

Résumé : la question des Kouriles empoisonne les relations entre le Japon et la Russie (ex-URSS) depuis la fin de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. On a longtemps écrit qu’à la source du blocage de tout compromis dans ce litige se trouvaient des considérations stratégiques liées à la guerre froide. La fin de celle-ci montre que les choses sont plus complexes. En fait, une partie du différend tient à une mésentente sur les termes lors de la rédaction des divers traités, mais aussi à un changement d’attitude tant des Japonais que des Américains au sujet des îles Kouriles après le conflit du Pacifique.

It is not rare to see these black vans, decorated with a huge map of northern Japan and southern Kurils, slowly riding down the streets in Japanese towns; nationalist claims are chanted through megaphones to remind people the "Northern Territories" are a Japanese territory and have always been so. Nationalist propaganda is still very much at work in Japan as in Russia. For long it pushed both sides to a stalemate in which no one can easily surrender to the other's demands. The sinking of a Japanese fishing boat on October 4, 1994, by a Russian patrol craft in waters near the disputed islands, illustrated the renewed tension in the ongoing conflict. An agreement was signed on February 27th, 1998, that allowed Japanese fishing boats to catch fish in the Russian waters around the Kuril Islands as of October 1st, 1998. Although this agreement was unthinkable four years ago and greatly improved relations between Moscow and Tokyo, the very basis of the problem, sovereignty over the islands, is not solved.

Both Russia's and Japan's positions seem deeply entrenched in a strong public nationalism. Besides, the Japanese as well as the Russian governments think international law and history are on their side; but the interpretation of past treaties between Japan and Russia has led to endless arguing. While the Russians stress the validity of World War II Conferences between the Allied Powers, notably the Cairo and the Yalta Summits, Japan argues the XIXth century treaties made clear that the Northern Territories are separate from the Kurils and are "inalienable" and "inherent" Japanese territory. The Japanese view of the issue is also that Japan was a victim of the Soviet attitude at the time: the USSR attacked while Japan was weak and while a non-aggression pact between Tokyo and Moscow was still valid. Therefore, morale and justice should be on their side.
This present deadlock of irreconcilable positions has not always been so. In the few years after the war, the Japanese idea about the so-called "Northern Territories" was fuzzy at best; Japan's claim was inarticulate and not always a policy priority for the government. Similarly, the United States initially considered the emerging issue in the light of the Yalta Declaration, in which they agreed to the USSR demands for the whole chain. The Cold War and the newly perceived strategic role Japan could play in it gradually led to a change in the American position relative to the dispute. For various reasons, Tokyo and Washington radically changed their stances in the 1950s, leading the negotiations between Japan and the USSR to the impasse we now know. What was their motivation in this radical veering? What were the Japanese arguments for it?

1) A continuing bickering

Russian President Yeltsin might find it difficult to make any decision since the conservatives would consider any concession to the Japanese an act of treason. The defiant stance of Russia's Parliament, in October 1993, shows the struggle is not over. Besides, the territorial breakup of the former Soviet Union indeed shocked many Russians, and further territorial losses would be quite unpopular, however tiny the territory involved would be. Paradoxically, given the present public mood, it is now Russia's relatively more democratic structure that prevents any move from the Russian government.

Within Japan, the official position is widely advertised. Newspapers regularly publish polls showing an overwhelming majority of Japanese would welcome the return of the four islands. Whether this return should be a policy priority or not does not appear in the polls. Japan maps ostensibly show the disputed islands as Japanese territory, while Tokyo unsuccessfully lobbied the western governments into adopting the same cartographic point of view. A ministerial decree of June 1964 decided the four islands would be called "Northern Territories" and not "minami-Chishima" (southern Kurils) any longer. February 7 has been declared "Northern Territories Day" in 1981 by Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki. Official propaganda advocating the Japanese position is printed in newspapers, and annual demonstrations are organized throughout the country.

