

Hidden Aspects of Russo-Japanese History and Relations

Edward M. Forsythe III, EdD

Behind America, one of Russian's longest standing adversaries is Japan, and the greatest source of friction between the two countries is a territorial dispute surrounding the Southern Kuril Islands (the Northern Territories— for instances where references differ between Japan and Russia, the Japanese references are provided in parenthesis.) From the time when Japan reopened its borders to foreign relations until today, Russia and Japan have been locked in a heated struggle for control of the territory which lies between them. Four of these islands—Iturup (Etorofu), Kunashir (Kunashiri), Shikotan and the Habomai islets—are relatively small pieces of rock protruding from the Pacific Ocean; but they have been the source of great controversy and vacillating ownership since before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. This dispute has been dubbed a microcosm of Russo-Japanese relations (Sevela). Despite current attempts at settling territorial disputes and improving Russian-Japanese relations through leadership summits, financial ventures and cultural exchanges (both well- and little-known), there seems to be no resolution in sight to the historical contention that exists between the two countries. This paper discusses the historical problems of Russo-Japanese relations which inhibit resolution of territorial disputes, including previous armed conflicts, the many treaties and agreements effecting their relationship and relevant political / economic issues. Finally, the paper will bring to light little-known efforts on the part of Japan to support Russia financially in spite of their history of estrangement.

Historical Hatred Develops

Proper relations between the governments of Russia and Japan were not established until the mid 1800's. Japan was emerging from a long period of self-imposed isolationism and Russia was expanding its borders eastward toward the Pacific Ocean. One of Russia's main goals in eastward expansion was the establishment of a sea port. Unable to establish a real port in the northwest, the Tsar looked to the Far East as a source of oceanic commerce. This eastward expansion brought relations with China, the Mongols and eventually, Japan. In the early 1800s, Russia claimed the northern part of Sakhalin Island (known in Japan as Karafuto) (*Sakhalin Island*). Then in 1845, Japan laid claim to all of Karafuto and the first international relations challenge between Russian and Japan developed. Soon thereafter, Commodore Perry forced Japan to open its doors to foreign trade and the Japanese government began to establish formal international relations with its neighbors and economic partners. The first treaty was signed with the United States in 1854, followed quickly by many others ("United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853"). The Shimoda Treaty—the initial agreement between Japan and Russia—was signed in 1855 and provided for, among other things, the establishment of official boundaries between the two nations. Article Two of this treaty stated that the islands of Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and Habomai belonged to Japan, and the remainder of the Kuril Islands belonged to Russia. Control of Sakhalin Island was left to historical precedent: Sakhalin Island was divided at the 50th parallel with Japan ruling the south—Karafuto—and Russia, the north: Sakhalin (see fig. 1). These boundaries remained in effect until the 1875 Treaty for the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands, in which Japan gained

control of the entire Kuril island chain from Hokkaido to the Kamchatka Peninsula. In exchange, Japan ceded control of Sakhalin Island in its entirety to Russia (Andersen; Sakhalin Island).



Fig. 1. The geographic boundaries of Japan and Russia in the mid-1800s.

Despite the acquisition of this island chain, Japan found itself needing of a land which could provide the raw materials which it desperately required to continue its economic expansion. Russia, too, still desired a true sea port such as that in Port Arthur, on the tip of China's Liaotung Peninsula. The Korean peninsula, controlled in the 1800s by China, provided the closest and most easily conquerable land which would satisfy Japan's needs; so it invaded in 1894 and began the Sino-Japanese War (Japan Center for Asian Historical Records). Japan easily dominated the weakened Chinese government and the Treaty of Shimonseki was signed in April 1895, ending the War. This pact gave Japan the right to annex Korea and the deed to the Liaotung Peninsula, including Port Arthur, as well as Southern Manchuria between the Yalu and Liao rivers. Russia, France, and Germany were enraged by this treaty because they lost the chance to take a piece of the Chinese pie. A Triple Intervention forced Japan to return Manchuria and the Liaotung to China under "dictates of humanity" (Okamoto, 47). Three years later, China granted Russia a 25-year lease on Port Arthur. The fact that Russia had conspired to rob Japan of its spoils of the Sino-Japanese War caused a rash of nationalism at home, focusing the scorn of the entire nation on Russia. Not only were the governments at odds, the entire country of Japan was rallying against the aggressive Bear to the north (Berry).

