



Lessons for Kashmir from the Kuril

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Writer - Krishnan Srinivasan (former
Foreign Secretary)

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India and Pakistan can learn from Japan and Russia on seeking innovative solutions to disputes

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.

Claims and counterclaims

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.

Towards greater collaboration

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.

GS World Team...

Kuril Islands

Why in the discussion?

- Recently, Japan has lodged its objection to Russia regarding the establishment of Russian military barracks on the two islands in the Kuril Islands.
- Japan has been claiming on these islands.
- Meanwhile Russia has also announced plans for the construction of barracks as well as other military bases.
- It is noteworthy that the four islands were captured by Russia during World War II, and since then there has been a dispute about sovereignty between Russia and Japan.
- This is the main point of contention between the two countries.

What is it?

- The Kuril Archipelago is a volcanic archipelago located in Russia's Sakhalin Oblast.
- It stretches to approximately 1300 km (810 mi) from the Hokkaido island of Japan to the southern end of Russia's Kamtak Peninsula.
- North Pacific Ocean is situated on the eastern side of the Kuril Islands and Okhotsk Sea, on the west side.
- This group has 56 rock cliffs and many small rocks rising above the sea surface.

Background

- On the islands of Kuril, the first inhabitants were the Ainu people. Japan declared these islands as part of their history during the Edo period (which began in 1603).
- Japanese control started spreading and made from

the southern islands to the north. On the other hand, the Russians had also spread Siberia and Kamchatka as part of their empire, and started spreading from north to south in these islands. By the 18th century, the Russian settlements had been built up to Iturup Island.

- The Japanese watchdog was posted in the islands of the south. In 1811 Vasily Golovin, a Russian sailor, who stayed with his team on the Kunashir island, was arrested by Japanese soldiers. In 1812, Russian soldiers arrested a Japanese businessman Takadia Kahai on Kunashir only.
- After seeing these skirmishes, the governments of Japan and Russia negotiated a treaty in 1855, according to which Iturup and that of the island of the South were made to Japan and Urop and the island north of it became Russia.
- According to this agreement, people of both countries were given the right to live on Sakhalin Island. According to the St. Petersburg Treaty, then in 1875, Japan gave the entire Sakhalin Island to Russia, but in return, all the Kuril Islands were handed over to Japan.
- In the 1918-1925 skirmishes, Japanese troops (together with American and European squads) reached the North-Kuril Islands on Kamchatka Peninsula and captured the southern part.
- In the last days of World War II, when the lands of Japan were using, the Soviet Union took control of the entire Sakhalin and all Kuril islands. Since then, all the Kurils are in the possession of Russia.
- Japan still considers reveals four areas of Kuril to its southern



islands. These four are Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and Habomai. Of these, Hobo is actually only a group of rocks. Russia denies Japan's demands and calls these islands their.

What is the dispute over Kuril Island?

- Kuril Islands is a volcanic archipelago located on the western edge of the Pacific Ocean. It extends from Japan's Hokkaido island to the southern end of Russia's Kamchatka peninsula.
- Kuril islands is on the eastern side of the North Pacific Ocean and the western side of the Sea of Okhotsk.
- Since the Second World War, it has been the cause of the dispute between the two countries. When the war broke out in Japan at the end of World War II, the Russian army

had captured Kuril Islands and dispersed nearly 17,000 Japanese settlers there.

Since then, there has been controversy over the four islands of Kuril on which Japan has declared its rights. These four islands are Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and Habomai.

At the end of World War II, these islands were captured by the then Soviet army. Since then Japan and Russia have been claiming their sovereignty on these islands. This is the reason that the peace agreement between the two countries has not been reached after the World War.

To resolve this dispute, diplomatic level talks have been held between the two countries, but no concrete results have emerged.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements regarding 'Kuril Island group' -

1. It is a disputed island group between Japan and China.
2. North Pacific Ocean is situated in its eastern part and Okhotsk Sea, in western part.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

2. Consider the following statements -

1. Kuril Islands group is spread from the Honshu Island of Japan to the south end of Kamchatka Island of Russia.
2. Four islands Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and Habomai Island are included in the recent dispute of Kuril Island.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. Recent Kuril Islands group dispute is also essentially a region dispute like Kashmir, but the new solutions have been adopted to redress the dispute between Japan and Russia, should India and Pakistan also learn from it? Analyse. **(250 Words)**

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 5 Jan. is 1(c) and 2(c).