1 Peter Berton, "Russia and Japan in the Post-Cold War Era", in James C. Hsiung editor, Asia Pacific in the New World Politics (Boulder : Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1993), pp. 34-35.
Suspicion is deeply entrenched

The Yalta Agreement, signed on February 11, 1945, pledged that the Soviet Union would regain Sakhalin Island and that "the Kuril Islands shall be handed over to the Soviet Union" in exchange for the Soviet Union's declaration of war on Japan, three months after Germany's surrender. Japanese literature on the issue rejects the validity of the Agreement on the grounds that Japan was not a party to it.\(^4\)

The Japanese view the August 9, 1945 Soviet invasion of Manchuria and the August 18 attack on the Kurils as a stab in the back and a treacherous betrayal of the five-year Neutrality Pact signed on April 13th, 1941. The treaty was effective until April 25, 1946. Besides, Japan had informed the Allied of its intention to accept the provisions of the Potsdam Proclamation, and therefore to surrender without conditions, on August 14, 1945, that is four days before the Red Army began hopping along the Kuril Islands chain. Japan's formal surrender was signed on September 2, but the Soviet troops were still on their move to occupy the whole chain on September 3\(^5\). Thus arose the idea that the Soviet Union deliberately ignored not only the treaty between Japan and itself, but also the signs that Japan was willing to accept peace on the Allied terms as embodied in the Potsdam Proclamation. The idea that the USSR further ignores international law provisions is further underlined when articles stress that the Atlantic Charter did not call for Japan being stripped of territories it had acquired through peaceful means.

Russia also feared Japan. Moscow remembered the Japanese surprise attack that started the Russo-Japanese War, the 1918 invasion of Siberia, the 1920-1925 occupation of northern Sakhalin. The Imperial Army's aggressively probed against Soviet defenses in 1938 in Changkufeng in Eastern Manchuria and in 1939 at Nomonhan on the Mongolian-Manchurian border. The July-August 1941 Kwantung army military maneuvers at a time when the Red Army was desperately struggling against the German invasion were also perceived as real threats; assessments that the USSR would have been defeated had the Japanese attacked at this time, retrospectively frightened the Soviet government and helped build the image of a treacherous Japan as well.\(^6\) As for legal arguments, Russia adopted a legalistic approach and stresses that

\(^6\) The battle of Nomonhan proved to be a stunning defeat for the Imperial Army. It certainly induced Japan into signing the Neutrality Pact with Moscow, partly deterred Japan from attacking the USSR again in 1941 and, in domestic political struggles, helped the Navy gain leadership in the conduct of military operations. The Navy's plans to attack the United States could then be enforced.

Japan signed the San Francisco Treaty that stipulates the Japanese cession of Sakhalin and the Kurils; Moscow adds that, even though it did not sign the treaty, there is only one obvious country that would receive the territory surrendered by Japan, that is Russia. Russia also replies to American pressure that the decision to give the Kurils to the Soviet Union was agreed upon by the United States at the Yalta Conference. Besides, Russia argues the 1855 Treaty that set the border between Etorofu and Urup, was subsequently canceled by the 1875 St-Petersburg Treaty and the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty. In effect, when these treaties provided for the annexation of the Kurils chain and the southern Sakhalin area, Japan did not feel it was compelled to keep the 1855 border.

**Talks... to no avail, despite a growing Japanese pressure.**

The negotiations the two countries had undertaken in 1955 led to a failure, and subsequent talks always failed to solve the territorial issue that Moscow feels is already settled. Given the deadlock the two countries had reached in their negotiations, Japan tried to put more pressure on the Soviet Union. Tokyo decided to further internationalize the issue and to lobby the G-7 into supporting its view in the territorial conflict. In Houston in 1990 and in Munich in 1992, Japanese diplomacy won great victories when the other industrialized countries endorsed Japan's request to mention the dispute in the official statement. Tokyo built up a tough stance as regards crumbling Russia, linking financial aid to the settling of the dispute, and said it would only agree, of course, for the return of the islands. But, to the displeasure of Tokyo, concessions had to be made, under pressure from France and Germany, on the question of economic assistance. It is true that the other industrialized countries gave a cool reception to the Japanese giving a top priority to the territorial issue; even Washington, usually on Japan's side as regards the Kurils question, showed much more enthusiasm in advocating a place for Russia in the summit club, than satisfying the Japanese demand.7

Despite this growing Japanese pressure and the crumbling state of its economy, there is no way the Russian government considers giving up the southern Kurils to Japan. Yeltsine's position was supported by influential local leaders in the Russian Far East, who actively campaigned

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against any Russian surrendering its territory.⁸ Although Yeltsine went to Japan in October 1993, talks did not lead to any possible solution. In the meantime, Russia's diplomatic position has improved, as aid was agreed upon from the West. Russia and China have settled most of their disputes. In normalizing its relations with South Korea, Russia might have found the helping partner to develop Siberia Japan ostensibly refused to be. Russia noticed South Korean companies are more willing to develop a trading partnership than Japanese firms; besides, a unified Korea with strong links with Moscow could act as a powerful counterweight to Japan's demands. Therefore, it seems any agreement between Japan and Russia on the issue is unlikely in the short term: the position of the two countries are too deeply entrenched to make room for compromise.

