

Background to the 'Northern Territories' Conflict

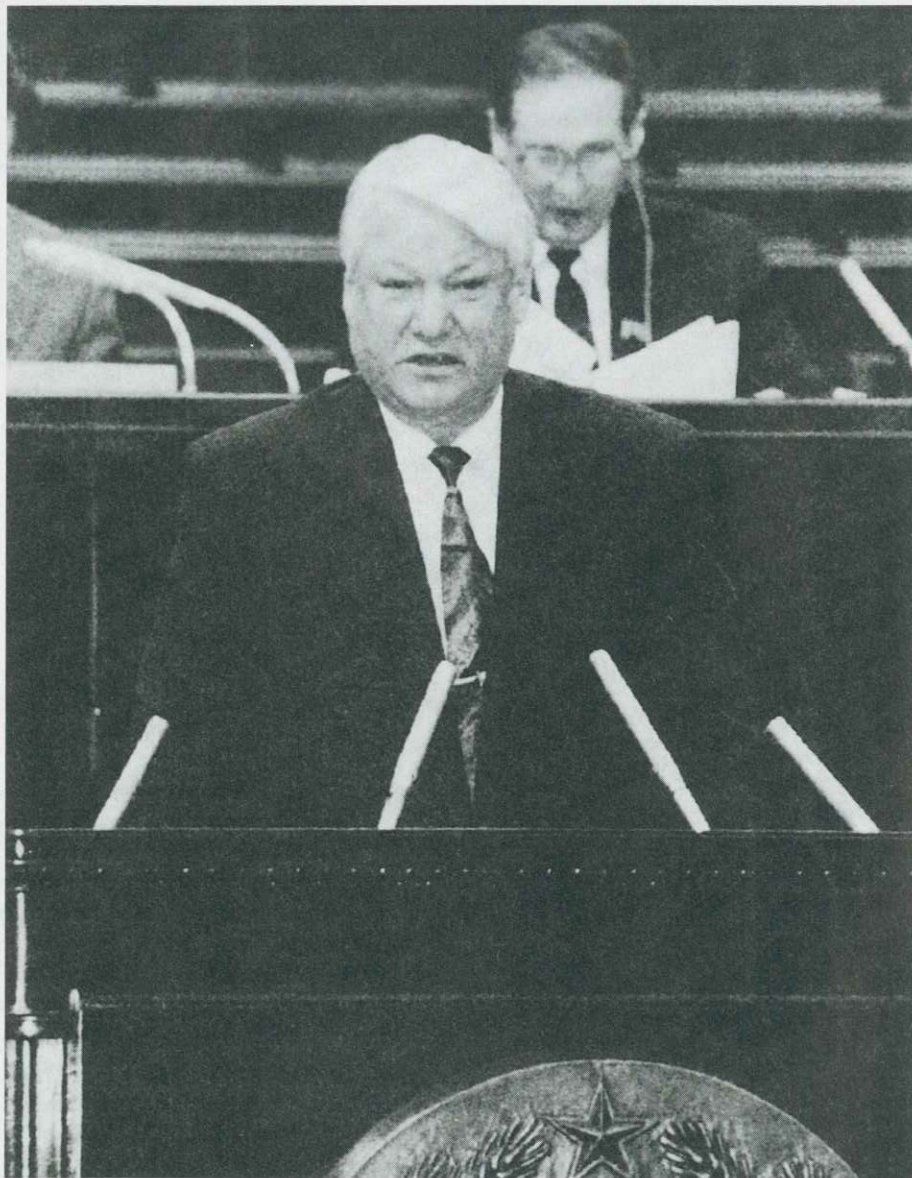
By Sato Kikuo

Japan and the former USSR have yet to sign a peace treaty following World War II. Although the 1956 Joint Declaration formally restored diplomatic relations, no formal treaty of peace was signed. Since then relations have been somewhat normalized, but it has been a cold peace. In fact, it can be said that Japan and Russia have tended to ignore each other. The friction stems from historical conflicts, territorial disputes and the Cold War. A lack of understanding of this history has left the rest of the world, especially the West, puzzled as to why Russo-Japanese relations have yet to be fully normalized, especially considering the end of the Cold War.