In order to counteract the Triple Intervention, Japan signed a treaty with Britain in 1902, stating that support would be provided should either country enter a conflict with more than one nation (Cavendish). This effectively nullified the power of the Russian/French/German pact and pitted Russia and Japan solely against one another. The Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900 gave Russia the chance to annex Manchuria unopposed, and Japan feared that "if Korea should fall into the sphere of [Russian] power, this foothold and key would be transformed into 'a dagger pointed at Japan's heart'" (Westwood 2). Russia and Japan began to view Korea the same way two husky people view the armrest between them on an airplane: both sides pushing for space and dominance

(see fig. 2). Japan tried to use diplomatic pressure to remove Russia from Manchuria by offering a tentative agreement which would allow Russia to maintain control of Manchuria and permit Japan to annex Korea. Russia promised to vacate Manchuria, but then reneged and even began to encroach on the Korean peninsula (Westwood). Tensions between the two nations increased until formal diplomatic ties were severed, and the Russo-Japanese War erupted in 1904.



Fig. 2. Land boundaries and sources of diplomatic tension between Japan, China, and Russia around 1900. (Source: North-East Asia, Retrieved from www.conflicts.rem33.com/images/Asia%20Pacific/EAST%20ASIA%201904-1931.jpg).

Japan needed a swift and startling victory before Russia could bring its full resources to bear in the war. Russia's inability to quickly reinforce the negligible military force which it did have in the Far East brought it to its knees by August of 1905. Although both countries were economically weakened by the war, Japan was able to maintain the façade of strength long enough to work through the United States to arrange a truce. American President Roosevelt brought the Russian and Japanese representatives together at Portsmouth, NH and a treaty was signed on September 5, 1905 (Portsmouth Peace Treaty). The Portsmouth Treaty gave Japan the Korean and Liaotung peninsulas, Port Arthur, and the southern half of Sakhalin Island, as well as allowing Japan to keep the Kuril Islands. Russia paid no indemnity but was forced to withdraw its troops from Manchuria. Despite an overwhelming victory, anti-Russian sentiment pervaded Japan due to the hardships the people endured throughout the conflict to regain that which had been taken from them despite legitimate claims that Japan held to the territory. Further, the Japanese people felt cheated after the war because Russia did not pay an indemnity, which the people were expecting to ease the economic burden they had suffered in support of the war effort. Historian John White stated, "The most significant consequence of the Russo-Japanese war and the decisions made at the Portsmouth Conference was the emergence of Japan as a continental Asian power" (White 310).

Following the Portsmouth Conference, Japan and Russia continued to work out the specifics of the agreement, such as establishing the border and the fishing rights to the area. Japan then formally annexed Korea in 1910 (Blakemore) and pushed into southern Manchuria to expand its empire. Russia was in no position to resist Japan's moves because the country was torn in a civil war and the beginnings of a revolution. After the fall of Tsar Nicholas II, Japan encroached further into Russian territory by capturing northern Manchuria (Trueman). Japan's aim was to establish an empire from which it could stop the spread of Bolshevism into the Far East ("Japanese Occupation of China before World War II"). These trespasses into Russian territory incurred the hatred of the Russian people and their newly burgeoning Communist leadership. During WWI, the Allies and Japanese continued to push into the Trans-Baikal and Siberia regions, but the Allies withdrew following the war. Japan remained in Siberia in an attempt to stem the spread of Communism, but eventually withdrew from Siberia and Manchuria due to domestic and international pressure ("Japanese Occupation of China before World War II"). "Psychologically, the northeast provinces (of Manchuria) beckoned like El Dorado to the Japanese, crammed into their craggy home islands ampler in scenery than in arable land. Officers in Manchuria never forgot the open space there" (Coox 20). Japan continued its attempts to obtain Manchuria and northern Sakhalin through 1930, but with lesser conviction due to domestic problems which decreased the importance of expansion. Worldwide economic problems of the 1920's and 1930's kept relations between Russia and Japan cold but uneventful. Even though the Portsmouth Treaty was signed and ratified by both countries, the terms were not settling in either Russia or Japan, so the bad feelings between each nation festered until WWII when Russia—then the Soviet Union—would get the chance to enact revenge (see fig. 3 for examples of anti-Japanese propaganda posters commonly found in Russia at the time).



