

The Kuril Islands Dispute: A Geopolitical Analysis of Russia-Japan Relations & Regional Implications

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Abstract

The dispute over the Kuril Islands remains one of the most enduring and complex territorial conflicts in Northeast Asia, continuing to hinder the normalization of relations between Russia and Japan since the end of World War II. This paper offers a comprehensive geopolitical analysis of the Kuril Islands dispute, tracing its historical origins, examining the legal and political arguments advanced by both states, and assessing the broader regional implications. The study explores the strategic significance of the islands, the impact on local populations, and the influence of external actors, particularly the United States. By applying the theoretical frameworks of realism and neorealism, the paper explains how the security dilemma perpetuates the stalemate and shapes state behavior. The analysis finds that the Kuril Islands dispute is not merely a bilateral issue but a critical factor influencing the security architecture and power dynamics of the wider Asia-Pacific region. The paper concludes by discussing potential pathways toward conflict resolution and the challenges that must be overcome to achieve lasting stability.

Keywords: Kuril Islands dispute, Russia-Japan Relations, Territorial conflicts, Northeast Asia, Realism, Neorealism

Introduction

The unconditional surrender of Japan after atomic bombing over two of its cities marked the end of World War II on August 14, 1945. The San Francisco Peace Conference held in September 1951, which officially ended the enmity between United States and Japan (Treaty of Peace with Japan, 1951). Up till now, Russia and Japan are still unable to sign a formal peace treaty to end the hostilities of the World

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War II. The barrier that is preventing the two states to sign a formal peace treaty is the dispute over the Kuril Islands (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

Basically, the Kuril Island is not a single island but a chain of about 56 islands, covering the total area of about 1250 km lies between the island of Hokkaido (Japan) and the expansive Kamchatka Peninsula (Russia), creating a proper boundary between the Sea of Okhotsk to the West and the Pacific Ocean to the East (Kuril Islands: The Unresolved Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute, n.d.). The Kuril Islands represent one of the most complex geopolitical intersections in the Northeast Asia. At the core of this continued disagreement lies the opposed control over the four southernmost islands which are collectively called as the Northern Territories in Japan and the called as Southern Kurils in Russia. These specific islands are Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and the Habomai islands. The dispute over these islands significantly disturbed the Russia-Japan friendly relations. This disagreement began from primarily different understandings of past treaties, wartime agreements, and post-war realities, it further became complex by the ideological connection of the Cold War and the unstable power dynamics of the 21st century (Kimura, 1992; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). The dispute over this territory is the essential reason that is now became a hinderance between the two states to sign a peace treaty which leads them to formally end the WWII conflicts, particularly postponing the growth of broader political, economic, and security alliance (Green, 2019). The Kuril Islands have crucial strategic location and significant value, taking the entree to the Sea of Okhotsk. Moreover, they hold diverse natural resources like rich fishing grounds and seaward oil and gas assets. One of these disputed four islands, the Iturup Island holds a rare and valued mineral called “Rhenium” which is crucially used in the engines of jets and rockets (Korzhinsky et al., 1994; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). This research paper purposes to deliver a broader inspection of the Kuril Islands dispute by exploring its complex historical progress, examining the contrasting legal and political claims, and evaluating its profound and continuous significances for common relations between Moscow and Tokyo, as well as for the constancy and security of the East Asian region.

Review of the Literature

The dispute over Kuril Islands has attracted substantial scholarly work, indicating its complication and enduring influence on the regional geopolitics. Initial studies (Kimura, 1992; Stephan, 1974) emphasis on the historical and legal roots of this

dispute, examining relative treaties such as the Treaty of Shimoda (1855), the Yalta Agreement (1945), and the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951). These works demonstrate the uncertainty and contention over the legal status of these islands, which remains to further exacerbate the competing claims.

Current scholarship has progressively highlighted the strategic and security extents of this dispute. Authors like Hara (1998) and Medvedev (2015) inspect how the geographic position and diverse resources presence in these islands rise their position to both Russia and Japan. The part of the U.S.-Japan coalition and the wider regional security situation is examined in the works by Green (2019) and Liff (2017), who claim that the involvement of the external actors further confuses the mutual talks and strengthens the security dilemma.