II) Arguments: History and Law

Since ancient times... The use of History.

_The Kuril Islands were discovered by De Vries, a Dutch navigator, in 1634._
H. J. Snow, 1897

_The honor of discovering and developing the Kurils belongs to the Russian people._
A. I. Pushkar, 1960

_History must enshrine the name of Murakami Hironori as the discoverer of the Kuril Islands._
Ochiai Tadashi, 1971⁹

"[The Northern Territories] are inherent to Japan, and have never been a territory of a foreign country"¹⁰. History, in the eyes of the Japanese government, gives its claim a strong legitimacy as Japan reportedly discovered the islands¹¹ and was the only country to administer them. Some argued the _Nihongi_, or Chronicles of Japan, completed in 720, gives credence to the idea the region was already under Japanese suzerainty at the time, an argument rather difficult to sustain given the painful conquest process of northern Honshu. Between the VIIth and IXth centuries, several military expeditions were sent to gradually conquer the land north of the Kanto region. An outpost was built in Echigo, present-day Niigata prefecture, in 647; the last expedition was sent in 811. The indigenous residents, called _emishi_, "maintained considerable autonomy and

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remained a consequential problem for the Japanese state until the early Kamakura period (1192-1333)".12

However, if the expression "Ezo ga Chishima" ("myriad islands north of Japan") appears in a 1356 scroll, this does not warrant that medieval Japanese had a coherent conception of the Kuril archipelago, let alone that they had begun to colonize it.13 Murakami Hironori was reportedly sent to the southern Kurils in 1635 by the lords of Matsumae in Hokkaido. In the map drawn according to his report, some of the place names do match with known locations, but the random configuration suggests the author had obtained his information from hearsay rather than from actual exploration.

Besides, it is difficult to argue the Kurils have been Japanese territory since ancient times, given the very recent colonization and integration of Hokkaido to the Japanese territory. Warriors are first mentioned to have landed in southern Hokkaido in 1443.14 The Matsumae basho, or fiefdom, founded in 1590, relied not on agriculture for its economy, but on trade with the Ainu people; the Japanese population was extremely small. These northern areas would be best described as a Japanese "frontier", in the North American meaning, or as "marshes", peripheral territories which some adventurers explored and exploited for their furs and their fish resources. When the central power in Edo revoked the Matsumae daimyo in 1799 so as to directly administer and develop Hokkaido, it was for fear of Russian encroachments: the Shogunate perceived the foreign explorations as a potential threat and tried to convert Hokkaido into a military frontier, an outpost against Russian explorations. But colonization began in earnest during the second half of the XIXth century; settlement was also encouraged by Tokyo in Sakhalin Island as well as on the whole Kuril Islands chain.16

Stephan dated the beginning of Russian exploration of the archipelago during the 1690s; the first documented Japanese landing on the southern Kurils dates back to 1754, and so their first exploration must have begun around the same time as the Russian.17 Stephan thinks the latter

13 Stephan, The Kuril Islands, p. 51
17 Stephan, The Kuril Islands, pp. 39, 54.
probably set foot on the archipelago first, but their explorations had been limited to Kunashiri, Etorofu and Urup when Russian explorers reached the southern islands and went on to explore them as well. Precedence is therefore difficult to argue; ancient possession, settlement and occupation, is even more. The emotional importance for Japanese nationals also lies in the presence of several generations of pioneers in graveyards in the Kuril islands: for the people born there, it means the land of the ancestors, an important notion in the Japanese image of territory, is now in a foreign country. Moscow, therefore, made a clever concession when it allowed Japanese to come to the disputed islands to visit the graves.

Interpreting the 1875 St. Petersburg Treaty: what are the Kurils?

The Cold War and the suspicion the two countries feel toward each other help understand the present deadlock. The situation was further aggravated when Japan, at the beginning of the 1950s, began reassessing the cession of the southern Kurils: Tokyo designed an argument based on a reassessment of the terms used in previous treaties with Russia.

