OVER SEVEN DECADES HAVE PASSED SINCE WORLD WAR II ENDED, but not for Russia and Japan—at least not officially. The status of the four southernmost Kuril Islands, nestled between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, has proved an impassable roadblock on the way toward an official peace treaty between the two nations. Although controlled by Russia since the end of the war, the islands, referred to as the Southern Kurils by Russia and the Northern Territories by Japan, are treated as sovereign territory by both, creating a sharp point of geostrategic contention. The lack of flexibility on both sides has constrained progress in Russo-Japanese relations. Recent efforts to establish joint economic activity on the Kurils have been featured in the media, sparking new hope for a forthcoming resolution, but this optimism is misplaced. The contrast in underlying expectations and intentions at the negotiation table will keep Russia and Japan at odds, despite recent glimpses of progress.

Intimidated by the rapidly increasing Chinese influence in East Asia, Japan recently turned to Russia in search of a new regional ally—a neighbor rich in energy sources in which Japan seeks to diversify. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan announced a new approach to Russia in May 2016, which was the first suggestion of a potential turning point in resolving the 70-year-old disagreement. Under the new policy, Abe committed to settling the dispute over the islands by the end of his term and focused on a strategy of economic incentivization. He presented a cooperation plan to Russia that included eight key points for strengthening cooperation in areas like business development and energy. Optimism for progress grew further in December 2016 during Vladimir Putin’s visit to Japan, the first in 11 years, when the two leaders agreed to launch joint economic activity on the islands.

The process of implementing these ideas began quickly. In June 2017, a delegation of 70 Japanese officials and businessmen visited the Kurils to explore the options for business opportunities on the islands. The historic mission inspected potential facilities for joint economic projects and analyzed possible development tracks in energy, fishing, transport, and tourism. Riding the momentum, Japanese and Russian foreign ministers met in August to discuss promising development courses in aquaculture, wind power,
package tours, and other areas, which were later selected for priority implementation by Abe and Putin during their talks at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.\textsuperscript{7}

The situation appears promising: despite the persistent disagreement on the political affiliation of the islands, Russia and Japan established a joint investment fund worth $1 billion,\textsuperscript{8} Putin and Abe discussed the hopeful possibility of a long-awaited peace treaty\textsuperscript{9} at a bilateral meeting at the G20 summit, and an “atmosphere of trust, friendship and cooperation”\textsuperscript{10} began rapidly filling the bitter Kurilian air. To cement the new friendship, Putin and Abe pronounced 2018 as the Year of Japan in Russia and the Year of Russia in Japan. While discussions of even linking Sakhalin and Hokkaido with a railroad have also emerged,\textsuperscript{11} a metaphorical bridge of understanding already seemed to stretch between the two countries.

Against this backdrop, it seems that the two nations still have fundamentally different ideas about the nature and long-term purpose of these agreements. In relying on economic inducement, Japan has overestimated what economic cooperation in the Kurils is worth to Russia. This is where a critical disconnect exists.

A country with scarce natural resources, Japan would certainly benefit from a territory rich in fishing grounds and, supposedly, offshore reserves of oil and gas. In addition, given the “new changes in the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific region, such as the issues concerning North Korea, the rapid growth of China, and moves toward the creation of an East Asian community,”\textsuperscript{12} it is only natural that Abe would prefer to have the islands under his control as a precautionary measure. But perhaps most importantly, for Japan regaining the control over the islands has always been a matter of national pride—so much that it claims that the islands have never once belonged to another country.\textsuperscript{13}

For Russia, who has been comfortable maintaining the status quo, the joint economic activity has been entirely separate from the territorial issue from the start. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this is the consistency with which Russia has been increasing its military presence on the Kurils, often in parallel to developments in economic cooperation. Right before Putin’s visit to Japan in December 2016, Russia deployed anti-ship missile complexes on Southern Kurils.\textsuperscript{14} In February 2017, the Russian Defense Minister announced that Russia was planning to deploy three divisions on the islands as part of “active work to protect the Kurils,”\textsuperscript{15} and in October, it was announced that the establishment of a Kuril naval base was already underway.\textsuperscript{16} Russia is not planning to stop there: the deployment of the Bal and Bastion missile systems on two of the islands is scheduled for 2018.\textsuperscript{17} Regardless of the progress of joint economic development,
Russia clearly gives precedence to strategic goals over any commitment to economic cooperation with Japan on the islands.

Russia’s geostrategic interest in the islands is clear from Putin’s statement made at the International Economic Forum held in June 2017, in which he admitted that "there is a possibility of U.S. troop deployment on these territories" if they were to pass under Japan’s control. Similar concerns were voiced by Russia in regards to the planned deployment of the Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system in mainland Japan, which would be under the control of the U.S. military. This pattern indicates that Russia’s military progression in the Kurils is part of a larger picture, and this is not the only instance from which United States influence comes into play. Recent incidents, like the Russian sanctioning of a Hokkaido mayor in retaliation for Japanese support of Ukraine-related sanctions, illustrate that Japan serves as another outlet for the Russo-American rivalry. Dominance in geostrategic competitions is far higher on Russia’s list of priorities than the possible economic benefits from a small territory like the Kurils. In effect, Russia has already repeatedly demonstrated what Japan refuses to see: cooperation in the Kurils is totally secondary to geopolitical goals. For Putin, economic discussions were never part of the territorial equation, stating that it is “only Japan that believes it has territorial problems with Russia,” while Russia has “no territorial problems [with Japan] at all.”

The current situation is not hopeless. Significant progress in bilateral relations has been made by both countries in the last couple of years. The Far Eastern neighbors are evidently taking positive steps, and the unprecedented turnover growth between Russia and Japan is a solid foundation for future economic cooperation. But whether this new partnership can end the protracted chapter of World War II is an entirely separate question approached by the two countries from contrasting angles to which so far there has been no real middle ground. For an understanding to be reached, the two nations first need to realize that they have been speaking two different languages. If they refuse to face the disparity in their positions, the territorial deadlock is bound to continue and World War II will technically carry on.

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Endnotes


13. Ibid.


RUSSIA AND JAPAN ON DIFFERENT WAVELENGTHS IN THE KURIL ISLANDS


