

# Japan-Russia Relations and Island Issues

## Abstract

Problems in foreign relations between Japan and Russia (former USSR) is historically deep and goes back to the rivalry of the Japanese and Russian empires for power in North Eastern region of Asia. After the world war II, the territorial issue for the Northern Territories has not settled properly even today. Historically, during the first half of the 1950s, added unsettled problems were included as fishing rights in the Sea of Okhotsk for Japan and coastal maritime provinces of USSR. Conciliation of these issues were unresolved in the 1956 due to the strain over territorial rights.

**Keywords:** Northern Territory, Kuril Island, former USSR, Soviet Union, US, Gorbachev, Putin, Hata, Shinzo Abe.

## Introduction

Acclimatizing the postwar international circumstances after the conclusion of San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, Japan and the USSR (now Russia) concluded a Joint Declaration in 1956, subsequently, four islands continued the only serious political issue between Japan and Russia. In 1970s, Japan has become the trade partner of the Soviet Union, among the industrialized nations. Regardless of the image that existed in the late 1980s having the worst relations between great powers by Japan and former USSR. After the end of the Cold War in 1991, prospects arise that Japan and Russia would overcome their variances and advance mutual cooperation in economic area and security relations motivated by the stability in Northeast Asia, and even common interests and identities as both the countries searching for a new model of development and Asian regionalism (Togo: 2005). In addition, Japan became the third-leading donor country, with global economic assistance totaling US \$6 billion to Russia. A new economic package was proposed as the Hashimoto-Yeltsin Plan of 1997, and plan to develop Siberia and the Russian Far East in 2007 by the prime minister Shinzo Abe.

## Objective of the Study

The article deals with the scenario responsible for tension between Japan and Russia due to the territorial issues especially for island issues. Japan is a peace loving nation allied with United States for military cooperation, and cooperating Russia, once a dominant nation with different ideology. The US and Russia were hostile during the cold war years in between 1945 to 1991, which impacted the Japanese foreign affairs at large.

## Japan-Russia Relations

Japanese relation with Russia (former USSR) was not cordial in between 1917-1991 and both the countries were having different ideology during the cold war days. Furthermore, the territorial skirmishes over the Kuril Islands and South Sakhalin was the continuous foundation of stiffness between both the countries, which prevented both Japan and Russia from signing a peace treaty after World War II, and even today the island problems continue without a proper solution. In the mid-1970s, the USSR started to warn that the Japanese peace treaty with China might endanger the Japan-USSR relations. In January 1976, USSR's foreign minister Andrei Gromyko visited Japan to recommence the talks on peace agreement. Japanese refused to remove the territorial question, Gromyko offered the Soviet-held island areas, the Habomai Islands and Shikotan--if Japan would sign a treaty of friendliness and cooperation. The signing of the Japanese and China peace treaty in mid-1978 was a main setback to Japanese-USSR relations. Notwithstanding, Japanese assertions that the treaty's anti-hegemony clause is not directed against any specific country, USSR saw it as placing Japan with United States (US) and China decisively in the anti-Soviet camp (Sims: 2001). Authoritatively, both sides sustained to express the desire for better relations,



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nevertheless USSR actions assisted only to alarm and distance the Japanese side. Which resulted in the 1980s military buildup in the Pacific area by USSR.

Deviations in the policy carried out under Mikhail Gorbachev commencement in the mid-1980s, comprising efforts at domestic reform and the pursuit of détente with the US and Western Europe, provoked normally positive Japanese interest, however the Japanese government held that the USSR had not altered its policies important to Japan. The Japanese government stated that it would not normalize its relations with the USSR until it returns the Northern Territories. The government and Japanese business leaders stated further that Japanese trade with and investment in the USSR would not grow noticeably until the Northern Territories issue is resolved.

#### **Island Issues**

In the late 1990, the USSR government had transformed its strategies and recognized that the territorial issue is a serious issue and could be negotiated with the Japanese side at the highest levels meetings. Officials from USSR apparently floated a suggestion to contract the Northern Territories and part of Sakhalin--once a colonial holding of Japan to Japanese government. Gorbachev and others also mentioned to a 1956 offer of the USSR to return one of the three main islands (Shikotan, the smallest of the three) and the Habomai Islands, and there were indications that USSR might be ready to recuperate the offer. The USSR accentuated that it would not return all the islands because of public antagonism and the possible revival of territorial claims by other countries against the USSR (Clark: 2005). The military of USSR apparently opposed the return since the Kuril Islands affords a protective barrier to the Sea of Okhotsk, where the USSR navy deployed the submarines loaded with long-range ballistic missiles or ICBMs.

The USSR also walked up its diplomacy toward Japan with the announcement in 1990 that Gorbachev would visit Japan in 1991. Officials from the USSR emphasized that government would offer demilitarization talks with Japan and might make more schemes on the Northern Territories during the visit (Inoguchi: 2013). Witnesses believed that Gorbachev might offer a platform dealing with the islands, arms reduction, and economic collaboration. In January 1990, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs moved its position, which previously had rejected negotiations with USSR on arms reductions, signifying that Japan would be eager to discuss. Japanese officials stated that the government would articulate policy on arms reduction in close coordination with US.

After the cold war and dissolution of USSR, the government of Boris Yeltsin took power in Russia in late 1991. Once again, Russia took a stand in firm disagreement to returning the disputed territories to Japan. While Japan joined with the Group of Seven industrialized nations (G7) in providing some technical and financial assistance to Russia. The relations between Japan and Russia remained unruffled. In 1992, Russian president Boris Yeltsin suspended a

scheduled visit to Japan, which was done in October 1993. Throughout the visit, though various applicable issues, including the Northern Territories and the signing of a peace treaty, were deliberated, no substantial development was seen in Japan-Russia relations (MOFA: 2019). In March 1994, then Japanese minister of foreign affairs Hata Tsutomu visited Russia and both the countries seek a determination over the persistent Kuril Islands dispute, which was not successful. The aggravated Russo-Japan relations moved to height when the Japanese government circulated a new instruction for school textbooks on in July 2008 to teach children that Japan has authority over the Kuril Islands. The Russian community was annoyed by the action and ask the Russian government to counter. The Foreign Minister of Russia announced in July 2008 that Russia endorsed its sovereignty over the islands

#### **Conclusion**

Japanese government has had long planning to recover few Northern Territories. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is continuing as Prime Minister of Japan since 2012, and the long term of office is necessary for lengthy negotiations. Consequently, Abe ignored criticism from US and visited Russia's Sochi in 2016, where he had an informal meeting with Vladimir Putin, who was elected as president for the third term in 2012 and continues. Abe projected a new line to Japan-Russia mutual relations that intended to enlarge the areas of cooperation through economic engagement. This new Japanese approach was intended to facilitate for both the neighboring countries with a strong bilateral ties in essence to side the territorial dispute. There is certain interest of both the countries, should be taken into account, that if Japanese get the authority over Northern Territories, then Russian have anxiety due Japan-US military alliance, and if Japanese left the claim of territory then it is not a valid move for Japan, and Japan have objection over militarization of Northern Territories (Kuril Island) by Russia.

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