The 1951 San Francisco Treaty stipulates, in Article 2, Chapter II, clause C, that

"Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kuril islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of September 5, 1905."

Beside the argument that the USSR did not sign the treaty and therefore cannot legally annex the islands,19 which is true but does not preclude the Japanese cession of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese position is that the Northern Territories are not part of the mentioned Kuril Islands. The so-called "Northern Territories" include the Habomai group, Shikotan, Kunashiri and Etorofu. Japan claims these islands are not part of the Kuril Islands and therefore are Japanese territory.20 The legal basis for this position would lie in the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda and the 1875 Treaty of St. Petersburg.

Since the Shimoda Treaty, the frontier between Russia and Japan was set between Urup and Etorofu, while Sakhalin Island was to remain jointly owned and exploited. This legal situation

18 Doumenge, "Russes et Japonais dans le Nord-Ouest Pacifique", p.15.
19 Many Japanese maps still depict the territory of southern Sakhalin and of the Kuril islands chain north of Etorofu in white, that is, neither Japanese nor Soviet or Russian. See, for instance, Nihonzenzu (Tokyo : Meibunsha, 1992); Nihonhakuchizu (Tokyo : Meibunsha, 1990).
20 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Les Territoires du Nord, pp.5-9; Nakagawa, "Why the Northern Territories Belong to Japan", p.79.

proved subsequently to be difficult to enforce, and in 1875 Russia and Japan signed the St-
Petersburg Treaty to settle this territorial issue.

The treaty was written in French, and therefore only the French text can be used as a legal reference, the Japanese and Russian texts being translations: "Signé (...), en français", warns the introduction. The title of the Treaty is "Traité d'échange de l'île de Sakhaline contre le groupe des îles Kouriles" (Treaty of exchange of the Sakhaline Island against the Kuril Islands group). The Japanese version mentions "Treaty of exchange of Karafuto against the Chishima-retto". This last version seems clear: Russia got the whole Karafuto (Sakhalin) Island while Japan received all the Chishima islands, from Urup to Kamchatka, as the frontier was between Etorofu and Urup. For the Russians however, the treaty provided for the exchange of the total ownership of Sakhalin Island against a part of the Kuril Islands, as the Kuril Islands were defined to stretch from Kamchatka up to Hokkaido21. The French wording strongly suggests that if it mentions the "Kuril Island group", it does not mean that Sakhalin was exchanged against the whole Kuril islands chain, but rather against a part of the Kuril chain, the part the Russians occupied. Thus, it seems that even for the negotiators the definition of the islands involved was not the same.

Article 2 states that


In the article is mentioned the notion of the group of the Kuril Islands, "le groupe des îles Kouriles". If it was the whole Kuril chain that was involved, as the Japanese now say, then why did the negotiators deem it necessary to precise twice that they were talking about a group? There

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21 The "Geographic and Historical Dictionary of the Russian Empire", published in Moscow in 1823, defined Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan as part of the Kuril Islands. Even after their annexation to Japan in 1855, they were considered part of the Kurils in the "Geographic and Statistic Dictionary of the Russian Empire", 1865.
is an other hint that they were indeed mentioning it, because they did not view the Kuril chain as excluding what Japan calls the Northern Territories since 1964: the absence of a comma in the sentence "Sa Majesté l’Empereur [...] cède à Sa Majesté l’Empereur du Japon le groupe des îles dites Kouriles qu’Elle possède actuellement" ("His Majesty [...] cedes to His Majesty the Emperor of Japan the group of the Kuril Islands that He presently possesses."). which supposes that the mention of the group logically means that Russia did not own the whole Kuril Islands chain.

Moreover, the article says that "[d]ésormais ledit groupe des Kouriles appartiendra au Japon", ("henceforth the above mentioned Kurils group will belong to Japan"), whereas the Japanese text says "from now on, all the Kuril Islands will belong to Japan". The Japanese version implies that beforehand, some of the Kuril Islands did belong to Japan. The difference in the wording did not matter at the time because all the islands from Hokkaido to Kamchatka then belonged to Japan. But it introduced an ambiguity inasmuch as it enabled a reader to think the 18 islands then acquired by Japan were the whole Kuril Islands.22

The present Japanese argument in its case to recover the Northern Territories is that since Etorofu and the islands to the south are not mentioned, in this treaty, as part of the Kuril Islands, which Japan then received, it is because they are not part of them23.