The claim of international relations theory, particularly realism and neorealism, has given valuable understandings into the perseverance of this dispute. Mearsheimer (2001) and Waltz (1979) claim that the conduct of both Russia and Japan is influenced by the pursuit of power, security, and rank, each side looking for to enhance its strategic gain while diminishing weakness. Recent studies (Gorenburg, 2016; Tanaka, 2020) have further discovered how internal politics, national uniqueness, and public opinion oblige diplomatic suppleness and prolong the territorial impasse.

Despite wide scholarship, gaps continue about the projections for conflict resolution and the possible effect of developing regional dynamics, like the rise of China and shifting U.S. appointment in the Asia-Pacific. This research paper pursues to contribute to the works by participating historical, legal, and theoretical viewpoints to offer a general understanding of the dispute over the Kuril Islands and its wider consequences.

Legal & Political Claims by Both Sides

❖ Russia's Claims

After the defeat of Japan by Allied Powers involving Soviet Union (Now Russia), paved the way to directly occupation and subsequent control of the Kuril Islands by Soviet Union (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). Now Russia firmly advocates for absolute and legal control over the Kuril Islands in its explanation of the consequences of World War II. In April 2023, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov restated: "The Kuril

Islands are an inseparable part of Russia,” rejected the Japanese statements about “illegal occupation” (The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands, 2024). Such statements by Russian officials show how confident they are over their control of Kuril Islands. Furthermore, some past treaties signed by Soviet Union, also solidifies the Russia’s claim over the disputed islands.

❖ **Yalta Agreement (1945)**

The Yalta Agreement signed in February 1945, established the basis of the Soviet Union’s claim over Kuril Islands after the World War II. In this agreement, leaders of Great Britain (Franklin D. Roosevelt), Soviet Union (Joseph Stalin), and United States (Winston Churchill) were the signatories. In exchange for Soviet participation in the war against Japan, the allies promised the territorial concessions to USSR, which involved the Kuril Islands and the Southern Sakhalin. The clause 1(a) and clause 3 of the Yalta Agreement clearly states that: “1- The former rights of Russia violated by the treacherous attack of Japan in 1904 shall be restored, viz.: (a) the southern part of Sakhalin as well as the islands adjacent to it shall be returned to the Soviet Union.” 3- The Kuril Islands shall be handed over to Soviet Union.” (U.S. Department of State, 1945; National Diet Library, Japan, n.d.; Avalon Project, Yale Law School, n.d.)

❖ **Potsdam Declaration (1945)**

The main focus of Potsdam Conference was based upon the post-war Europe which indirectly turned into a solid foundation for Soviet (now Russian) right over the Kuril Islands through the Potsdam Declaration of July 26, 1945. Specifically, the point 8 of this declaration authorized the execution of the Cairo Declaration of 1943, which specified the Japan’s termination of territories acquired by combat. The Allied powers, considered the Kuril Islands as such, had already in agreement at the Yalta Conference of February 1945 to give these islands to the Soviet Union as in exchange for their commencement into the war against Japan. Japan’s ultimate acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration on August 10, 1945, was taken by the Allies as an agreement to this territorial line up (Yalta Conference, 2025). Accordingly, the Soviet Union occupied the Kuril Islands, making the Yalta agreement and Japan’s approving of the Potsdam Declaration as base, which merged the principles of the Cairo Declaration. The Potsdam Declaration, by mentioning preceding agreements and being accepted by Japan, provided a decisive, albeit indirect, legal and political base for the Russian affirmation of sovereignty over the Kuril Islands (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

❖ San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951)

The San Francisco Peace Treaty signed in 1951, aimed to resolve the post-war issues with Japan, ironically intensified the Kuril Islands dispute with the Soviet Union (now Russia). Article 2(c) saw Japan renounce its claims to the "Kurile Islands," Even the treaty lacked a proper definition, so the Soviet Union refused to sign this treaty. This lacking allows Japan to argue that the four southernmost islands ("Northern Territories") were not part of the renounced territories and were illegally occupied. Conversely, Russia asserts that Japan's renunciation covers the entire chain occupied by the USSR after World War II, as agreed upon at Yalta and Potsdam. The treaty's failure to explicitly transfer sovereignty and the USSR's non-participation left the territorial issue unresolved, hindering a formal peace treaty between Russia and Japan to this day (The Four Northern Islands and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, n.d.).