Fig. 3. Anti-Japanese propaganda posters from Russia in early 1900s. (Source: "Yellow Promise / Yellow Peril").

Relations heated up again in 1939 when a small, undeclared battle was fought over a parcel of land in Manchuria which both Japan and Russia claimed. This battle for control of the area surrounding the town of Nomonhan in Manchuria foreshadowed a turning point in Japan's imperial luck. After Japan lost this area of Manchuria and pulled back from its southern Manchurian locations, both Japan and Russia found it prudent to sign a mutual non-aggression pact to carry

them through World War II. Russia signed the pact to avoid having to fight a war on two major fronts thousands of miles apart, and Japan signed to minimize its potential enemies in the Pacific campaign (“Japanese Occupation of China before World War II”).

With their energies expended elsewhere, neither country questioned this pact until 1945. Under the terms of the Yalta Agreement, Stalin promised to declare war against Japan and did so the same day that the United States dropped its second atomic bomb. In the four weeks which followed the war declaration and invasion, the USSR finally got revenge for Japan’s previous transgressions. Stalin was able to regain control of the Kuril Islands, including the four southern islands and all of Sakhalin Island, arguing that the USSR could take these lands as dictated by the Yalta Agreement and the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951: “the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth of September 5th, 1905” (Lasserre 7). The Soviet troops hesitated before taking the four southern islands, but when no resistance was met from the Americans, they boldly snatched up the remaining islands. This encroachment into Japan’s sovereign lands was in violation of international law because the occupation of these islands occurred after a cease-fire, so the disposition of such property should have been resolved in a peace treaty. Instead of a peace treaty, Stalin formally annexed the islands in January 1946 with the support of the Supreme Command of the Allied Powers (Lasserre 10). Since this particular item was not agreed to by both parties in a peace treaty and also not stipulated for in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, then Soviet/Russian claim to the southern Kuril Islands was without legal basis. According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “It can be said that the [current] Northern Territories Issue originated from this illegal incorporation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan) (see fig. 4 for image of how Japan was controlled following WWII).

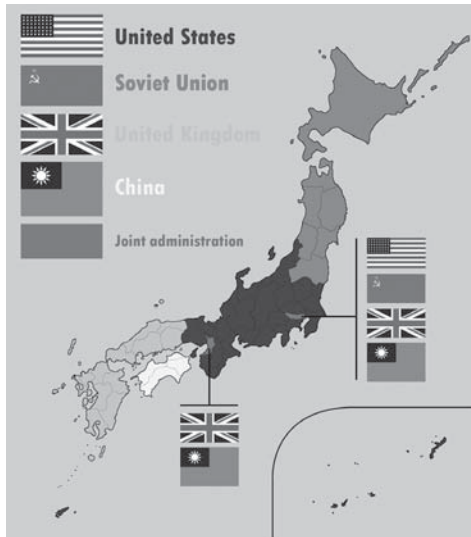


Fig. 4. Occupation zones of occupied Japan. (Source: “Divided Japan”).

Post-World War II Russo – Japanese Relations

Relations between Japan and Russia degenerated further due to the egregious treatment of the

Japanese people on these territories after the Soviet government took control. Many inhabitants were forcibly deported without any of their belongings; others were subjected to harsh discrimination and subjugation to Soviet authority. They had to give up their entire way of life to conform to their new totalitarian leaders. The property Stalin acquired has remained under Soviet or Russian control since the end of WWII. The first attempt at establishing a formal peace treaty occurred in 1955-56 when the USSR offered to return two of the southern Kuril Islands (Shikotan and Habomai—the closest to Hokkaido) (see fig. 5). However, Japan refused the offer, demanding all territories be returned (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan).

