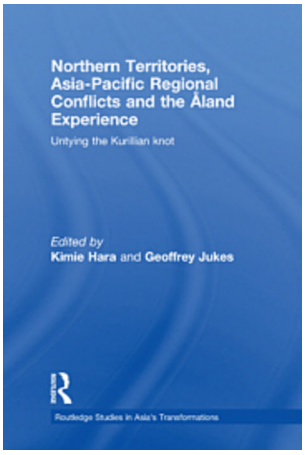
The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Untying the Kurillian Knot: Toward an Åland-Inspired Solution for the Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute

Kimie Hara

Contrary to the post-Cold War globalization discourse, which tends to posit a de-territorialized and borderless world, issues of border demarcation and territorial sovereignty, which are classical components of international relations, continue to provide sources of conflict and remain significant problems of international concern. Even though emphasis in international relations shifts from time to time, it does not necessarily diminish the residual sources of confrontation. Yet, while a source of confrontation remains unchanged, so does the possibility of its resurgence. With regional conflicts in many parts of the world as yet unresolved, there may be lessons to be learned from historical precedents of conflict resolution.

The recent volume, Northern Territories, Asia-Pacific Conflicts and the Åland Experience: Untying the Kurillian Knot, from which the present article draws, is the fruit of an international collaborative study, which considers the Åland islands settlement in northern Europe as a model for the resolution of major Asia-Pacific regional conflicts that derived from the post-World War II disposition of Japan, with particular focus on the territorial dispute between Japan and Russia, the Northern Territories (Southern Kuriles) problem. The volume provides analysis of the Åland settlement, the Japan-Russia territorial dispute and Åland-inspired solution ideas by experts from all over the world, including Russian and Japanese ex-government officials, scholars and military specialists. Its contents illustrate its range and scope:



Foreword.

Preface.

Introduction: Northern Territories, Asia-Pacific Regional Conflicts and the Åland Experience: Untying the Kurillian Knot.

(1) The Autonomy of Åland and Conflict Resolution.

(2) The Northern Territories Issue: Japanese-Russian Relations and Domestic Concerns in Japan.

(3) The Territorial Dispute between Japan and Russia: The "Two-island Solution" and Putin's last years as President.

(4) The Cold War in East Asia and the Northern Territories Problem.

(5) Can the Southern Kuriles be Demilitarized?

(6) US Views on the Northern Territories Issue.

(7) The Indigenous Ainu of Japan at the Time of the Åland Settlement.

(8) Solving the Territorial Dispute between Japan and Russia : Åland Islands and Finland's Post-World War II experiences as Source of Inspiration.

(9) Envisioning Åland-Inspired Solutions for the Northern Territories Problem

The Northern Territories (Southern Kuriles) Problem and Åland Settlement

The Northern Territories (Southern Kuriles) problem, the territorial dispute between Japan and Russia over the sovereignty of the four islands group of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan and the Habomais, is one of the major regional conflicts in East Asia derived from the post-World War II disposition of Japan, particularly the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. Japan renounced vast territories, ranging from the Kuril Islands to Antarctica and from Micronesia to the Spratlys, in the Treaty. However, neither their final devolution nor their precise boundaries were specified, which created various "unresolved problems" in the region, many of which are among the most contentious legacies of World War II which remain unresolved nearly six decades later. The other "unresolved problems" of this kind include Takeshima/Tokdo, Senkaku/Diaoyu, and the Spratly/Nansha sovereignty disputes, the divided Korean peninsula and the Cross-Taiwan Strait problem. There had been no border dispute over the Kurile Islands before the war. The demarcation line between Japan and Russia changed in 1855, 1875 and 1905, but in each case by mutual consent. Nor does the dispute originate solely in the San Francisco Peace Treaty. Agreement to transfer South Sakhalin and the Kuriles from Japan to the USSR was reached

by Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. However, the problem emerged at San Francisco, since the Treaty did not include a clear border demarcation. There is still no peace treaty between Russia and Japan, and the territorial issue remains the biggest obstacle to normalizing relations between them.