Much to Japan's chagrin, while leaders of foreign governments often vocally support Japan in the territorial conflict, they see Japan's stubbornness to put the repatriation of four tiny islands before all else as the main problem. Most Japanese, however, see the former Soviet Union as the main culprit flowing from its land grab in the dying days of WW II when it occupied four southern islands in the Kuril chain (known in Japan as the Northern Territories), and violated an international agreement on territorial non-expansion by criminally annexing them and keeping them to this day.

A ray of hope, though, came with Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power in the mid-1980s and the extension of his New Thinking diplomacy to Asia. Expectations were high when, in the midst of the "Gorby" boom, he came to Japan and met with then Prime Minister Kaifu Toshiki. Despite energetic discussions during the spring 1991 talks, negotiations over the territorial dispute failed and optimism quickly faded.

Boris Yeltsin, who replaced Gorbachev, proposed an unhurried five-step plan that would leave the resolution of the territorial dispute to future generations, an action which the Japanese saw as a retreat from the Gorbachev position. To make things worse, Yeltsin abruptly and unilaterally canceled a scheduled formal visit to Japan in the fall of 1992 with only four days notice. Japan came to regard him as uncivilized, naive in diplomatic etiquette



Does the president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, truly have a blueprint for the reconstruction of the country?

and was offended at what it saw as Yeltsin and his government's contempt for Japan. Thus, friction between Japan and Russia is tangled up in Russia's arrogance and Japan's anti-Russian sentiments, both which stem from past conflicts and the Cold War.

I will explain how this friction devel-

oped and clarify the current uncertainties which continues to thwart the signing of a final peace treaty. I will do this mainly through historical analysis and the presentation of specific problems in past negotiations. These facts are for the most part common knowledge in Japan but are virtually unknown in Asia and the West,

which are at a distance from Russo-Japanese relations, and in Russia, where the former secretive government long controlled the flow of information.

The Yalta agreement

The seeds for the continued antagonism between Japan and Russia were sown at the Yalta Conference of 1945. In late 1944, when Japanese defeat was a certainty, the U.S. Army presented a gloomy scenario to President Roosevelt: Japan would surrender by the fall of 1946 but not before the U.S. sacrificed 1 million GIs in a bloody land battle on Japanese soil. While the Manhattan Project was underway at the time, there was no guarantee that an atomic bomb could be developed nor was there a scenario for using it against Japan as the fatal blow. Thus, seeking to expiate an early end, Roosevelt urged Stalin to join the Pacific war.

Extraordinarily generous conditions were offered for a Soviet attack from the north, the Allies would approve of the Soviet retaking of southern Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands and restoration of Russian interests in southern Manchuria. Even with his unchallenged power, Stalin questioned whether he could gain popular support for sending 1 million soldiers to the Far Eastern front after losing 20 million lives and exhausting national resources in the war against Germany.

However, Roosevelt's proposal proved too attractive, and ignoring the fact that six months still remained in the Japan-Soviet Neutrality Pact, he agreed to enter the war against Japan. On August 8, just two days after the bombing of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and easily broke through the worn-down troops in Manchuria, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, winning a huge booty. Subsequently 600,000 Japanese soldiers were detained in Siberia after they surrendered, with 60,000 of them dying under the austere conditions of heavy labor, sickness and the harsh Russian winter.

Among the Yalta agreements was a secret protocol between Roosevelt and Stalin, not a formal state agreement. Later, Stalin wanted about one-third of Hokkaido to be included in the Soviet occupied zone, but this was immediately rejected by President Truman who succeeded Roosevelt. Unable to ignore the ghost of Yalta, Supreme Commander for

the Allied Powers (SCAP) General Douglas MacArthur did yield to the defacto Soviet occupation of the southern Kurils. In an ordinance issued near the beginning of the Allied occupation, he did exclude Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashiri and Iturup from the Allied occupied zone, and drew a line midway between Hokkaido and the four islands. The Soviet Army completed its Chishima Operation on September 3—some 20 days after Japan's surrender and about two weeks before the arrival on the mainland of Allied forces.