Consequently, as the Japanese argument goes, as Etorofu and the other islands to the south are not mentioned, in the St-Petersburg Treaty, as part of the Kuril Islands, which Japan then totally acquired, it is because they are not part of them. Therefore, the 1951 San Francisco Treaty does not apply to them and Japan can legitimately claim them. This position stems from the difference of the wording in the different translations, but the French version does not provide such an ambiguity. The political importance of this semantic juggling is underlined by the very date chosen to commemorate the Northern Territories. February 7 is the date of the signing of the Shimoda Treaty, which defined the border between Japan and Russia, between Etorofu and Urup.24 This former border reportedly defines Japan's "inalienable territory" as the "northern territories have historically been part of Japan"25.

Thus, apart from the historical claim that Japan laid to the Southern Kurils, the legal arguments Tokyo pushes forward seem quite questionable. The distinction it keeps making since

22 Mormanne, "Le problème des Kouriles", pp.74-75.
23 Nakagawa, "Why the Northern Territories Belong to Japan", p.79; Mormanne, "Le problème des Kouriles", pp. 65-66.

1964 between "Northern Territories" and the Kuril chain cannot sustain the examination of the wording of the 1875 Treaty of St-Petersburg.

III) Changing stand: the "inalienable territory" changes shape.

A changing Japanese conception of "inherent territory".

Such has not always been Japan's position. Immediately after World War II, there was no awareness of a territorial grievance with the Soviet Union. Tokyo even made efforts to move Japanese nationals from the Kurils after the Soviet occupation26.

The concern about the territorial issue gradually materialized, over a period of a few years, as a consequence of the Soviet Union annexation of the chain on September 20, 1945; to the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP) Directive n°677 depriving Japan of all administrative rights to the "Kurils, Habomais and Shikotan" (January 29, 1946); to the revelation of the Yalta Agreement clauses. In 1946, the Hokkaido Prefectural Assembly passed the first of many motions calling for the return of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan and the Habomais. On December 22, 1949, the government made public its first position on the issue, denying any legality to the Yalta Agreements and asserting Japan's claims to the southern Kurils and southern Sakhalin.

However, the Japanese government signed the San Francisco Treaty that provides for the cession of the Kurils. As mentioned above, the Japanese subsequently argued that the term "Kurils" does not include the islands south of Etorofu. The Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida also pressured Dulles to acknowledge Japanese sovereignty over the southern Kurils27. But in 1951 too, Yoshida mentioned that Etorofu and Kunashiri were part of the Kurils, which Japan explicitly renounced in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, a position also clearly stated in the Foreign Ministry's August 1955 pamphlet, "the Northern Island".28 Besides, a Diet resolution, passed on July 31st, 1952, shows that the Japanese government asked only for the return of the

26 Stephan, The Kuril Islands, p. 198.
smaller islands of Habomai and Shikotan. This definitely shows that at the time of the signing of the treaty, there was no consensus as to whether Japan should press ahead for claims on the islands. True, some Members of Parliament and pressure groups already lobbied for the return of the four Southern Chishima islands. But on March 8, 1950, Nishimura Kumao, then Director of the Treaties Office, had stated that a definition of the Kuril Islands excluding the four southernmost islands was untenable. In October 1951, during the ratification process in the Diet, he had also stated that the "Kuril islands" expression referred to both the northern and the southern parts of the archipelago. The Diet passed a resolution on July 31, 1952, calling for the return of only Shikotan and Habomai. In a nutshell, the Japanese government might have been frustrated to yield the southern Kurils, but had not yet elaborated their position of their not being part of the Kurils archipelago. The general agreement that prevailed, probably even among the Soviets, was that Shikotan and the Habomais were not part of the Kuril chain, whereas Kunashiri and Etorofu were: on August 19 and 24, 1956, U.S. Secretary of State Dulles told Japan's Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru it would be difficult to argue that Etorofu and Kunashiri were not part of the Kurils.

After Stalin's death in 1953, Malenkov announced the time had come for normalization. Negotiations began between the Soviet Union and Japan to try to solve the border issue. Matsumoto Shunichi was sent to London in 1955 with instructions to ask for the return of Sakhalin and the whole Kuril archipelago as the maximum claim, and to accept the return of Habomai and Shikotan if that could secure a general settlement. When, on August 9, 1955, the Soviet negotiators notified Matsumoto that the USSR was willing to transfer the mentioned islands to Japan in exchange of a peace treaty, the Japanese government came up instead with new conditions: the return of Etorofu and Kunashiri in addition to Shikotan and Habomai, and the organization of an international peace conference to settle the fate of Sakhalin and the rest of the Kurils archipelago. The Soviet Union angrily refused these new conditions and the negotiations broke down.