The Åland problem, on the other hand, is the first international conflict resolved by the League of Nations established after World War I. When Finland became independent from Russia in 1917, an international dispute arose over whether the Åland Islands should be transferred to Sweden or should remain part of Finland. Most of the residents were Swedish, and wished to be reunited with Sweden. However, the League of Nations decreed in 1921 that Finland should retain sovereignty.[1] The Åland Settlement deserves attention as a conflict resolution model in several respects. It features autonomy, demilitarization and neutralization, and Finland, while retaining sovereignty, undertook to guarantee the inhabitants' political autonomy, Swedish culture and customs, and Swedish as the sole official language. The decision was supplemented by a treaty between Finland and Sweden on how to effect the guarantees, and, at League of Nations insistence, a treaty on Åland's demilitarization and neutralization was drafted. The islands' proximity to the Swedish mainland creates an obvious danger for Sweden from military bases in the hands of a hostile power. The Islands hold the key to control of the Gulf of Bothnia, and their demilitarization and neutralization has significance for the security of not only Sweden, but also the region. The Åland settlement was positive-sum for all parties, including the residents of the islands. Finland received sovereignty, Åland residents' autonomy, combined with guarantees for their language and culture, and Sweden received guarantees that Åland would not constitute a military threat. Even today, after the passage of nearly 90 years, the basic principles of the settlement are intact.

In August 2006, the year marking the fiftieth anniversary of restoration of Japanese-Soviet diplomatic relations, a three-day conference entitled New Initiatives for Solving the "Northern Territories" Issue between Japan and Russia: An Inspiration from the Åland Experience was held in Mariehamn, the capital of Åland. It began only few days after a Russian coastguard fired on and seized a Japanese fishing boat in the waters near the Northern Territories, killing a Japanese crew member and souring Japanese-Russian relations. At the conference, which included a series of on-site briefings by the Åland government, there were lively exchanges among the participants, who gathered from Japan, Russia, Europe, Australia and North America. Almost all acknowledged the significance of Åland as a conflict resolution model, but opinions varied as to its potential applicability to the Northern Territories dispute, even those who thought it applicable differing over how to apply it. Nevertheless, the conference generated significant new inspirations for considering possible solutions of the Northern Territories question. In this article, I would like to discuss one Åland-inspired solution model, paying attention to specific features of the Åland settlement, including resolution of the sovereignty issue, the multilateral framework, autonomy, domicile, language regulations and demilitarization.

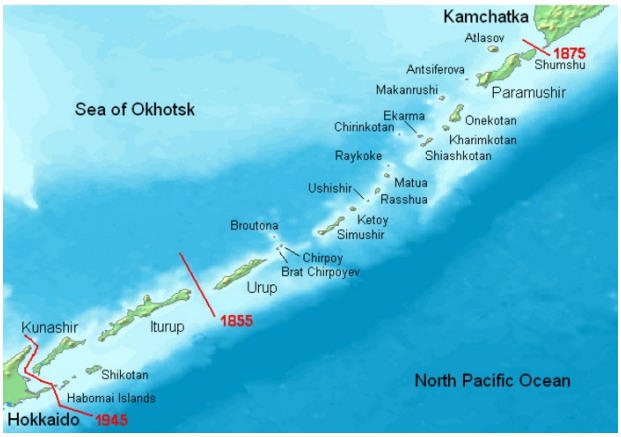
Territorial Sovereignty

First to discuss is the territorial sovereignty issue. Putting the conclusion first, the question of sovereignty over the Northern Territories, or border demarcation between Japan and Russia, should be resolved as soon as possible, as the core of the issue lies here. Sovereignty over the islands was also the core of the Åland question, and that of Finland was confirmed in the end. This has not changed.

Åland Islands map

However, including some in discussions at the above-mentioned Åland conference, there are still voices calling for "postponement" of resolution on grounds that it is "premature", or requires "confidence-building" first.[2] On the other hand, there are also voices arguing that there is no need to throw cold water on Japanese-Russian relations, now relatively good compared to the Cold War era, by raising the bothersome Northern Territories issue. However, these lack understanding of the nature of the problem – if they are not deliberate attempts to prevent its resolution.

Resolution of the Northern Territories issue has been "postponed" already for over half a century since the 1956 Japanese-Soviet Joint Declaration. "Confidence building" between the two countries has certainly progressed in every aspect of bilateral relations, including politics, economics, security and culture, compared to the Cold War era. However, because of this Northern Territories problem, the two countries have not yet concluded a post-World War II peace treaty, so their relations have not formally normalized yet. More importantly, no matter how much they improve their relations and make progress in confidence-building, as long as the source of the conflict remains unchanged, there is always the possibility that tensions resurge and conflict escalates. The August 2006 fishing-boat incident in the waters off the Northern Territories was a strong reminder of this. Clearly-agreed borders make good neighbors, and establishing them while their relations are relatively good will benefit both countries.