In September 1951 at the San Francisco Conference, during the peak of the Korean War, a U.S.-negotiated peace treaty with Japan was signed, effective the following April, packaged with a mutual security pact. The scenario had been drawn up by John Foster Dulles, then U.S. secretary of state advisory. In the treaty, Japan was forced to withdraw its rights, authority and claims to southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru tried to assert that the southern Kurils were Japanese territory during the negotiations, but the subsequent treaty designated the islands as land to be abandoned by Japan. There were no objections from the participating countries.

Soviet delegate Andrey Gromyko (then first deputy foreign minister) loudly trumpeted the illegality of the treaty pointing out that it would put Japan under U.S. influence, that the new People's Republic of China, born in 1949, was unduly uninvited, and that the neutrality of Japan was denied. He refused to sign, necessitating a separate peace treaty between Japan and the Soviet Union.

A history of treaties

The territorial dispute began in 1855 when the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was signed between Japan and Russia. The treaty established a border between the two countries mid-way between Iturup and Urup (the most southern island of the northern Kurils). This treaty stands as the historical and legal base of Japan's current claim to the four islands. In 1875 the two countries exchanged southern Sakhalin and the northern Kurils, giving Russia sovereignty over all of Sakhalin while Japan gained control over the entire Kuril Island chain.

As part of the reparations for the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, Japan once again gained control of southern Sakhalin. Thereafter, no territorial change occurred between the two countries until the end of WW II. Thus Soviet expansion following the Yalta agreements is a direct link to the current territorial conflict. The 1951 San Francisco peace treaty was concluded amidst intense Cold War U.S.-Soviet antagonism. Thus the treaty simply called for Japan's abandonment of sovereignty over southern Sakhalin and the southern Kurils, but did not assert Soviet sovereignty. Considering the time, it may have been appropriate. However, legally, it did not ascribe sovereignty to the disputed lands, leaving the responsibility to the Americans. Nevertheless, the U.S. has not played a proactive role, leaving it to Japan and the Soviet Union to negotiate directly.

Further complications

In 1955, three years after the enactment of the San Francisco peace treaty, a more liberal prime minister, Hatoyama Ichiro, replaced Yoshida Shigeru and entered into peace negotiations in response to a Soviet initiative. Yoshida appointed Matsumoto Shin'ichi, vice foreign minister in the last wartime cabinet, as his envoy for negotiations with the Soviet ambassador in London. Matsumoto was instructed by Foreign Minister Shigemitsu to secure at least the return of Habomai and Shikotan, if not all four islands.

To Matsumoto's delight, the Soviet Union offered the return of the two islands. However, the foreign minister decided to side with the anti-Soviet hawks, which included Yoshida and other powerful members of the Liberal Party as well as a section of foreign ministry officials. They opposed the peace plan advocates, including Prime Minister Hatoyama and Agricultural Minister Kono Ichiro, who represented the interest of the fishing industry. To break this deadlock Shigemitsu flew to Moscow to negotiate for all four islands, but agreed to accept the return of just two. As he was about to sign this would-be treaty, he received an order from the prime minister to wait and the negotiations failed. For Hatoyama, it was unacceptable to let his former opponent, Shigemitsu, fish in these trouble waters. Yoshida and other Liberal conser-

