



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Japan-Russia Dispute Over Northern Territories Highlights Flawed Diplomacy

by Gregory Clark

If East Asia was the site of the most costly wars of the era of U.S.-Soviet confrontation, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 no major war has torn the region asunder. In recent years, however, territorial disputes whose roots lie in the era of empire and war, and which have been largely dormant, have erupted. Japan Focus has taken up recent disputes involving Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, and Japan and South Korea over Takeshima/Tokdo Islands as issues of security, resources, and nationalism erupt on Japan's borders. The present article locates Japan-Russian conflicts over the Northern Territories/Kurils within the broader parameters of shifting regional and global relations.

Japan is now in serious territorial disputes with all of its neighbors -- Taiwan, China, South Korea and Russia. True, this could prove there is something wrong with all of Japan's neighbors. But it could also prove that there is something wrong in the way Japan handles territorial problems with its neighbors. There is no clearer example of this than the dispute with Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin says he is willing to visit Tokyo this year to negotiate a much delayed peace treaty with Japan on the basis of the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration of Oct. 19, 1956, which promises the return to Japan of the Habomai islets and Shikotan (islands at the southern end of the Kuril archipelago that were occupied by Soviet forces in 1945). But Tokyo says Putin is not welcome unless he promises also to return the two much bigger islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri nearby.

Why should Tokyo today want seriously to amend an agreement it signed and ratified almost 50 years ago? The story begins with Japan's 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with the Allied Powers. Article 2(c) of the treaty said unequivocally that Japan would renounce all rights, title and claim to the Kuril islands chain (Chishima Retto) and southern Sakhalin (Karafuto) -- territories to the north of Japan that Japan had controlled up till 1945. But Japan's Foreign Ministry insists that Japan never recognized Etorofu and Kunashiri to be included in those renounced Kuril islands.

This Foreign Ministry claim simply is not true. Japanese materials at the time -- Foreign Ministry maps, statements by former Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru at San Francisco and in his later memoirs, and newspaper reports all make it clear that Etorofu and Kunashiri were most definitely included.

The chief U.S. negotiator for the San Francisco treaty, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, agreed. Asked at San Francisco to define the territory of the Kurils, he said only that the Habomais might be excluded (at the time there were suggestions that Shikotan might be part of the Kurils).

More was to follow. Questioned in the Diet on Oct. 19, 1951, over whether the word "Kurils" as used in the treaty included Etorofu and Kunashiri, the head of the Foreign Ministry Treaties Bureau, Nishimura Kumao, said unambiguously that both the northern Chishima and southern Chishima (Etorofu and Kunashiri) were included.

So why the insistence now that Japan has every right to demand not just the Habomais and Shikotan but also Etorofu and Kunashiri? More background is needed, and fortunately we do not have to rely on the heavily slanted Foreign Ministry material. We have a remarkably detailed but little-known 227 page book titled "Moscow ni Kakeru Niji" (Rainbow over Moscow -- The Secret Record of Restoring Japan-Soviet Relations, Asahi Shimbunsha, 1966) by Matsumoto Shunichi, a former diplomat and mainstream conservative politician who represented Japan in most of the 15 months of complex negotiations leading to the 1956 joint declaration.

Matsumoto says that when he began the talks in London in June 1955 his brief was simply to demand the return of the Habomais and Shikotan on the grounds that before 1945 the two territories had administratively been part of Hokkaido rather than the Kurils.

The Soviet side rejected this demand, saying both territories were included in the Kurils promised to Moscow at Yalta in February 1945 as a condition for Moscow entering the war against Japan (in Russia, the two territories were called the Lesser Kurils).

But at the 10th meeting on Aug. 9 and coinciding with Soviet moves for detente at the Big Four meeting in Geneva that year, the Soviet side suddenly made a turnabout and said Moscow would consider returning the Habomais and Shikotan if Japan promised that its military alliance with the United States was not directed at any third nation.

Matsumoto duly reported this major breakthrough to Tokyo, only to receive new Foreign Ministry instructions on Aug. 27. This time he was told to demand not just the Habomais and Shikotan but also the unconditional return of Kunashiri and Etorofu as well.

Matsumoto was astounded by this extraordinary shift in position. He blames conservatives in the Foreign Ministry, and in particular ultraconservative Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru, for seeking deliberately to sabotage efforts by then-Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro for better relations with Moscow.

He also notes how the shift in position coincided with a meeting in Washington between Shigemitsu and the bitterly anticommunist Dulles, who, he says, also wanted to block any territorial solution with Japan. (Released State Department documents confirm that Dulles as early as January 1955 was urging pressure on Shigemitsu to prevent a settlement on the territorial dispute.)

Moscow predictably rejected the belated Etorofu-Kunashiri claim and the talks spluttered out, only to be revived by Shigemitsu himself, accompanied by Matsumoto, arriving in Moscow in July 29, 1956, for further talks, and creating yet another extraordinary volte-face also conveniently ignored by the Foreign Ministry materials.

Shigemitsu had begun with a strident demand for all four territories -- the Habomais, Shikotan, Etorofu and Kunashiri (what Japan was beginning to call its "Northern Territories.") But in the face of blunt Soviet rejections and explanations, he suddenly about faced and on Aug. 12 declared that he would sign a peace treaty on Soviet conditions, i.e., he would accept the Habomais and Shikotan, and drop the demand for Etorofu and Kunashiri.

Problem over? Not quite.

Shigemitsu was immediately summoned to London for talks on the 1956 Suez Canal crisis and on Aug. 19 met Dulles again. According to Matsumoto, an

ashen-faced Shigemitsu returned from the meeting saying, "Dulles has said something completely terrible (mattaku hidoi). He said if Japan lets the Soviet Union keep Etorofu and Kunashiri the U.S. will make Okinawa its own territory."