Kuril Islands map

On the sovereignty question, there are also some voices suggesting "trusteeship" or "joint sovereignty" as other options. "Trusteeship" is not final settlement; it might have worked as a provisional measure at the outset, but is no longer applicable after over half a century. Japan and Russia already had experience of jointly governing Sakhalin for two decades from 1855. However in 1875 they separated their jurisdictions by an exchange of territories, since shared sovereignty had not worked. The same mistake should not be repeated for the Northern Territories.

The Japanese should be aware that time is not on their side. The four Northern Territories (the islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Shikotan and the Habomais) were internationally recognized as Japanese for ninety years after Japan and Russia first set their borders in 1855. Now the Russians have controlled the islands for over sixty years, and this is widely known in the international community. Postponing resolution of this issue means extending Russian control, thus contributing to strengthening Russia's hold on them.

The 1956 Joint Declaration specified continuation of peace treaty negotiations, and, after conclusion of a treaty, the "Habomai and Shikotan" transfer, i.e., "two-islands return" to Japan. Japan has since then insisted on a "four islands" return, but has achieved neither a peace treaty nor return of even one island. In the meantime, many of the former Japanese residents have passed away, while nostalgically yearning to return to the islands. Even if Japan persists with the claim for four islands, there is little prospect for their return, which Russia has never promised. In hindsight, the strong driving force behind Hatoyama Ichiro's visit to Moscow and rapprochement with the USSR in 1956 was the safe return of the many Japanese Prisoners of War detained in Siberia since the end of the war, and other pending issues such as Japan's admission to the United Nations and safety of the northern fisheries. Japan now seems to feel a sense of impending crisis concerning the islands based on recognition of the factthat the problem might develop, with no former residents available to return to the islands, or the de facto borders being confirmed (i.e. no-islands return).

As in the Åland Islands' case, important determinants for the settlement of territorial disputes are interpretations of relevant international agreements and history, what former President Boris Yeltsin called "law and justice". One might think all arguments have already been exhausted. However, this may not necessarily be so, because there may have been insufficient information released for public scrutiny. In many countries government documents are generally opened for public scrutiny thirty years after their creation. However, in the Northern Territories' case this rule is not evenly adopted in Japan or Russia. Thus existing studies may not be sufficiently thorough.

Now, over sixty years since the end of World War II and over fifty years since restoration of Japanese-Soviet relations, most of the individuals involved in the early negotiations are already dead. It is questionable whether anyone with a thorough understanding of the issue is still in either government's service. If "law and justice" are to be pursued, then relevant documents should be disclosed and the issue examined from various angles by a broad spectrum of parties, not by a limited number of specialists within the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. The final settlement will require political decisions, and unless "politics", not "bureaucracy", can take policy-making initiatives, the problem will remain deadlocked. Yet, even if the top leaders of both countries make a "political decision", it will be meaningless unless ratified by their parliaments. In order to make a just border settlement, the people's "right to know" must be fulfilled in both nations, and broad understanding obtained.

Multilateral Framework

Finland and Sweden could not resolve the Åland Islands dispute bilaterally, so the British brought it to the League of Nations, which resolved it within its multilateral framework. Historical experience has shown that the Northern Territories dispute is extremely difficult to resolve bilaterally. But, like the Åland issue, it is possible that it could be resolved in a multilateral framework. The Ålands dispute was resolved only a few years after it arose, but the Northern Territories issue has been disputed for over fifty years -- long enough to move it into a multilateral framework. Furthermore, considering its historical origins and present interests in resolving a Soviet-Japan conflict, it is worth investigating the possibility of settling it within that framework.

As mentioned earlier, the Northern Territories issue is one of the East Asian regional conflicts (such as Takeshima/Tokdo, Senkaku/Diaoyu, and the Spratly/Nansha sovereignty disputes, the divided Korean peninsula and the Cross-Taiwan Strait problem) derived from the post-war territorial disposition of Japan, particularly the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty.[3] That Treaty was a multilateral agreement, drafted under US initiative, with inputs from other allies, and signed by forty-nine states. However, except for Japan, the major states involved in these conflicts were either not invited to the conference (the two Chinese and the two Korean states) or were present but did not sign the Treaty (the Soviet Union). That is to say, whereas multiple "concerned states" took part in the disposition of these territories, no consensus was reached among the countries directly involved in the conflicts.