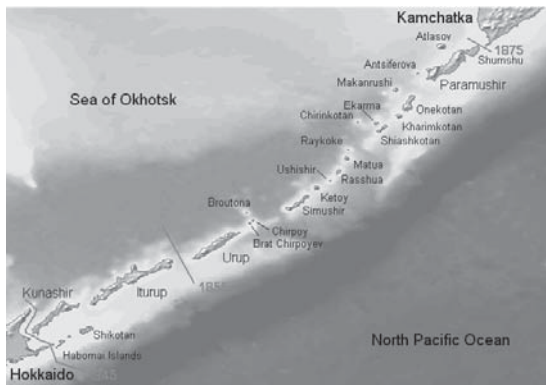


Figure 5: Kuril Island chain with 1855 treaty boundary. (Source: Asia Times Staff, “Japan”).

The lack of agreement led to the signing of the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, which was “a termination of the state of war and a resumption of diplomatic relations” vice an actual peace treaty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan). The boundary dispute was not settled by this cessation of hostilities and continues to be a source of contention between the two countries to this day. Russian President Putin has indicated a willingness to continue with the 1955 offer to return control of two islands to Japan, but the Japanese government has refused all offers to date, stating a position of all-or-nothing in reclaiming its stolen lands (Andersen).

Japan’s claim to the four southern Kuril Islands is rooted in the following facts: 1) these islands, prior to Stalin’s annexation, were considered part of Japanese territory since the days of Tsar Nicholas I; 2) that Stalin’s acquisition of these islands was not in accordance with international law; and 3) that the treaties of 1855 and 1875 specifically delineated these islands as Japanese territory (Andersen; Lasserre). The Russians claim that the Portsmouth Treaty of 1905 nullified the arrangements stipulated in the 1855 and 1875 treaties; therefore, the stipulations of the San Francisco Treaty govern the control of these islands – that they should have been returned to Russia / the USSR. Due to the fact that there has been no challenge of Stalin’s actions in the international arena, the Russian government accepts these islands as having been lawfully acquired. Vague wording and semantics in the Yalta Agreement, Cairo Declaration, Potsdam Proclamation, and San Francisco Treaty further complicate the matter (Andersen) because there has not been a definitive identification of which specific islands are included in the Kuril Islands – which is how these treaties referenced the area in question when establishing the governing authority. Without a formal agreement on the disposition of the disputed territories, a formal peace

treaty between Japan and Russia following WWII is not likely to be accomplished until the issue of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories) is settled.

Modern Complications

Current conditions which serve to maintain the friction of this territorial issue are: Japan's continued demand for the return of the four islands to Japan, the fishing rights in the surrounding waters, the ancestral rights of the original Japanese inhabitants balanced with the ancestral rights of the current inhabitants, and the amount of money each government has invested in the area (Andersen; Lasserre). Finally, it is important to keep in mind that having ceded entire countries to Western influence after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia was not prepared to give up any more territory in the end of the 20th Century and the West was no longer interested in supporting Japan in resolving this issue (Dittmer).

Perhaps the most dicey of today's issues regarding ownership of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories) is the fact that the surrounding waters host one of the best fishing areas in the Pacific Ocean ("Ishinomaki Food Export Promotion Council"). The money made from fishing these waters as well as the selling of fishing rights to other nations is one of the primary economic supports for the inhabitants of these islands. These people are very poor and depend heavily on fishing for survival (Korzhev). Since the beginning of the 21st Century, loosening of travel restrictions on the part of the Russian government has allowed frequent visits to Japan for these people, as well as allowing Japanese former inhabitants to return to their ancestral territory. For the Japanese people, the ancestral worship of Buddhism pervades their very existence, and removing these people from their homeland and the spirits of their ancestors only served to create hatred and animosity between the two peoples. Conversely, the Russian inhabitants of these islands have lived there long enough to establish their own ancestral association to the islands. Even if the Russians aren't bound by their religious convictions, they do feel a real attachment to the land. One inhabitant was quoted as saying: "Home is where you have your dead" (Ruesch). Under this definition, the people of both nations have a basis for calling these islands their home.