❖ Soviet Japanese Joint Declaration (1956)

The 1956 Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration normalized relations and saw the USSR offer to transfer the Habomai Islands and Shikotan to Japan after a peace treaty was concluded (Article 9). However, disagreements over the larger islands (Kunashiri and Etorofu) prevented a peace treaty. The Soviets later tied the smaller islands' transfer to the withdrawal of foreign troops from Japan, an unacceptable condition. While failing to resolve the core territorial dispute, the declaration remains a key document acknowledging potential territorial concessions and serves as a basis for stalled negotiations. Japan still views it as a starting point for resolving the Kuril Islands issue and achieving a peace treaty with Russia (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). Russia considers the islands as a valid spoil of war, fairly secured through huge sacrifice throughout the war against Axis powers, including the Imperial Japan (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). The Kremlin constantly states that sovereignty of Soviet was recognized as a straight consequence of the war conclusion and the surrender of Japan, refusing any view that the occupation was illegal (Stalin's Definition of the Kurile Islands, n.d.). Away from the historical explanation, Russia emphasizes the massive strategic position of the islands. Due to these Islands, Russia has the access to the unfreeze Pacific Ocean, avoids the chokepoints controlled by other countries, and significantly increasing its naval plan capabilities and regional military position, predominantly in countering the US influence (The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands, 2024). They also have Submarine strongholds in the Sea of Okhotsk depend on control of these islands. Moreover, the islands hold substantial economic value, mainly through their rich marine resource, some of the

ironic fishing grounds worldwide and speculated likely for seaward oil, gas, and mineral deposits (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). Russian accounts often highlight the historical presence of Russian travelers and settlers preceding significant Japanese settlement (though the indigenous Ainu presence predates both) and highlight the considerable investment in communities, development and military setting up developed over the decades since 1945 (Rise of the Territorial Dispute, n.d.). Moscow considers the islands as an absolute portion of the Russian Federation, strengthened by recent constitutional revisions highlighting the territorial integrity, and asserts that any negotiation about their future must start from the principle of certain Russian sovereignty (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). Subsequently, the determined demands of Japan for their return are frequently represented not only as territorial claims, but as exertions to revise the post-WWII universal order and possibly undermine Russia's national security. This position has evidently become tough in the recent years, fueled by worsening relations with the West, the imposition of authorizations (mainly after 2014 and 2022), and supposed pressures from increased US-Japan military incorporation (The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands, 2024).

❖ Japan's Claim

Japan's claim on the Northern Territories is heavily rooted in the historical instances and particular legal explanations, claiming that these four certain islands have always remained as an essential part of Japanese territory and were never been lawfully achieved by Russia. The initial arguments of Japan based on a sequence of mutual treaties preceding to World War II, providing a solid base to the Japan's claims over the control of the Kuril Islands.

❖ Treaty of Shimoda (1855)

The treaty of Shimoda which was signed in 1855, was a primary recognized agreement which defined the borders between Russia and Japan. It clearly allocated the islands of Iturup (Etorofu), Kunashir (Kunashiri), Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands to Japanese region. Only the islands north of Urup were allocated to Russia. This treaty provided a reason for Japan to claim that these four islands were historically never been a part of the chain of Kuril Islands and were explicitly considered as a part of Japanese territory. This treaty provides a key legal base for their contemporary claims over the Kuril Islands (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d.; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

❖ **Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875)**

By this later treaty of Saint Petersburg which was signed in 1875, resulted in the Japan's acquisition of the remaining Kuril Islands from Russia. In return, Japan conceded its claims to Sakhalin Island to Russia. While Japan ultimately lost these attained Kuril Islands after the World War II, this treaty demonstrated a period where Japan detained control over the whole Kuril Islands chain (involving what they now call them as Northern Territories) (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003; Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d.).

❖ **Peace Treaty of San Francisco (1951)**

In the Peace Treaty of San Francisco which was signed in 1951, Japan rejected "all right, title and its claims over the Kuril Islands." Japan preserves that the four Northern Territories were historically and legally separate from the "Kuril Islands" as referenced in this treaty. Thus, they argue that their claims to these four islands was not surrendered by the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The issue raised when Moscow refused to became a signatory in this agreement (The Four Northern Islands and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, n.d.; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