Moreover, the Northern Territories issue was not the sole problem created by the Treaty. In preparation of post-war occupation policy and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the issue was linked with other problems of the time. For example, the USA linked disposition of the Kuriles to that of other territories, such as the divided Korean peninsula (to prevent the USSR from occupying all of it), trusteeship of Micronesia (to secure exclusive control over the South Pacific), and continuing US occupation of Okinawa.[4] These linkages played an important role in US negotiations with the USSR. After the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula, the US deleted mention of "China" from the provision in the draft Treaty stipulating the return of Taiwan; this eventually influenced the Kuriles and all other territorial dispositions, with no clauses specifying to which country territories ceded by Japan would belong. The Northern Territories issue derived from this post-war territorial disposition, which linked several issues together within a multilateral framework.[5] Even today, long after the end of the Cold War, these individual problems, which were left to the countries

directly involved, remain unresolved.

In the past, the US and even China supported Japan's position on the Northern Territories issue, but their support was anti-Soviet rather than pro-Japanese, part of their stances in the US-Soviet Cold War and the Sino-Soviet dispute, directed at embarrassing the USSR rather than solving the problem. After their rapprochements with the USSR/Russia, the international environment surrounding the problem changed greatly. What has not changed, however, is that many countries are interested in the possible impact of solution of the issue and accordingly of Russo-Japanese diplomatic normalization on the peace and stability, or the power balance, in Northeast Asia. It seems reasonable to explore solution of the problem by moving beyond the current bilateral framework into a multilateral one.

What kind of multilateral framework is appropriate? Instead of using the Åland model "as is," in which "arbitration" would use the platform of the United Nations and/or the International Court of Justice, it would seem appropriate to modify the approach and aim for a political resolution created through multinational negotiations.

The present equivalent of the League of Nations is the United Nations. However, the Ålands problem was entrusted to the League's Council only because the Permanent Court of International Justice (1921-1945) had not yet been established. Today the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is available for dealing with international disputes, and its decisions are supposed to be internationally respected. However, it would be extremely difficult to bring the Northern Territories issue into this kind of framework, because the situation surrounding both countries is rather different from that of Sweden and Finland in 1921. Through over half a century of dispute, both countries' positions are widely known, and mutually exclusive. In such a case any settlement produced by an international organization, even within a multilateral framework, would likely be viewed as a win-lose situation, with a danger of international loss of face. Both Japan and Russia are currently big powers within the G8, but in the United Nations Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council, with power of veto, and Japan is not. Japan has in recent years called for reform of the UN and sought a permanent Security Council seat, but with little success. This may be one reason why the Northern Territories issue has not been brought to this international organization.

When the disputants are two parties with confronting positions, third-party arbitration runs the same risk of having any settlement similarly viewed as a "win-lose" situation and potential loss of face. However, if the issue were placed within a multilateral framework along with a number of other outstanding issues and their disputant states, then the circumstances would be different. Mutually acceptable solutions not achievable within a bilateral framework may be found in multilateral negotiations by creatively combining conditions. In addition, this would blunt domestic criticism of a zero-sum kind, such as of "too large concessions" or "defeat by negotiating partner", which tend to follow bilateral negotiations, thus allowing both governments to save face by showing gains.

A settlement of the Northern Territories issue, therefore, should be pursued together with other related issues within a multilateral framework that reflects the historical background and present reality of international relations. In other words, it should be negotiated together with several other "unresolved problems", using a framework comprising the major disputants and "concerned states" that were involved in the original disposition and still have strong influence and deep interests in the region.

Though important, a "multilayer" approach to the various areas within a multilateral framework has been missing in the past. During the Japanese-Soviet negotiations in the 1950s, Japan urged the US to convene an international conference to revisit its post-war territorial dispositions. However, the situation at the time did not allow this, as the US was concerned that the USSR and China would raise controversial issues, such as Okinawa, then still under US occupation. However, the situation today is very different. The US returned Okinawa to Japan in 1972, and, on balance, even China and Russia now regard its presence in the region, including its Okinawa bases, as a stabilizing factor.

The countries involved, including Japan and Russia, may have to review or revise policies solidified during the Cold War era. Yet it seems worth investigating the area of contribution, or of possible linkages to other disputes, just as was the case when most of those disputes were created. Those could include combining mutual concessions involving various disputes, or linking them with resolution of other "unresolved problems." Hypothetically, such linkage may be found between the Northern Territories, Takeshima/Tokdo, Senkaku/Diaoyu, and the South China Sea islands. Also, it may be possible to link these problems with other political, economic, military, or non-conventional security agendas of the concerned states such as resource development, trade, and fishing rights.

