

# LESSONS FOR KASHMIR FROM THE KURILES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

“Although Russia has for long been Japan’s hypothetical enemy, Japanese PM Shinzo Abe’s wish to engage with Moscow stems from the rapid rise of China.” Russian President Vladimir Putin (left) with Mr. Abe in Moscow in 2013. AFP

The Second World War left behind many problems inherited from history, not least in Asia in respect of multiple disputed territories. One of them concerns four islands in the Kurile chain that are claimed by Japan but occupied by Russia as successor state of the Soviet Union. Despite the passage of over 70 years, this dispute has defied solution and prevented the conclusion of a Russo-Japanese peace treaty to draw a final curtain over the detritus of the war.

The Kuriles are an archipelago of some 56 islands spanning about 1,800 km from Japan’s Hokkaido to Russia’s Kamchatka. All of them are under Russian jurisdiction but Japan claims the two large southernmost islands, Etorofu and Kunashiri, and two others, Shikotan and Habomai, as its ‘northern territories’. These islands were occupied by the Soviet Union in August 1945, after which the entire Japanese population, numbering less than 20,000, was evicted. The islands are now populated by the various ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union, but only eight of them are actually inhabited.

The prime value of the islands, however, is strategic. The Russians have deployed missile systems, plan a submarine project there, and intend to preclude any American military use of the islands.

Public opinion in both countries is totally averse to any concession. Russian memory recalls the Japan-Russia war (1904-05) and the Japanese intervention with the U.S. and Europe during the early years of the Russian Revolution. Moscow’s legal claim is based on the post-war settlements of Yalta and San Francisco, whereas the Japanese claim is founded on the Russia-Japan treaties of 1855 and 1875. Leaders in both Russia and Japan are aware that their domestic political positions would be severely at risk from right-wing and conservative circles were they to suggest even the slightest compromise.

Among hyper-nationalist circles, territorial issues have always been questions of utmost sensitivity. While the Japanese government’s official position is that it has “energetically been continuing negotiations with Russia”, the reality is that it was only after the advent to power of President Vladimir Putin in Russia and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Japan that there has been any forward movement. After Mr. Putin’s visit to Japan in 2016, both leaders have embarked on some joint undertakings on the islands without calling in question the claims and legal positions of either side. In two summits last year, they agreed to joint field surveys and joint economic activities with the identification of specific projects, the enterprises that would undertake them, and three levels of supervision. These proposals cover marine species and aquaculture, greenhouse strawberry and vegetable cultivation, development of package tourism, wind power generation, and the reduction and disposal of garbage. They also agreed to scheduled visits by Japanese families who sought to visit the graves of their ancestors, and two such visits have already taken place. The Japanese have further proposed safe opportunities for fishing salmon and trout without using prohibited driftnet methodology, and cooperation in disaster prevention. These may seem small steps, but underlying them is a serious purpose: to build trust. Summits and Foreign Ministers’ meetings have become commonplace.

Moscow is concerned about Tokyo amending Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which

disallows Japan from maintaining a military force or using force to settle international disputes, and views with anxiety the fact that Japan is among the world's biggest spenders on defence and has a very powerful military. Japan plays host to American bases and missile systems, and plans to spend \$240 billion up to 2024 on cruise missiles, missile interceptors, fighter jets and aircraft carriers. Responsible for this military build-up are trepidations about threats from China and North Korea. South Korea for its part has similar apprehensions and, apart from being the world's 11th major economy, has now become the 12th strongest military power. Moscow cannot be unaware that Japan and South Korea seem to be inching towards a future of relative independence from the U.S. in wartime operations, especially in the context of the projected American decline in world status, and the political uncertainties among Washington's political circles.

Although Russia has for long been a hypothetical enemy of Japan's, Mr. Abe's wish to engage with Russia stems from the rapid rise of China, which spends three times more on defence than Japan, and the perceived threat from North Korea, which recently fired two ballistic missiles over Japan as a taunt to the U.S. Russia is now seen in Japan as the lesser enemy, and improving relations with Moscow might drive a wedge in the growing quasi-alliance between Russia and China, a break-up desired by the U.S.-led Western alliance. Tokyo notes that the Russian far east is endowed with plentiful natural resources which are in need of investments, but is hampered by a small population, whereas China has 100 million citizens along that shared land border. Japan has no territorial or demographic ambitions in Russia other than the Kuriles, and has the capacity to transform the vast contiguous areas of Russia.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that both Japan and Russia see merit in pursuing greater collaboration, although the U.S. has made no secret its displeasure at Japan's accommodating attitude towards Russia. At Vladivostok last September, Mr. Abe declared that Japan-Russia relations held "unlimited potential" and that the absence of a peace treaty was "an abnormal state of affairs". Mr. Putin agreed, noting that the Russian and Japanese militaries had cooperated for the first time, and urged the immediate conclusion of a peace treaty without preconditions. Japan demurred on the grounds that the Kurile islands dispute had to be settled first before the issue was foreclosed. Nonetheless, Mr. Abe stated that "Japan-Russia relations are advancing at a degree never seen before."

The interactions between Japan and Russia probably hold scant interest for the Indian public. Nevertheless, although no two international problems are analogous, there are important lessons to be drawn from the manner in which traditionally hostile neighbours can identify common interests and explore unorthodox avenues along which to proceed in search of innovative solutions to apparently insoluble disputes. This requires strong leadership and a bold imagination. Neither India nor Pakistan lacks either attribute. Kashmir is essentially a territorial dispute of almost equal vintage as the Kuriles. But if both sides keep waiting for the most propitious time to make the first move, it will never come about.

*Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary*

India does not gain anything by escalating the nuclear arms race in the region with INS Arihant

**END**

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com