Overall, Japan confidently claims that the occupation by Soviet Union initiated between August and early September in 1945, while Japan had already declared getting of the Potsdam Declaration and surrendered entirely after the bombing over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 15th, thus surpassing the principles of international law apart from the territorial achievement by use of force, particularly after hostilities had ended (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003; Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d.). Furthermore, Japan objects the legality of the Yalta Agreement as a basis for territorial allocation, perceiving it was a secret understanding amid the Allied leaders that Japan was not a member. Despite the legal arguments, Japanese claims are introduced by having the solid emotive and cultural appeal, emphasizing the imposed shift of around 17,000 Japanese inhabitants after 1945 and the separating of deep inborn and community ties to the islands. While in Japan, the public opinion remains excessively supportive of inspiring the return of the territories, perceiving the continuous clash as a strong sign of unsettled past inequality and crucial step to the filled national sovereignty. Thus, subsequent Japanese governments have progressively set the resolution of the Northern Territories matter as a critical condition to have a proper peace treaty with Russia and forming entirely stable, progressive mutual relations. While keeping its claim, Japan has mostly encouraged for a peaceful, diplomatic solution for this dispute through determined dialogue,

providing numerous plans over the years (including joint economic activities) and demonstrating the potential for collective economic assistance and greater regional steadiness should be achieved (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003; Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d.).

❖ Geopolitical Implications

The unsettled dispute over the Kuril Islands shows a long extremity outside of the mutual relationship, applying widespread effect on the broader geopolitical arena and the security dynamics of Northeast Asia region. The entrenched distrust triggered by the territorial dispute serves as a determined pause on the Moscow-Tokyo collaboration across a wide range of conceivably collective interests, involving common economic projects (especially in the energy progress in Sakhalin and Siberia), ensuring energy security deviation for Japan, handling maritime safety measures in the busy neighboring waters, and fostering deeper security discussions (Green, 2019; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003). This lack of consideration complicates the coordinated regional responses to insistent mutual challenges, such as managing the North Korea's nuclear purposes, addressing piracy and transferring, or routing the multifaceted web of covering maritime differences in the South and East China Seas (Liff, 2017; Green, 2019). The strategic settlement of the islands implicitly increases the Russia's military position in the North Pacific, providing it a mode to its navy allowed operational range and manipulating the strategic benefits of further key regional players (Medvedev, 2015; Gorenburg, 2016). The United States, accord partner of Japan, openly supports the Japan's authority right over the Northern Territories but must add steadiness in this with the condition for regional steadiness and irregular strategic collaboration with Russia (Green, 2019; Liff, 2017). China observes the dispute, possibly perceiving it as a reason of power or a reason restricting the harmony of the US-led coalition system in Asia (Gorenburg, 2016). Additionally, South Korea, also having its own territorial conflicts with Japan (Dokdo/Takeshima), realizes the legal and political models carefully (Tanaka, 2020). The conflict demonstrates as a basic reminder of the long-lasting legacies of 20th-century wars in the post-Cold War period and also shows the massive struggle of determining the sovereignty matters knotted with national identity, historical recall, and strategic interests in a multipolar world (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). As in a race to achieve more and more resources, impact, power, and strategic positioning extends across the Indo-Pacific, with the progressively accessible Arctic region via the Northern Sea Route (Medvedev, 2015; Gorenburg, 2016). The Kuril Islands dispute is supposed to continue as a serious, and possibly unpredictable,

aspect influencing the regional security means for the predictable future (Green, 2019; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

❖ Realism and the Security Dilemma

The Kuril Islands dispute perfectly fits into the Realist model in International Relations (IR), suggesting that as the international system is naturally anarchic, it forces the states to prefer the survival, power, and security above all other matters. The Realist school of thought suggests that states being as a rational-actors, are determined by self-interest and a continuous pursuit to maximize their security (Saeed & Askari, 2021). In the given context of the dispute over the Kuril Islands, both Russia and Japan act in harmony with these principles, observing the control over the islands as crucial to their national interests and regional influence (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979).

Another vital concept within Realism, the security dilemma, is strongly demonstrated here as the Russia's military build-up and legal entrenchment on the Kuril Islands are taken by Japan (and its ally, the United States) as hostile and expansionist, emphasizing the countermeasures such as diplomatic protests and nearer security ties with the United States. On the contrary, Japan's diplomatic and legal declarations, particularly when harmonized with the United States, are perceived by Russia as challenges to its post-WWII expansions and as threats to its strategic penetration in the Pacific. This mutual distrust extends a round of mistrust, making compromise indefinable (Jervis, 1978; Gorenburg, 2016; Sultaana, 2021).