For example, Japan could make concessions to Russia on the Northern Territories by offering a "two plus alpha formula", and to Korea by offering Takeshima/Tokdo as part of a "settlement of the past" including the "comfort women" and forced labor issues. In return, Japan would receive recognition of its sovereignty over Senkaku and Okinawa from China. (The ROC government insisted on the "return" of Okinawa after the war, and Taiwan has not formally withdrawn that claim. So, China could promise not to inherit/revive it.) China, in exchange for its concession on Senkaku/Diaoyu and Okinawa, would receive recognition of its sovereignty over the South China Sea islands, particularly the Paracels, to which it has strong historical links, from all participants in such multilateral negotiations. There could be additional conditions, such as support for Japan's proposal for UN reform. Solution of one problem may lead to solution of others, as their origins show them to be mutually related in one way or another. There would seem to be multiple as yet unexplored possibilities for solving these issues, as well as for linking them to future emerging policy agendas with profound implications for reducing conflicts across the region.

Among existing frameworks for this kind of multilateral negotiations, especially noteworthy are the Six Party Talks (US, PRC, Russia, ROK, DPRK and Japan) of recent years, which have been the forum for negotiating issues surrounding the North Korea nuclear crisis. This issue is in essence about survival of the North Korean regime, which has long sought to obtain cooperation or assurance from the US and neighboring countries to resolve conflicts dating back to the US-Korean War and the San Francisco treaty.

Originally, the problem developed from the question to which country Japan renounced "Korea".[6] It was an "unresolved problem" originating from the post-war territorial disposition of Japan, as was the Northern Territories and other conflicts in East Asia. The Six Party Talks have negotiated various conditions that reflect the interests of each participant, and their progress therefore merits particular attention as a test case for multilateral negotiatins.

In post-war East Asia, multilateral cooperation, especially in establishment of security organizations and regional integration, which include Japan and its neighboring countries, has been less successful than in the Euro-Atlantic region. During the Cold War the US attempted to establish multilateral military alliances similar to NATO (e.g. the Pacific Pact) to confront communism in this region, but all ended in failure. From the late-1980s, multilateral cooperation has been actively pursued in economics and diplomacy, using a larger framework, such as APEC, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN+3, and most recently the East Asian Summit. However, while numbers have multiplied, these frameworks are only places for "dialogue", and quite different from NATO, which has grown to encompass Eastern Europe, or the EU, and has advanced economic and political integration in Europe. Rather, they resemble the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) seen during Cold War détente.[7]

As yet the East Asian countries do not have relations of sufficient mutual trust to form an alliance. Their countries and peoples are connected by economic interdependence, but remain divided politically, and are still in dispute over "unresolved problems", including territorial sovereignty and boundary demarcation, created by or even predating World War II. Resolution of these issues will contribute to removal of hindrances to regional cooperation and community-building. Therefore, resolution of the Northern Territories dispute, like its origin, should be sought in this broader context.

Multilateral international agreements tend to be more durable than bilateral ones. The more participating states there are, the stronger restraint tends to be, and the greater the possibility that a country in breach will be internationally isolated. It is therefore desirable to obtain wide international recognition for agreements concerning the Northern Territories settlement, including specific conditions attached to it (these conditions are dealt with in the next section), in other words, to win international recognition from the concerned states that participate in such multilateral negotiations, and/or a rather large framework like the UN, along with bilateral consensus on the issues. In the Åland settlement, the League of Nations had supervisory responsibility to ensure implementation of agreements, and Finland assumed responsibility for passing on all of Åland Parliament's petitions and demands on the compensation issue to the League's Council. Similar arrangements for international monitoring and reporting may be made with the Northern Territories issue.

Respecting Residents' Interests: Special Autonomous Region

The majority of Ålanders originally wanted to reunite with Sweden, and thus were dissatisfied with the settlement. However, as a result of the settlement, particularly because of their unique form of governance, which included autonomy, demilitarization and having Swedish as the sole official language, they have enjoyed various benefits, such as a high standard of living, prosperity, high educational and cultural levels, exemption from Finland's mandatory military service, and special international status, including passports that read "European Union– Finland – Åland." Åland joined the Nordic Council in the 1970s, and has its own representatives on it. If these innovative arrangements had not been made and Åland had been returned to Sweden, it might well have become merely an outdated and depressed border region, or a military frontier area, quite a different situation from today.

The Åland stamp issued in 1991, depicting the session on the Åland question of June 24, 1921, at the League of Nations in Geneva.