During the mid 1990's, the inhabitants lobbied heavily for a return to Japanese control because they felt that they had been forgotten by the Russian government. Russia pacified them by promising economic assistance, but never followed through with these promises (Okuyama). The inhabitants, fearing oppression and discrimination from a Japanese government, no longer favor a return to Japanese rule. In an attempt to curry favor with the people, the Tokyo government has invested heavily in the region with economic aid and assistance in rebuilding their infrastructure, as well as the financing of a geothermal power plant. The desires of the inhabitants vacillate with the changing of the ocean's currents (Buntilov).

In 1956, the Soviet Union issued an internationally binding declaration that it would return Shikotan and Habomai when it concluded a peace treaty with Japan. Both President Yeltsin and President Putin have hinted that they would follow through with this promise if Japan would work to establish a formal peace agreement; but Tokyo's position remains all-or-none. Steps have been taken to improve the situation by allowing free visits to the four islands by ex-residents and their families; but Russia tightened its military control of the region in 1993 further aggravating the situation (Andersen). Additionally, in 2017 Russia began constructing a military base on Matua Island, in the middle of the Kuril Island chain, creating a threatening military presence near the

disputed islands (Asia Times Staff, “Putin;” “Russia Starting Construction;” Korzhov). Unfortunately, these Russian measures have only served to increase Japan’s feelings of being threatened, and strengthen its rhetoric for the return of all four islands.

The dispute over ownership of the Southern Kuril Islands (Northern Territories) has long since become a matter of prestige for Moscow and Tokyo. Both countries believe that they have valid claims of possession and neither is willing to compromise on the division of territory. Historically, relations between Russia and Japan have been rocky and hateful, so it is no surprise that they continue to squabble over such a relatively minor issue. The capitulation of one country to accept a two-island compromise would be a loss of face that neither nation is willing to endure. The aggression and invasion of one another’s territory since the beginning of formal diplomatic relations has left a huge rift in the relations of these countries, resulting in extreme distrust of one another. This history only serves to cloud this territorial issue further and hinders any near-term solution. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reported that “[t]he islands have some significance from a military-strategic standpoint and because of their rich fishing grounds. But it is doubtful whether their possession is worth a long-term burden on relations between the two countries” (Ruesch). There seems to be no solution in sight; and considering the turbulent history of the area, there will not be a peace treaty or a resolution to this territorial dispute for quite some time.

Japan Rescues Post-Soviet Russia

In spite of a century of bad blood between these two neighboring nations, Japan realized that saving its northern enemy was in its own best interest when it came to the problem of dealing with the decaying remnants of the Soviet Union’s Cold War navy. Lying roughly 1,000 kilometers from the northwest coast of Japan is the Russian Navy’s largest Far Eastern port, Vladivostok. This port is home to current and retired ships and submarines of the Russian Pacific Fleet. Through the end of the Cold War, Russia amassed over 250 nuclear-powered submarines and ships whose homeport was either Vladivostok or Petropavlovsk, on the Kamchatka Peninsula at the northern end of the Kuril Islands (Handler) (see fig. 6). Of course, the maintenance and upkeep costs of such a large nuclear submarine fleet were extensive, and the new Russian Federation had serious difficulty meeting these financial demands after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War (Pravda.ru).

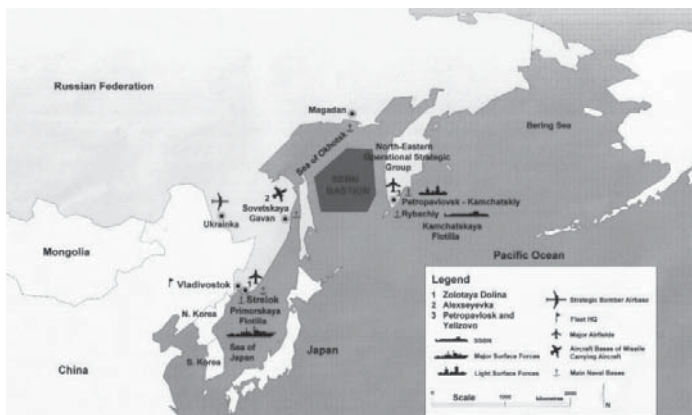


Fig. 6. Map of the Soviet / Russian Pacific Ocean Fleet. (Source: Muraviev).