❖ Neorealism (Structural Realism)

The concept of Neorealism or Structural Realism, enhances classical realism by demonstrating the effect of the structure of international system, precisely the circulation of power over the state behavior. Under the lens of Neo-Realism, the purpose of Russia to hold the Kuril Islands is not simply about historical objections or resource wealth, but about upholding its status as a Pacific power and avoiding hold by U.S.-led alliances. The Kuril Islands offer Russia with critical access for its Pacific Navy, supporting its nuclear deterrence and regional inspiration (Giles, 2019; Gorenburg, 2016).

The stance of Japan is influenced by its coalition with the United States, which both encourages its territorial claims and obliges its diplomatic flexibility. The United States safety umbrella ensures the defense of Japan, as well as complicates the discussions with Russia, as Russia observes any concern as a possible fading of its strategic posture regarding the U.S. and its allies (Green, 2019; Liff, 2017).

Defensive & Offensive Realism in the Kuril Islands Dispute

In the dispute over the Kuril Islands between Russia and Japan, the further variants of neo-realism as defensive and offensive realism also fall within this dispute. The actions taken by both sides provide the reason to see Russia as Defensive Realist and Japan as an Offensive Realist.

❖ Russia as Defensive Realist

Defensive Realism, a prominent strand of realist theory in international relations, posits that states seek only the amount of power necessary to ensure their security and survival, avoiding over-expansion that might provoke counterbalancing coalitions and ultimately undermine their security (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). The behavior of Russia in this specific dispute over the Kuril Islands demonstrates this sense, as the actions of Moscow are mainly determined by the reason to uphold a locked strategic location rather than desires of violent extension.

❖ Military Buildup as Deterrence

Russia has significantly deployed its military on the Kuril Islands—with the setting up of innovative coastal missile systems like the Bastion-P anti-ship missile batteries, consistent naval exercises, and transformation of air defense abilities—demonstrates a clear deterrent mindset meant at safeguarding its eastern side. These actions are intended to balance apparent fears from Japan and its U.S. supporter, rather than to take any aggressive actions or territorial expansion (Gorenburg, 2016). The military existence guarantees control over essential maritime tactics and guards the Sea of Okhotsk, which is crucial for Russia's Pacific Fleet and its nuclear submarine mainstay. This defensive stance line up with Russia's wider strategic preference to the protection of its nationwide security in a multipolar Asia-Pacific setting.

❖ Legal and Constitutional Actions to Strengthen Sovereignty

Outside the military means, Russia has started its working on the legal and constitutional ways to further harden its claim. The constitutional amendments in 2020 clearly ban the surrender of any Russian territory, involving the Kuril Islands, efficiently closing off the option of territorial concession (BBC News, 2020). This legal intrenchment is enhanced by the organized efforts to “Russify” the islands via population migration, infrastructure growth, and economic investment, gesturing to both domestic spectators and the international community that the islands are now an intimate part of Russian autonomous territory (Kaczmarski, 2020). These actions strengthen the Russia’s defensive realist goal of conserving the status quo and preventing any efforts to contest its sovereignty.

❖ Maintaining the Strategic Status Quo

The Kuril Islands deliver Russia with crucial strategic gains. By having the control over these islands assures the unhindered access for the Russian Pacific Fleet to the wider Pacific Ocean, avoiding the chokepoints like the Tsugaru Strait, and guards the submarine mainstays in the Sea of Okhotsk— crucial apparatuses of Russia’s nuclear deterrent (Giles, 2019; Gorenburg, 2016). By preserving its hold on the Kuril Islands, Russia safeguards its constant status as a Pacific power without involving into any risky territorial extension. This tactic replicates defensive realism’s prominence on balancing power to preserve security rather than chasing extremist gains.

In short, the approach of Russia to the Kuril Islands dispute is a classic instance of defensive realism. Its military accumulation purposes as a deterrent rather than an aggressive stance, legal and constitutional actions harden the sovereignty, and strategic control over these islands conserves crucial security interests. The actions taken by Russia demonstrates a careful harmonizing act aimed at upholding the status quo and safeguarding the national security in a multifaceted regional situation, constant with the central beliefs of defensive realism (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978; Giles, 2019).