The Åland stamps are important symbols of the autonomy.

It seems reasonable to consider adopting a modified Åland model, with the goal of applying special governance, to the four Northern Territories islands, no matter where the borderline between Japan and Russia is drawn. These islands already hold a special position in Japan-Russia relations. It is a historical fact that Japan has demanded a return of these islands for over half a century, and special arrangements such as visa-free visits and other bilateral exchange programs now exist. Therefore, rather than placing them under a local government jurisdiction, they could be permitted an independent position as a special autonomous region in politics, economy, culture and security, guaranteed by the Japanese and Russian governments and internationally.

Like the Åland Islands, the Northern Territories are inhabited, and the residents' future should be the most important element in considering any settlement. The Northern Territories has a history under Soviet/Russian control as a neglected border area and military frontier. Japan had a similar experience with Okinawa, which was returned in 1972, having suffered from problems associated with the predominance of US military bases and a serious gap in living standards, including economy and education, compared with mainland Japan. In both cases, the residents' rights and interests were of secondary importance. Given such a past and present, Åland appears an attractive model for the Northern Territories' future.

Nonetheless, Åland and the Northern Territories have different backgrounds. Historically, Åland's inhabitants were always predominantly of Swedish descent, whereas in the Northern Territories the interests of the current Russian as well as former Japanese, and indigenous Ainu inhabitants should all be taken into account. Therefore, specific arrangements could be more complicated than in the Åland case depending on the interest in resettlement by Japanese and Ainu former inhabitants.

While Åland's autonomy covers such areas as education, culture, preservation of ancient monuments, health and medical care, environment, promotion of industry, internal transport, police, postal services and media, the state has authority over foreign affairs, a large part of civil and criminal law, judiciary, customs and federal taxation.[8] Åland has an elected representative in the Finnish Parliament, and the Governor, representing the Finnish State, is appointed by Finland's President in agreement with the Chairman of the Åland Parliament.[9] At the Åland conference in August 2006, when Governor Peter Lindback spoke on the division of powers between Åland and the state, he outlined the strong position of Åland government representatives in the Finnish State, and stressed that "Finland cannot unilaterally make decisions without the consent of Åland officials, who are elected by the Ålanders themselves."[10]

In looking into the applicability of Åland's autonomy to the Northern Territories, special consideration needs to be paid to such areas as education, culture, and inheritance and environmental preservation, in relation to the current, past and indigenous residents. Policy arrangements for these may be dealt with in the context of "human security", which would likely receive both domestic and international understanding and support. As for the relations between these islands and the states (Japan/Russia), to which they would belong, the Åland model may be applied in a modified manner, so that the islanders would send elected Members to the Japanese Diet and Russian Duma. Also, appointments of Governor Representatives would be made by the central governments of Japan and Russia but approved by the islands' governments. Yet, in considering qualification for such elections and appointments, questions arise --- namely, domicile and citizenship. These are addressed in the next section.

Domicile and Dual Citizenship

In Åland there is a system called "domicile", which is the right of residence and/or inhabitance. People must have domicile to vote and/or be elected in Åland Parliamentary elections, to possess property in Åland, and to operate businesses there. Finns adequately fluent in Swedish, and resident in Åland for five years, can apply for domicile. A child receives domicile at birth if one of its parents possesses it. A person loses it if resident outside Åland for five or more years. However, the Åland Government can "occasionally grant exemption from the requirement of right of domicile for those wishing to acquire real property or conduct a business in Åland."[11]

To apply this system to the Northern Territories, conditions of language and citizenship would need to be expanded so that Japanese or Russian nationals fluent in either language would be eligible to apply. Russians already resident, as well as Japanese and Ainu former residents, would have priority. Domicile for foreign nationals would need to be considered in the longer run, to meet future needs for development and immigration promotion in the islands.

The sovereignty of Åland belongs to Finland alone, but in the case of the Northern Territories, it is possible that both Japan and Russia would share partial sovereignty (unless one country gets all four islands). Therefore, the residents of the four islands should be allowed to have dual Japanese-Russian citizenship. This would eliminate the problem of the eligibility of election of representatives to the Japanese Diet and the Russian Duma. Russia already recognizes dual citizenship, while Japan does not. However, it is something Japan needs seriously to examine as one possible response to social problems such as a low birthrate and ageing population. Thus, the Northern Territories could provide an important test case. Other features of the Åland model may include exempting Russian islanders who possess domicile from Russian conscript military service. Since Japan has no conscription, this is irrelevant to Japanese residents. Furthermore, to ensure that the islanders' standard of living is similar to or higher than the average living standard of the country to which they belong, preferential treatment may be necessary in regard to budgets and taxes.