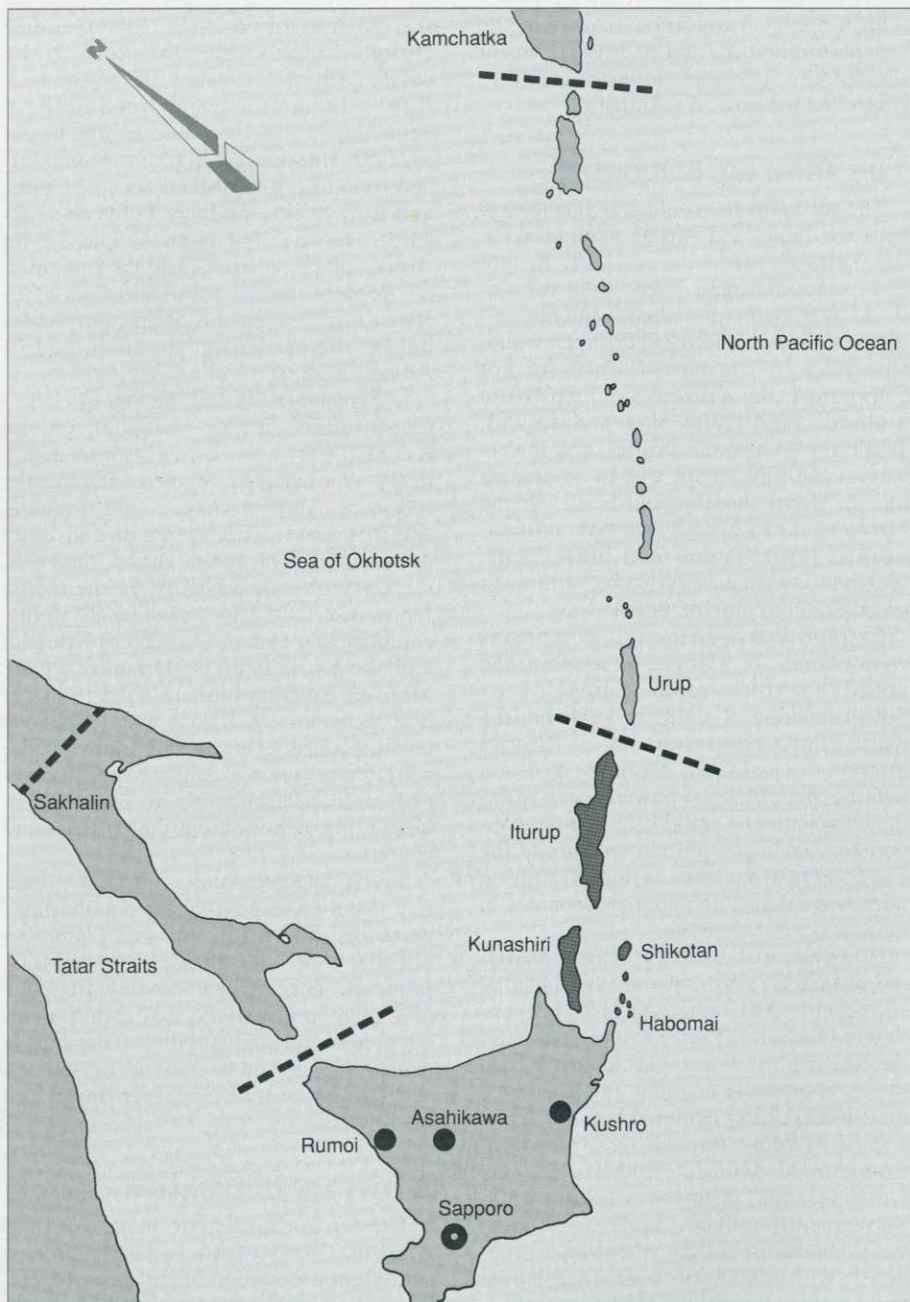
vatives and anti-Soviet hawks, considered Shigemitsu a traitor.

Such internal squabbling among Japan's leading politicians stained Japan's history with double-faced diplomacy, drawing the peace negotiations with the Soviets into the domestic power struggles between politicians and the bureaucracy. Ultimately, an ailing Hatoyama visited Moscow and signed a joint declaration that ended the state of belligerency, but opposition at home kept him from concluding a formal peace treaty. The joint declaration did state that Habomai and Shikotan would be handed over after the conclusion of a formal peace treaty. Popular opinion accepted the normalization of Russo-Japanese relations as necessary, but leaned towards the claim that four islands should be returned rather than only two. The joint declaration, stating that only two would be returned, was coldly received and the return of all four islands has since become a rallying call.

As the Cold War continued, only minor progress was made. In October 1973 a joint communiqué was issued by Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and First Secretary of Soviet Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev which stated their commitment to resolve the pending issues between the two countries after WW II in order to conclude a peace treaty. Japan claimed the pending issues included the disputed islands—Tanaka said that Brezhnev confirmed this by saying "Da," although the Soviet Union denied this. Thus the discussion was rendered fruitless and thereafter the Soviet Union has refused to soften their stance.

In retrospect, the promise to return Habomai and Shikotan in 1956 seems to have been the maximum concession offered by the Soviet Union, as that was during the early years of the Khrushchev regime at a time when Stalin was being denounced. Perhaps Khrushchev, with his ambition and strategy of understanding capitalism, might have been offering the tiny islands as an incentive to lure Japan away from its alliance with the U.S. At that time, although Japan had been inclined to join the liberal camp, a pro-Soviet line was still strong among politicians, businessmen and critics.