❖ Japan as Offensive Realist

Offensive realism is a key variant of realism in international relations, claims that the states are obliged to increase their power and safety by looking for to rescript the status quo in their own interest, frequently through firm and active approaches (Mearsheimer, 2001). The behavior of Japan in this specific dispute over the Kuril

Islands demonstrates numerous core beliefs of offensive realist, as Japan insistently challenges the Russian control to increase its own safety and regional effect.

❖ **Assertive Territorial Claims**

Japan consistently asserts its sovereignty over the Northern Territories—the four southernmost Kuril Islands—through diplomatic channels, legal arguments, and international forums. Tokyo invokes historical treaties such as the Treaty of Shimoda (1855) and emphasizes the illegality of the Soviet occupation after World War II to press for the return of the islands (Smith, 2018). Japan's government regularly raises the issue in bilateral talks, public statements, and multilateral settings like the United Nations, signaling a determined effort to revise the existing territorial arrangement in its favor. This assertiveness is a hallmark of offensive realism, which views territorial claims as essential to maximizing security and power.

❖ **Leveraging the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance**

Japan's close security alliance with the United States significantly bolsters its position in the dispute. The U.S. provides strategic backing through military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic support, which emboldens Japan to adopt a more assertive stance toward Russia (Green, 2019). This alliance not only enhances Japan's deterrence capabilities but also signals to Russia that any unilateral attempts to solidify control over the islands could provoke broader strategic consequences. By leveraging this powerful partnership, Japan seeks to shift the regional balance of power and increase its influence in Northeast Asia, consistent with offensive realist logic (Liff, 2017).

❖ **Revisionist Diplomatic Strategy**

Japan's diplomatic approach to the Kuril Islands dispute reflects a revisionist ambition. Japan has exaggerated its diplomatic efforts and protests, employed progressively assertive bombast, and wanted to internationalize this conflict by adding many-sided organizations such as the G7 and the UN's Human Rights Council (Tanaka, 2020). These actions are aimed to detach Russia diplomatically and pressurize the Russia to review its stance over the Kuril Islands. The willingness of Japan to challenge the status quo via constant diplomatic engagement highlights its offensive realist behavior to increase its strategic gain and redesign the regional dynamics in its own interest.

❖ Balancing Assertiveness with Restraint

While Japan has refrained from military escalation, its persistent efforts to revise the territorial status quo and maximize its strategic position align with offensive realism's emphasis on power maximization. Japan's strategy reflects a calculated balance—assertive enough to challenge Russia's claims and strengthen its own security, yet restrained to avoid direct military conflict that could destabilize the region or provoke a harsh Russian response (Smith, 2018; Tanaka, 2020).

In sum, Japan's approach to the Kuril Islands dispute exemplifies offensive realism. Through assertive territorial claims, strategic alliance leverage, and revisionist diplomacy, Japan actively seeks to revise the status quo to enhance its security and regional influence. This behavior illustrates how states, particularly those in contested regions, pursue power maximization within the constraints of the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Nevertheless, the current stalemate over the Kuril Islands is continuing due to the phenomena of security dilemma as the efforts of each side are aimed to increase its own security are perceived as threats by the other side, leading towards the reciprocated actions that further deepens the dispute (Jervis, 1978; Gorenburg, 2016). Russia's constitutional amendments, which disallow the territorial concessions, and its systematic "Russification" of the islands, serve to strengthen its sovereignty claims and signal to both domestic and international actors that the issue is non-negotiable (BBC News, 2020; Kaczmarski, 2020). Japan's progressively imperative style and diplomatic protests, particularly following Russia's entering of Ukraine and consequent sanctions, show a solidifying posture but also demonstrates Japan's restricted leverage in the face of Russian obstinacy and United States' strategic priorities (Tanaka, 2020; Green, 2019).

The conflict also involves significant regional implications. It modifies the Russia-Japan cooperation on wider security and economic matters, preventing the resolution of World War II legacies, and serves as a critical juncture in the developing balance of power in Northeast Asia region (Green, 2019; Liff, 2017). The United States supports claims of Japan over the Kuril Islands, but its direct focus remains on the containment of China, which further restricts the possibility for a talk over peaceful settlement. Meanwhile, the actions taken by Russia are intimately viewed by other regional actors, who explain the dispute as mode of the wider

contests of post-Cold War regional settlements and the continuity of power politics in the Asia-Pacific (Tanaka, 2020; Gorenburg, 2016).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, analytical approach, using both primary and secondary sources to observe the Kuril Islands dispute. Primary sources contain official treaties such as the Treaty of Shimoda (1855), Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875), Potsdam Conference (1945), Yalta Agreement (1945), and San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951), Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration (1956), government statements, and diplomatic efforts from both Russia and Japan. Secondary sources contain scholarly articles, books, and policy evaluations that deliver historical background, legal explanations, and theoretical perceptions.