By 2004—12 years after the fall of the Soviet Union—approximately 175 nuclear-powered submarines were retired from active service and sent to the Vladivostok area for storage (Technical Secretariat). Unfortunately, the Russian government and military lacked the funds and resources to dismantle and appropriately store the derelict nuclear submarines, and the 1980s and 1990s saw a growing environmental disaster looming (Pravda.ru). Images such as figure 7 grew more common in the shipyards and bays around the Vladivostok region.

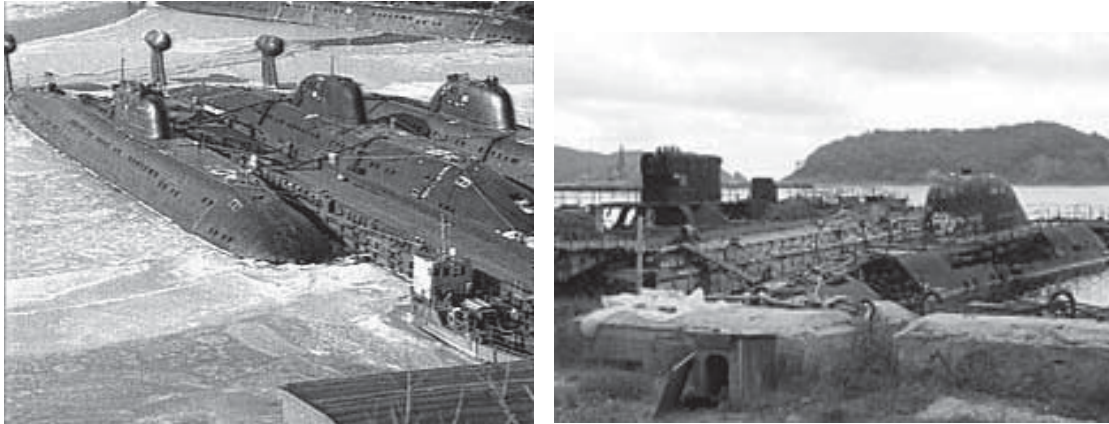


Figure 7: Derelict nuclear-powered submarines left in a state of mid-scraping near Vladivostok (Source: Digges (left image); Globalnonproliferation.com (right image)).

In 1985, a fire and explosion in a secret submarine storage facility in Chazhma Bay near Vladivostok killed 10 and exposed over 200 people to radiation; that submarine remained in place through the mid-2010s (Chuen: Chazhma Bay Nuclear Submarine Accident). This accident and the several dozens of nuclear reactors cores awaiting scrapping while floating in Chazhma Bay near Vladivostok (Digges) were warning signs that Japan had no choice but to act to prevent an impending environmental crisis that would have long-reaching impact on Japan's fishing industry, populace, and natural resources.

Almost immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japan and Russia, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, began Project Star of Hope in 1993 (Technical Secretariat). This project was a collaboration to disarm and dismantle the aging Soviet submarines in the Far East ports of Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk. Japan contributed a total of 4.92 Billion JPY—one third of the total spent on the project—resulting in six submarines being scrapped (Technical Secretariat). This was but a drop in the bucket of needed funding and effort required to deal with the threat posed by aging Soviet submarines, but it was a successful first step toward collaboration and improved relations between Japan and Russia.