While public opinion continued to call for the return of all four islands, in 1960, four years after the U.S.-Japan bilateral security treaty was due to be ratified, a



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huge demonstration opposed to the treaty encircled the Diet shouting "Down with the treaty, Down with Kishi!" Civil unrest caused President Eisenhower to cancel a scheduled visit to Japan, and contributed to the resignation of Prime Minister Kishi, who was prepared to trade his political career for passage of the Japan/U.S.

alliance treaty. Thus Khrushchev's strategy of separating Japan from the U.S. was not, necessarily, a pipe dream.

Since then, little has changed and it can be safely assumed that two islands are the maximum the Soviet Union, and now Russia, is prepared to offer. Japan's public opinion, however, still believes that the

entire four islands should eventually be repatriated. This is contrary to the Russian position and this disparity underlines the seriousness of the territorial dispute.

It is ironic that despite perestroika and the birth of a new Russia, the territorial dispute has only increased in complexity as Russian attitudes have apparently retrogressed. This was illustrated by Gorbachev's visit to Japan. Although he admitted the existence of a territorial dispute and agreed to include the names of the disputed four islands in a joint declaration, he refused to confirm the 1956 Joint Declaration, which Japan considers

the bare minimum for any peace treaty. Gorbachev told the press "... the unrealized [Habomai and Shikotan] has lost its validity," creating consternation among many Japanese.

Gorbachev's stance stemmed from enormous political pressure at home, where his position was weakened by his failure in the economic sphere. Furthermore, Russian nationalism has resurfaced making it suicidal for an ostensible leader to give up any land. If Gorbachev had reconfirmed the former joint declaration and promised to return the islands his political life would have ended immediately.

After Yeltsin assumed power, the possibility of settling the territorial issue has diminished as nationalist sentiment grows. Moreover, the international community sees support of Yeltsin as the only way to safeguard the new Russian state, and in the U.S. and France economic aid to Russia is regarded as a most urgent international issue.

Accordingly, Japan has had to withdraw its traditional position of demanding progress in the territorial dispute as a precondition for receiving economic aid. This shift was necessary for Japan to be selected to host the 1993 Group of Seven summit which will focus largely on Russian aid.

Prime Minister Miyazawa has announced that he will not raise the Northern Territory

dispute at the summit, a statement which Yeltsin misread as a decision by Japan to separate, in principle, the territorial issue and economic aid. Moreover, he mentioned that he planned to visit Japan, perhaps to excuse his earlier cancellation, but this was again withdrawn. Japanese people were disgusted by this one-sided performance and do not expect much from the Yeltsin government.

There is one more important misunderstanding between Japan and Russia, one which has not been recognized by the government of either country. Yeltsin assumed in the fall of 1991 that Russo-Japanese relations should be dealt with according to principles of "law and justice." Regarding law, there is little difference in interpretation as both sides seek approval of treaties, agreements and joint declarations since the 1855 treaty.

As for justice, however, opposing views are entrenched. Japan is looking for rectification of several injustices perpetrated by the Stalinists, including an illegal declaration of war upon Japan, unjustifiable occupation of Japanese territory and inhumane detention of Japanese soldiers in Siberia—an official apology and repatriation of land is expected. Russia, not surprisingly, does not abide by Japan's self-serving interpretation of this history. According to Russian journalists stationed in Tokyo, Yeltsin's justice means the correctness of the Soviet Union's entrance into the Pacific war to smash Japanese militarism in the final stage of the war against fascism. There is little common ground between these two positions.

Leaders and foreign ministers in both countries desire an improvement in Russo-Japanese relations according to law and justice. However, given the aforementioned differences, reconciliation and the development of mutual confidence seems highly unlikely. In any case sentiment in Japan, regarding the Soviet Union in World War Two, was that Germany was the main aggressor and Japan was a victim of this development. The West ignores this aspect of history and only attacks Japan over its reluctance to aid Russia. Is this fair? A review of these facts is in order.

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Commemoration of the withdrawal of Japanese troops from the southern Kurils. One decision stemming from the Yalta conference was Soviet possession of the entire Kuril Island chain.