Japanese and Russian: Two Official Languages

How about application of the official language policy? Many participants in the Åland conference considered it difficult to apply this feature of the Åland model. The official language became Swedish there, because the Ålanders were of predominantly Swedish descent. Following this example, the participants in the Åland conference for the most part responded by conceiving the Northern Territories as having "Russian as the official language". Such a response may be reasonable if one thinks only of the current residents, i.e. Russians. They also considered it "impossible" to have Japanese and Russian as the two official languages. I also thought this way at first. However, an important aspect of the language regulation in the Åland model is that, since the Swedish language and culture had been passed down since ancient times, these traditions were respected. Thus, the Åland model may be applicable in the sense of respecting the languages historically used on the islands. According to this logic, not only Russian, which has been in use there for over sixty years, but also the Japanese and Ainu languages should be given consideration. However, in view of the practical aspects such as the virtual disappearance of Ainu as a spoken language among the former residents and their descendants, and also given that the Ainu never had a state of their own, it seems reasonable to have Russian and Japanese as the two official languages. Particularly if Japanese residents return to the islands. This does not necessarily mean that all residents should become bilingual, but that education in each language would be made available, and official documents would be made available in both languages.

Here we can reflect on the Canadian model. Canada's two official languages are English and French; Canadians are encouraged but not required to be bilingual. Government documents, merchandise labels and package instructions are written in both languages and simultaneous translations are used in Parliamentary broadcasts. However, the main language used depends on the region. The main language in Quebec is French, and there are many monolingual French speakers there. In other areas, especially western Canada, French is not often heard, and many people there do not speak it.[12] It is possible that a variant of the Canadian system could be of relevant to the Northern Territories. In other words, the existence of two official languages, Japanese and Russian, would not require residents to achieve fluency in both. As time passes the number of bilingual residents could increase. This would foster future generations, who understand both cultures and customs, and could play an important role in bridging relations between the two countries. Thus, the Northern Territories could become a place that produces talented people who might pave the way to stronger Russia-Japan relations.

Demilitarization

Demilitarized zones are generally treaty-designated areas, where countries to which the areas belong must refrain from stationing troops or establishing military installations, in order to maintain international peace and cooperation. Some are "tense" demilitarized zones, like the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula, but others, like the Åland Islands, have long been peaceful.

The Åland Islands, located at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia, were from 1809 to 1917 a frontier zone of the Russian Empire. Åland's demilitarization was agreed on in 1856 at the Paris Peace Conference, as a consequence of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War. The Committee of Jurists appointed by the Council of the League of Nations reported that the effect of the Paris Agreement would endure. Nevertheless, the Council specifically included demilitarization in the League's settlement.

Just as the Åland islands were part of Russia's western border, the Northern Territories, located at the southern end of the island chain that divides the Pacific Ocean from the Sea of Okhotsk, are today part of Russia's eastern border, and Russian troops are stationed there. For settlement of the Northern Territories issue (no matter where the border is set), demilitarization could become the most important condition. In 1960, after the US and Japan concluded a revised security treaty, the USSR revoked its 1956 undertaking to return Shikotan and the Habomais, citing the possibility that Japan would permit US forces to be stationed there.[13] Whatever the case, demilitarization of the Northern Territories would contribute to the peace and security not only of Japan and Russia but also of all Northeast Asia.

Conclusion

The Åland Islands issue was entrusted to the League Council soon after the League was established, and the result was an innovative resolution of a non-zero-sum nature, in the long term benefiting not only the governments of Finland and Sweden, but the residents of the disputed islands, and the whole region.

The Northern Territories problem differs greatly from the Åland case in its historical background and in the international position of the disputant countries. The Åland model, therefore, cannot be adopted "as is". Nonetheless, as this article shows, in all the points of resolution of the sovereignty issue, multilateral framework, autonomy, domicile, language regulation, and demilitarization, there are lessons to learn from the Åland experience. It seems possible to apply a modified model. However, because the contents of the modified model raised herein are more complicated than the Åland case, it would be appropriate for a settlement to include provision for reviewing and, if necessary, modifying specific features every ten-years or so.

