

Russia-Japan dispute over Kurils reflects mounting tensions in North East Asia

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In the midst of acute tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Russia announced in January that it intended to base military aircraft in the Kuril Islands, which are claimed by Japan as its Northern Territories. While portrayed by Western media as an aggressive Russian provocation, the decision is in response to the military threats by the US, backed by Japan, to attack North Korea if it does not bow to Washington's demands to denuclearise.

The Kuril Islands, situated between the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido and the Kamchatka Peninsula on the eastern coast of Russia, are currently controlled by the latter nation. Japan responded angrily to the Russian plan to base military aircraft in a newly-constructed civilian airport on Iturup, one of the more populated islands. The aircraft will bolster existing missile defence systems on Iturup, following a decision last November to build a naval base on Matua, another island.

Russia announced its military basing plan amid diplomatic talks with Japan to ratify an official peace treaty ending World War II. After issuing diplomatic protests, accusing Russia of negotiating in bad faith, the Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe threatened to withdraw from further negotiations.

Tensions flared again last week when the Russian military conducted an air force readiness exercise in its far eastern territories, including sending two SU-35 fighters to Iturup for the first time. After making a formal diplomatic protest, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono declared that "the strengthening of the Russian military presence in the Northern Territories ... contradicts our country's position on these islands."

In Japan, Abe is under pressure. His government had advanced the negotiations with Russia as a means of reclaiming at least some of the Kurils, in exchange for

increased economic investment by Japan in Russia's energy-rich Siberian regions.

The Kuril Islands are a remote, sparsely populated archipelago, spanning 1,300 kilometres. Held by Japan until World War II, they were taken over by the Soviet Union in 1945 and, following its dissolution, they remained a part of the Russian Federation. Japan has always considered the loss of the islands, particularly the southern group, including Iturup, to be a humiliation—a factor in its refusal to sign an official peace treaty with Russia concluding World War II.

Given the Kurils' relative proximity to Russia and Japan, both nations consider them to have strategic importance. The islands also sit atop large and mostly unexploited deposits of valuable natural resources, including gold, silver and the rare element rhenium.

While an ongoing sore point in relations between the two countries, the dispute over the island chain has not become a flashpoint for military confrontation. However, since the announcement of the "pivot to Asia" strategy by US President Barack Obama, tensions throughout the region have dramatically sharpened.

As part of its growing confrontation with China, the US has encouraged Japan to remilitarise and play a more belligerent role in North East Asia. Apart from its demands on the Kurils, Japan has escalated its dispute with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which has led to dangerous stand-offs involving aircraft and ships.

For its part, Russia has indicated that a necessary precondition to re-engage in talks would be for Japan to reduce its military ties with the US. Russian government officials have emphasised that the reason for basing warplanes in the Kurils is the US placement of advanced anti-missile systems in Japan. Last

December, Tokyo approved the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) batteries and Aegis Ashore missile defence systems on the Japanese mainland.

Though the systems are supposedly defensive, China and Russia regard them as provocative steps intended to enhance the US military's capabilities in the event of a war. The THAAD systems in Japan and South Korea are equipped with advanced radar systems that enable the US to monitor military installations and missile launches deep inside the two nations.

In January, *Pravda.ru* suggested negotiations between Russia and Japan have been complicated by Russian fears that any transfer of the Kurils to Japanese control would result in US military forces being based there under the US-Japan Security Treaty. As a result, the US military would have forces close to major Russian Far East bases, including the strategic port city of Vladivostok.

While accusing Russia of militarising supposedly "disputed-territory," the Abe government has enhanced and strengthened Japanese military bases and fortifications, including with Aegis Ashore systems, on Hokkaido, its northernmost island, adjacent to Russian territory.

Abe has also backed US President Donald Trump's bellicose threats against North Korea, including his rant last year that the Pyongyang regime faced "fire and fury like the world has never seen." Russia, which shares a border with North Korea, fears the consequences of a war on the Korean Peninsula, which could involve nuclear weapons and create millions of refugees.

The Russian regime of President Vladimir Putin, however, has no progressive solution to the mounting dangers of war. It is organically incapable of making any appeal to the international working class—the only social force able to halt the war drive. Russia's strengthening of its military in the Far East, as in Europe, only plays directly into the hands of US and Japanese imperialism as they accelerate their preparations for conflict.



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