

Uncomfortable compromises in Russia–Japan territory dispute

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On 12 August, Russia held military manoeuvres on two of the four disputed islands that lie north-east of Hokkaido. The island chain, known as the South Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, has been the major sticking point in Japan–Russia relations during the post-war period.

The Soviet Union, and then Russia, has exercised de facto administration over the entire island chain since 1945 — Russian citizens and soldiers currently live on all four of the disputed islands. Japan, on the other hand, maintains that the islands remain Japan's 'inherent territory'. Disagreement over the territories' status has proved to be the key obstacle preventing the signing of a post-World War II permanent peace treaty between the two states.



Russia's recent military drills involved over 1000 soldiers, five armed assault helicopters and around 100 other pieces of military hardware, and took place on the two largest disputed islands — known as Iturup and Kunashir in Russia, and Etorofu and Kunashiri in Japan. Russia last held military exercises in the territories in 2010.

In response to the exercises Japan [lodged a 'strong protest'](#) ^[1] with Moscow, and a senior official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) stated that 'the Northern Territories are an inherent part of Japan's territory, and we cannot accept the move'. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe stated that the manoeuvres were 'totally unacceptable'. Russia's President Vladimir Putin had been scheduled to visit Japan later this year, though MOFA sources say that this visit is now uncertain.

The military exercises came as an apparent reprisal for Japan's support for anti-Russia sanctions, which had been enacted in response to Russia's role in the ongoing crisis in eastern Ukraine. In an attempt to avoid aggravating the territorial dispute, Japanese sanctions have been mild when compared to other G7 countries. Tokyo's targeting of 40 individuals and restriction of imports from Crimea fall short of American and European measures aimed at hobbling Russia's banking, energy and military industries. Still, Japan's more measured sanctions appear to have angered the Russian leadership. In addition to the military drills, Russia has responded with its own sanctions, which restrict entry of specific Japanese individuals to Russia.

Negotiations over the disputed islands have long been mired in cycles of dialogue and deadlock. Even so, while Japan's other territorial disputes have seemingly reached impasses, dealings with Russia over the Northern Territories/South Kurils have held comparatively more promise for resolution. From the mid-2000s onward, successive Japanese prime ministers have met with Russian presidents Putin and Dmitry Medvedev to discuss a way forward on the issue. While a visit to Kunashir Island by then president Medvedev in 2010 — the first ever visit of a Soviet or Russian leader to the South Kurils — put a temporary freeze on talks, Prime Minister Abe's second term as prime minister has seen a renewal in dialogue.

Abe has made resolution of the issue a priority of his foreign policy platform and, during his first year in office, [met with President Putin](#) ^[2] five times. (By comparison, similar bilateral meetings with South Korean and Chinese leaders have remained elusive). Following a 2013 visit to the Russian leader in Moscow, Abe stated that his 'good personal relationship' with Putin would be crucial in resolving the dispute. This relationship has been cultivated with some intensity by Abe: in February, he attended the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, in contrast to the leaders of major European states and the US, who boycotted the event over human rights concerns.

What the latest setback demonstrates, however, is that [the territorial dispute remains volatile](#) ^[3]. Despite Abe's intensive diplomatic outreaches, there is not enough goodwill in the relationship between the two states to allow Japan to tread a fine line between placating the United States and not incensing Russia. As Russia moves closer to China through the signing of the US\$400 billion Gazprom gas pipeline deal, there is the potential in the future for vested interests on both sides to exert further influence.

Abe is now left in a difficult position.

Japan can continue to hedge between Russia and its position in the G7, and suffer the consequences of having to take the kind of half-measures that have placed it in its present bind. Another option is to react by ratcheting up sanctions against Russia to match those imposed by the US and EU — though such a response would surely only further delay dialogue on the Northern Territories.

Alternatively, Abe can resume his carefully-cultivated personal diplomacy with Putin, perhaps negotiating a deal to ease sanctions in exchange for concrete action towards resolution of the territorial dispute. Given [Russia's increasing economic importance to Japan](#) ^[4], and Japan's

desire to diversify its energy imports by expanding its supply of Russian gas and oil, such an option must at least be in the back of Abe's mind. A [personal message of condolence from Putin](#) ^[5] to Abe in the aftermath of the Hiroshima landslides that killed 39 people suggests that the Russian leader remains open to such talks.

Today's arguments over the status of the islands are rooted in the interpretation of wartime and post-war agreements, and, like Japan's [other territorial disputes](#) ^[6], are muddled by the legalities of Tokyo's pre-war expansions. An early chance for resolution of the dispute was unsuccessful: in a 1956 peace deal with Russia, Japan was willing to abandon its claims to the two bigger islands, but the United States intervened and forced Japan to reject the terms. Then, as today, the alliance sometimes forced uncomfortable compromises.

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[1] lodged a 'strong protest'

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http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/08/13/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-protest-russias-military-drills-disputed-islands/#.U-xWY-N_u9Y

[2] met with President Putin:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/05/15/japanese-prime-minister-abes-visit-to-russia/>

[3] the territorial dispute remains volatile:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/02/23/russia-japan-territorial-disputes-divisive-as-ever/>

[4] Russia's increasing economic importance to

Japan: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/06/15/26925/>

[5] personal message of condolence from Putin:

http://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASGM21H01_R20C14A8EAF000/

[6] other territorial disputes:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/08/17/south-korea-and-japan-disputes-over-the-dokdo-takeshima-islands/>