Some of the proposals for settling the Northern Territories problem raised so far contain elements resembling specific features of the Åland settlement. For example, former President Yeltsin's five-stage-resolution proposal features demilitarization and

autonomy. The "four-island special region" of the modified Åland model, and "two islands plus alpha" return mentioned as a hypothetical example, were earlier proposed by scholars such as Wada Haruki. They did not specifically mention the Åland model, but, as Kimura Hiroshi wrote, "humans all tend to think similarly".[14]

In the modified Åland, or Åland-inspired, model investigated in this article, "two official languages" and "a multilateral framework" enlarge the scope of previously proposed resolutions for the Northern Territories issue. Yet, if we reflect on the use of Japanese/Russian road signs and labeling in hotels and stores in parts of Hokkaido, it almost seems that a movement for "two official languages" has already begun in an area at the border of the two nations, an area of growing Russian-Japanese interaction. The multilateral approach was lacking or overlooked in the early Cold War years, because it clashed with the US Asia strategy; both review of the post-war Japanese territorial disposition in a multilateral framework and resolution of the issue itself were seen as contrary to US interests. After that, the historical and political correlations among the so-called "unresolved problems" that originated in the post-war disposition of Japan were overlooked and thus became a "blind spot."[15] However, a multilateral framework paying due attention to the linkages among the "unresolved problems" would seem a necessary approach for Japan and its neighbors in East Asia, in order to settle grievances from the past and take steps towards a "post- Cold War" world.

Kimie Hara is a professor and the Renison Research Professor in East Asian Studies at the University of Waterloo, a CIGI Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), Canada, and an Asia-Pacific Journal associate. She is the author of *Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific: Divided Territories in the San Francisco System (Routledge, 2006) and the editor, with Geoffrey Jukes, of Northern Territories, Asia-Pacific Regional Conflicts and the Aland Experience: Untying the Kurillian Knot (Routledge, 2009), from which the present article is adapted.*

Recommended citation: Kimie Hara, "Untying the Kurillian Knot: Toward an Åland-Inspired Solution for the Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute"

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 24-2-09, June 15, 2009.

Of related interest:

Kimie Hara, Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific: The Troubling Legacy of the San Francisco Treaty.

Kimie Hara, Micronesia and the Postwar Remaking of the Asia Pacific: "An American Lake".

Notes

1 James Barros, The Aland Islands Question: Its Settlement by the League of Nations, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968.

2 Discussions during the conference, New Initiatives for Solving the 'Northern Territories' Issue between Japan and Russia: An Inspiration from the Åland Experience, August 18-20, 2006.

3 For details, see Kimie Hara, Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific: Divided Territories in the San Francisco System, Routledge, 2007.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Although the San Francisco Peace Treaty stipulates Japan's recognition of Korea's independence, it does not specify to which government or country Korea was renounced. There was then, and is still, no country or state called "Korea", but two states, the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north. (In fact, this "Korea" was not a country name, but a geographical area.) For details, see Hara (2007), Chapter 1.

7 Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) since December 1994.

8 Åland Government and the Åland Parliament, "Åland in Brief" .

9 Ibid.

10 Scott Harrison, New Initiatives for Solving the "Northern Territories" Issue between Japan and Russia: An Inspiration from the Åland Experience: Conference Report, East Asian Studies Centre, Renison, University of Waterloo, 2007, p.8.

11 "Åland in Brief".

12 Many other countries also have two or more official languages, and none requires its residents to know more than one, e.g. Belgium (Flemish and French), Wales (English and Welsh), Ireland (English and Irish), Singapore (English, Malay), India (English, Hindi), Pakistan (Urdu, English). South Africa has eleven official languages (English, Afrikaans – which is a variant of Dutch – and nine African languages). There are many regional variations in China, e.g. in Hong Kong (English, Beijing dialect of Chinese), Macau (Portuguese, Beijing Chinese), Tibet (Tibetan, Beijing Chinese), Xinjiang (Uighur, Beijing Chinese), Inner Mongolia (Mongol, Beijing Chinese). There are many others. The above are all languages in which official documents are printed, court cases conducted. Etc. There are many other cases of languages such as Cantonese, Hokkien, Punjabi, or Maori that are widely spoken, in many cases taught in schools and have their own newspapers, radio and TV, but are not used in government, so are not classified as "official".

13 Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes, Translated and Edited by Jerrold L. Schecter with Vyacheslav V. Luchkov, Boston: Little Brown, 1990., p.89.

14 Kimura Hiroshi, "Orando no keiken wa yakuni tatsu (Åland experience is useful)", Anpoken Hokoku (Report of Security Studies), August 28, 2006.

15 Hara (2007), op.cit.