It seems rivalries within the Japanese government led the Japanese negotiators in London in 1955 to adopt a tougher stance on the territorial issue. It was the time of the merger between the Liberal and the Democratic parties, with senior officials struggling to get good positions in the LDP-in-the-making. In a conservative group as it was, a nationalist stance against the Soviet

29 Mormanne, "Le problème des Kouriles", p.77.
30 deVillafranca, "Japan and the Northern Territories Dispute", p.615.
Union could help get an edge over the rivals. Former Liberal Prime Minister Yoshida's bitterness against Hatoyama (Democrat), who initiated the negotiation process in 1955, also fueled the rivalry.\(^{33}\) Later in 1956, when new negotiations opened between Japan and the Soviet Union, rivalries within the Japanese government deprived the Japanese negotiators of the latitude they needed to reach an agreement, as Moscow renewed its proposal to hand back Shikotan and Habomai in exchange of a formal peace treaty.\(^{34}\)

**Evolving American attitude : the impact of Cold War considerations.**

An American intervention in the talks also accounted for their breakdown. The United States' position about the Kurils issue evolved markedly during the period from 1944 to 1956. Roosevelt's agreement to Stalin's demand about the Kurils stemmed from his understanding of their strategic importance to the Soviet Union. Some suggested that Roosevelt was not aware of the history of the treaties between Russia and Japan, and wrongly believed that Japan had seized the whole chain together with southern Sakhalin in 1905\(^{35}\). However, when Roosevelt told the Pacific War Council that Stalin wanted "all of Sakhalin returned to Russia, and to have the Kurile Islands turned over to Russia in order that they may exercise control of the straits leading to Siberia"\(^{36}\), his wording strongly suggests he was familiar both with Soviet images of Japanese encroachments in Soviet territory and with the history of the treaties.

When John Foster Dulles prepared the San Francisco treaty, he formally respected the Yalta agreements that called for the transfer of the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union, but he interpreted them at statements of general purpose, not as binding pledges in themselves. This meant that to assume sovereignty over the Kuril Islands, the USSR would have to sign the peace treaty. There was little chance the Soviets would participate in this American-controlled process and therefore the ultimate owner of the islands would be legally undetermined. In so doing, he frustrated the Soviet Union with legal recognition of its annexation of the archipelago, and left an open point of friction between Japan and the USSR. The ambiguity of the Kurils question only had a meaning in the frame of the Cold War, but by no means meant an American endorsement of the present Japanese stance. Dulles's statement, on September 8, 1951, that the Habomai group was not part of the Kurils implicitly meant the other islands were.

Washington's extended its recognition of Japanese sovereignty to Shikotan in 1952, after an American warplane was shot down by Soviet fighters over the Nemuro Strait; the move was

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\(^{34}\) The Economist, April 21, 1956:256; August 8, 1956:551; September 15, 1956:869.

\(^{35}\) Stephan, The Kuril Islands, p.216.


directed at the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the decision to recognize Japan's title to Kunashiri and Etorofu was a political tool to pressure the Japanese government. During the new negotiations between Japan and the Soviet Union in August 1956, Washington feared a possible Soviet-Japanese rapprochement. Shigemitsu had just proposed Tokyo that Japan agrees to the Soviet proposal - a peace treaty in exchange for the return of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands\(^{37}\). The United States did not regard positively what they perceived as "a serious Japanese trend toward neutralism". Secretary of State Dulles then warned Foreign Minister Shigemitsu that "if Japan recognizes Kunashiri and Etorofu as Soviet territory, the United States will ask her to confirm Okinawa to be American territory"\(^{38}\). Anxious about the possible strain on US-Japan relations such a blunt interference might create, on September 7 the State Department sent Tokyo a document supporting Japan's claims to the southern Kurils and defining the Yalta Declaration as "simply a statement of common purposes" rather than a final determination of the chain's status\(^{39}\). The American government justified its new stand by saying that "after a careful examination of the historical facts", the United States had concluded that Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomais had always been "part of Japan proper and should in justice be acknowledged as under Japanese sovereignty."\(^{40}\) From then on, the Japanese government would insist that, according to the St Petersburg Treaty, Etorofu and Kunashiri are not part of the Kurils, whereas it had, from 1945 to 1956, agreed that they were\(^{41}\).