In addition to Project Star of Hope, Japan has aided Russia in building its infrastructure for the storage and processing of nuclear materials from derelict submarines. Japan has provided funding for transportation and secure storage facilities of nuclear reactor cores from submarines, for the rebuilding of a nuclear submarine dismantling facility in Zvezda Shipyard, and for building a nuclear waste reprocessing facility near Vladivostok (Chuen). From 1993 through today, Japan has spent over 60 Billion JPY in Russia for nuclear-related projects (Chuen, Primorskoe Television & Radio), significantly outspending other East Asian countries. Despite the tensions seen between

the leaders of each country in the press, the efforts to deal with this impending ecological disaster continue and the Russo-Japanese collaborations are working to save the people of both countries and their neighbors from the dangers of the past. Japanese Prime Ministers have often met with the Russian Presidents to discuss and work towards a solution to the northern territories issue as well as to the problem of Russia's aging naval fleet's threat. Both countries seem to understand the importance of finding a solution behind the scenes to the latter problem first and foremost, while they openly clash over the future of the Southern Kuril Islands. Some recent examples of the grassroots-level connections between the Japanese and Russian people include the 2013 Russian-Japan Student Forum, the formation of the Russo-Japanese Friendship Society and a Japanese-Russian Youth Exchange in 2015, the 10th Russian-Japanese Workshop on "Open Shell Compounds and Molecular Spin Devices" in 2016 to explore scientific collaboration in nuclear energy, and joint business ventures in 2017 (*Siberian Times*). Meetings between President Putin and Prime Minister Abe in 2016, 2017, and 2018 have discussed the matter of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories) as a way of finally working towards a peace treaty (JapanGov). It is fortunate for the people of both countries as well as for the citizens of the Korean Peninsula, China, and even those around the Pacific Rim, that Japan and Russia continue to work toward preventing a nuclear disaster from happening in the waters around Vladivostok in spite of the contentious relationship that continues between the two countries' viewpoints of the ownership of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories).

Conclusion

There has been a long history of contention and border disputes between Japan and Russia (Andersen, "Sakhalin Island"). The specific lands which have been under dispute include Sakhalin Island (Karafuto), the Southern Kuril Islands of Iturup (Etorofu), Kunashir (Kunashiri), Shikotan, and Habomai. These lands have officially exchanged hands since the early 1800s. The change of control has led to the development of feelings of contention and even hatred among the countries' peoples toward the other country (Okamoto). Because of the territorial disputes, several treaties have been signed between Russia and Japan to establish legal boundaries beginning in 1854 ("United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853").

The latest dispute stems from the actions of the Soviet Union following the Japanese surrender after World War II: the USSR annexed the Southern Kuril Islands (Northern Territories) and have maintained control of them until now. To this day, the Russians and Japanese have not signed a peace treaty after WWII and these islands remain as the sticking point to finalizing peace (Ruesch).

In spite of the decades of dispute and distrust, the Japanese have been put into a position that led them to provide financial support to Russia in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Chuen). The early vessels of the Soviet Navy's once-powerful nuclear submarine force have been rotting in ports and awaiting dismantling (Chuen; Digges), and the inability of the Russians to expediently recycle or process the nuclear reactor cores from the submarines has created the potential for an ecological disaster that would affect Japan and the entire Korean peninsula. In order to try to avoid such problems, Japan has financed the dismantling and recycling of some submarines and their reactor cores, spending over 60 Billion JPY (Chuen, Primorskoe Television and Radio). This huge investment in Japan's self-preservation was only a drop in the bucket of what will be required to fully rectify the existing problems. Recent discussions between Prime

Minister Abe and President Putin have opened the door to more discussions of settling the territorial dispute of the Southern Kurils (Northern Territories) in exchange for continued investment by Japan in the cleanup of the ecological problems in Russia's Far East (Asia Times Staff, "Putin" and "Japan"). Settling this matter and formalizing peace between Russia and Japan would benefit every nation in the region, but longstanding distrust and even historical hatred that has been passed down through generations are difficult to get beyond when negotiating on the world stage. It is important for both Japanese and Russian people to understand the hidden aspects of the history and relationship between their countries so that peace can prevail, and these two great nations can work toward avoiding an environmental catastrophe before irreparable harm is done to the waters and shores of the Sea of Japan.

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