic relations, as the US shifts its focus to the Asia-Pacific. While the US is aiming primarily at China, by strengthening its alliances with Japan and South Korea in particular, the Russian elite is concerned about the US military buildup in the region.

Concerns in Tokyo and Washington over Russia's moves were highlighted recently when Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper warned that Etorofu island, where Russia plans to build an airbase, would provide a gateway to the Pacific, just as "it served as the military base for the Imperial Japanese Navy as it prepared for its surprised attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941". The newspaper said the region was also important for Russia's plan to develop a sea route through the Arctic Ocean: "Such a route linking Europe with growing Asian economies would require half the travel time compared with using the Suez Canal."

Stretching from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula to Japan's Hokkaido, the Sea of Okhotsk, which includes the Kuril Islands, is crucial for Russia's nuclear submarines. Last year, a US thinktank, the Jamestown Foundation, noted that the Russian navy no longer had sufficient nuclear attack submarines and surface warships to protect the deployment of its newest Borey-class ballistic missile submarines. It concluded: "The only safe option seems the semi-closed Sea of Okhotsk, guarded by the Kuril Island chain."

Last July, Russia held its largest military manoeuvres in the region, including in the Kurils, since the collapse of the USSR.

This year, Russia and China will hold another joint military exercise in the same region, partly in response to the growing US pressure in the Korean Peninsula. The Obama administration has urged South Korea to take tough stance toward North Korea, accusing it of sinking a South Korean warship and shelling South Korea's *Yeonpyeong* Island. The US navy has supported South Korean military drills in the Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan, with a broader aim of threatening China.

As part of a US strategy to use Japan as a bulwark against China, the Obama administration has also stated that the US-Japan Security Treaty obliges Washington to assist Japan against China in any war over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islets. Japan's latest defence guidelines, published in December, unveiled a new orientation toward the southwestern islands, including Senkaku. For that purpose, the Japanese government announced it would increase its submarines from 16 to 22 and double the fighter forces based in Okinawa.

While Tokyo has not placed the same emphasis on the Kuril Islands, that could change if Washington decided to contain the Russian military presence in the Far East. That possibility has already been raised in Moscow. Expressing concerns about a potential war with Japan, Russia's *Pravda* newspaper recently warned that "history has precedents where ownership of certain territories was disputed at a battlefield". The latest example was Russia's conflict with the US-backed Georgia in 2008. "Japan is a much more formidable opponent in all respects" than Georgia, *Pravda* noted.

As the US seeks to use its military might to offset its economic decline and counter the rise of China, the growing tension between Russia and Japan over the Kurils is another indication that great-power rivalries in North East Asia are assuming an ever more explosive character.



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