When Japan and the Soviet Union reestablished diplomatic relations in 1956, the Declaration of October 19 stipulated the Soviet Union was still willing to transfer the two smaller islands of Shikotan and Habomai, the transfer of which would become effective upon the signing of a peace treaty. But in 1960, after the conclusion of the American-Japanese Security Treaty, the USSR radicalized its position and demanded in turn the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Japan before it could contemplate negotiating again about the territorial issue. All three parties had completely changed their stance: the deadlock had begun.\(^{42}\)

\(^{37}\) deVillafranca, "Japan and the Northern Territories Dispute", p.616.
\(^{39}\) deVillafranca, "Japan and the Northern Territories", p.616; Mack and O'Hare, "Moscow-Tokyo and the Northern Territories Dispute", p.385.
\(^{40}\) Stephen, The Kuril Islands, p.219.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring much change to this deadlock. Economic and strategic arguments could certainly explain part of what was at stake. But these arguments do not account for the extent of the dispute. These barren islands, almost always caught in fog, have no economic value but for fisheries. The strategic imperative is gradually weakening as improved anti-submarine warfare and silent submarines enable the Americans and the Japanese to hunt Russian submarines more effectively. Besides, lack of funds is a cause for a decline in the operational capabilities of the Russian Pacific Fleet. Moreover, confrontation is a goal Russia cannot afford and does not want for now.

The Japanese political elite is still in place. If Japan recently officially agreed not to link aid to Russia to a settlement of the Kurils issue, as Western governments twisted its arm, it is not sure senior officials in the Ministries of Finance and of Foreign Affairs will agree to change their stance. Besides, the nationalist wings of the conservative parties have a disproportionate weight in politics dealing with this issue. More, the islands issue is a good tool for the Defense Agency to talk about the so-called Russian threat, ask for more credit and procurements, and for the government to buy American military hardware and thus reduce the huge trade surplus with the United States. Therefore, though it knows the Russian government cannot accept these terms, Japan might not be willing to settle for less than its Northern Territories.

Japan may wait a long time before it recovers them. Painfully realizing that the San Francisco Treaty meant the surrender of the Kuril chain, Japan thought this situation could be made up for when the Soviet Union offered to give back two islets. Partly under American pressure, but also partly under ill-conceived strategy, Tokyo then decided to ask for more. This was a double mistake, inasmuch as Moscow then came back to its previous hard stance. Besides, as it adopted a stance it previously thought as indefensible so as to foster its claims to the Southern Kurils, the Japanese government started manipulating history, trying to have then international community believe that the "Northern Territories" and the Kuril Islands are two very different geographic island grouping, a distinction Japan did not even make itself before 1964. Japan also stresses its commitment to the 1855 Shimoda Treaty. Tokyo underlines the fact that the border between Russia and Japan was then defined and should remain as was agreed then. But when Japan annexed Russian territory in 1905, did it worry about respecting the previous treaties signed in 1855 and 1875?
One may wonder if the Russian government will be able to keep its opinion from knowing less glorious facts about Moscow's behavior, such as the violation of the non-aggression pact, the unnecessary declaration of war of August 8 after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the pursuit of warfare after the Japanese surrender in August 15. For now, the nationalist mood within the Russian opinion makes it unlikely that there would be a strong movement advocating the return of the islands in exchange for intensified financial help from Japan.

Moreover, some analysts, in Asia as well as in Russia, tend to think the status quo helps maintaining Japan in its dependent status with the United States. They fear a settlement of this territorial dispute might boost Japanese nationalism and desire for more autonomy, a prospect they cannot help linking to World War II memories.

In this part of Asia, the dispute for a few poor cold foggy volcanic islands is likely to go on for a long time.
Fig. 1: The Conquest of the North

Fig. 2
Evolution of the Border Between Japan and Russia

1855
Treaty of Shimoda

Sakhalin Island was left jointly owned by Russia and Japan

1875
Treaty of St. Petersburg
1950
Treaty of Portsmouth

1951
Japan's interpretation of the San Francisco Treaty

The Kuril Islands do not comprise the "Northern Territories". The treaty does not mention which country should receive the Kurils and southern Sakhalin.

1951
De facto situation, recognized by several Western countries

Japan in its Regional Setting