Dulles' threat worked. Shigemitsu returned to Tokyo and the talks could only be revived by Hatoyama himself visiting Moscow a month later. Once again there was impasse over territory claims, but both sides agreed on a Joint Declaration to restore diplomatic relations and to hold further talks on a peace treaty, with the promise of the Habomais and Shikotan to be returned if and when the treaty was signed. Despite strong Japanese pressures, there was no mention of continued talks about territory.

True, there are reasons why Tokyo has found itself caught up in this mishmash of contradictions. From the start, many Japanese conservatives, including Yoshida Shigeru, were not happy about the territorial renunciations at San Francisco. They insisted that history proved Japan had gained control of the Kurils peacefully. Some even insisted that southern Sakhalin (Karafuto), taken from czarist Russia after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, was also gained "peacefully." In particular, they were very unhappy about having to renounce all rights to the southern Kuril islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri, arguing that this "traditional territory" had never been controlled by Russia.

But having been forced at San Francisco formally to renounce all these territories, all the conservatives could do by way of a comeback was to note that there was no mention of to whom these territories had been renounced. They called for an international conference to decide the question, and hoped that somehow in the process Japan could regain not just the Habomais and Shikotan, but also some other renounced territories -- Etorofu and Kunashiri in particular. Part of Matsumoto's original 1955 brief had been to demand such a conference.

But the unexpected Soviet offer of the Habomais and Shikotan in August 1955 threw this strategy into disarray. So Foreign Ministry conservatives had to move quickly to stake out the claim to the Etorofu and Kunashiri territories they had wanted all along. In the process they were forced suddenly to insist that Japan had never renounced its rights to Etorofu and Kunashiri, despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

The twists and turns do not end there.

Etorofu and Kunashiri are always called Minami (southern) Chishima in Japanese. And since the Japanese version of the San Francisco treaty says Japan renounced all rights to Chishima Retto, it stands to reason that it had also renounced Minami Chishima.

To get round this rather incriminating detail, the Foreign Ministry had to begin to emphasize how the English version of the San Francisco treaty uses the word Kuril Islands. This, it insists, can refer only to the Northern Kurils. Why? Because that was the alleged meaning of the Russian word "Kuril" in 19th-century treaties with Japan. This, despite the fact that at San Francisco, Minami Chishima was always translated by the Japanese side as "Southern Kurils."

The Matsumoto book spots the first sign of the Chishima/Kuril vocabulary change in Aug. 30, 1955. Soon after, in October, Tokyo officially sought the U.S., British and French view of this change. Only Washington offered a glimpse of support by suggesting reference to the International Court of Justice -- a move that Tokyo has pointedly declined to endorse. The British, whose Tokyo embassy had in now-released documents described the Japanese change as "curious and naive," were fairly negative. The French were very negative, making pointed reference to the record of discussions at San Francisco.

True, the U.S. was much more supportive in later 1956-57 statements, but by then it had every reason to want to be supportive. Needless to say, Tokyo today repeats constantly what the U.S. had to say in 1956-57, ignoring anything that happened beforehand. It also has to clutch at vague straws claiming Moscow has at various times since 1956 promised further talks on territory -- talks that from the Russian point of view could simply be intended to put an end to Japan's various claims.

The Foreign Ministry position in all this is understandable. For as the saying puts it, "diplomats are honest people sent out to lie for their country." What is alarming is the ease with which not just public but intellectual opinion in this country has been mobilized to provide full support for the shaky Foreign Ministry position.

The few who suggest a "two-island solution" -- that Japan should receive the Habomais and Shikotan and leave Etorofu and Kunashiri for the future -- are quickly silenced. Very occasionally, when the Nishimura Kumao statement is raised, we are told that it was "mistaken," or for "domestic consumption only," or "later retracted."

Washington's role in all this is even more "curious." Why in 1951, at the height of the Korean War and its anti-Soviet hysteria, did it force a reluctant Japan to renounce all claim to all the Kuril islands? Professor Miwa Kimitada of Sophia University suggests it was due to a secret 1947 Washington-Moscow deal to guarantee Soviet support in the United Nations for U.S. control over Micronesia.

My own research says it had something to do with pressure from a bitterly anti-Japan Canberra determined to see Japan stripped of all its prewar possessions. Others say it was a skillful Dulles plot to force Tokyo and Moscow into decades of confrontation, or to preserve the Yalta framework for the sake of Europe, especially for Austria, which was still partly under Soviet occupation.

Be all that as it may, the U.S., which in 1951 had forced Japan to renounce all claim to the Kurils, including Etorofu and Kunashiri, in 1956 was able to threaten to turn Okinawa into a U.S. colony if Japan did not maintain all claim to the Kurils, including Etorofu and Kunashiri. Machiavelli would have been proud of that.

Interestingly, the only Japanese who seem able to see the problem in perspective are at totally different ends of the ideological spectrum -- the Japanese Communist Party and the extreme right, including Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara. Both blame Washington for the current mess. Both say that Japan should stop fussing about Etorofu and Kunashiri and go on to claim all of the Kurils as its "traditional territory."

The Foreign Ministry could easily back them up by releasing still unclassified documents in which Japan in 1951 strongly protested U.S. pressure to renounce the Kurils, including Etorofu and Kunashiri, and by pointing out how Japan was still under U.S. occupation. But if it did that, its claim that Japan never renounced Etorofu and Kunashiri would automatically be undercut. The chickens would finally have come home to roost.

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