The study pays document examination to follow the historical development of this dispute and to evaluate the legal and political claims presented by sides- Russia and Japan. The theoretical framework of realism and neorealism is linked to understand state actions, concentrating on the notions of the security dilemma, power matching, and defensive against offensive approaches. This research paper also reflects the role of external actors and regional security dynamics by thorough examination from international relations literature.

By combining the historical, legal, and theoretical viewpoints, this methodology permits an inclusive understanding of the Kuril Islands dispute and its wider consequences for regional steadiness and international relations in Northeast Asia.

Discussion

The desires of Russia and its actions to have the control over the Kuril Islands is deeply entrenched in a multifaceted web of military, geopolitical, economic, and security situations. The importance of these islands spreads far beyond their straight geography, supporting Russia's stance and determinations in the Asia-Pacific region.

❖ Military and Naval Access

The Kuril Islands provides a pathway to the Pacific Fleet of Russia with shortest, unhindered access to the Pacific Ocean, avoiding substantial chokepoints and securing dynamic sea paths. This is also important for the operative freedom of the

nuclear submarines of Russia and shallow containers, mainly those based in Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy. These islands work as a natural barrier at the northern arrival to the Sea of Okhotsk, defending this strategic body of water, which is safe place to the ballistic missile submarine fleet of Russia. Having the control over the Kuril Islands guarantees the safety of Russia's second-strike nuclear capability, a foundation of its deterrence dogma. Russia has severely invested in the militarization of these islands, installing advanced missile and air defense systems, seaside defense batteries, and strengthening its barracks to deter possible opponents and project power into the broader region (Rossi, 2021; CSIS, 2023; Harvard International Review, 2024; Danube Institute, n.d.).

❖ **Geopolitical Status and Power Projection**

Sovereignty over the Kuril Islands is a key pillar of Russia's great power status in both Eurasia and the Pacific. The islands allow Russia to assert itself as a central player in Northeast Asian security architectures, balancing the interests of China, Japan, and the United States. The Kurils' location at the northern end of the First Island Chain enables Russia to influence maritime trade routes and regional military dynamics, mirroring strategies employed by other major powers in the Asia-Pacific. By maintaining a robust military presence, Russia signals its willingness and capability to contest U.S. and Japanese influence, reinforcing its regional clout and deterring encroachment by other powers (Rossi, 2021; Danube Institute, n.d.; Investment Monitor, 2022).

❖ **Resource Security and Economic Interests**

The Kuril Islands are rich in natural resources, including abundant fisheries, significant mineral deposits (such as pyrite, sulfur, and polymetallic ores), and potential offshore oil and gas reserves. These resources are vital for Russia's economic interests in the Far East. The islands support a thriving fishing industry and have attracted investment in infrastructure, including processing plants and transportation links. Recent initiatives, such as the establishment of a special economic zone with favorable tax regimes, underscore their economic importance to Russia's broader development strategy in the region. Control over these resources not only benefits Russia economically but also denies strategic rivals' access to them, further reinforcing the islands' value (Wikipedia, 2025; ICWA, 2021).

❖ Countering U.S. and Allied Influence

The militarization of the Kurils serves as a direct counter to U.S. and Japanese military activities in Northeast Asia. By restricting foreign navigation and establishing a buffer zone, Russia complicates U.S. power projection and surveillance in the region. Russian officials have explicitly voiced concerns that transferring any part of the Kurils to Japan could result in the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems or military bases, which would threaten Russia's strategic deterrent and regional security. The presence of Russian forces on the islands acts as a tangible barrier to the expansion of U.S. influence and military infrastructure, particularly in light of the growing U.S.-Japan security alliance (Investment Monitor, 2022; CSIS, 2023; Harvard International Review, 2024).

❖ Strategic Indispensability

The Kuril Islands are thus indispensable to Russia's security architecture in the Pacific. Their loss would not only weaken Russia's military posture—by exposing the Sea of Okhotsk, undermining the Pacific Fleet's freedom of movement, and eroding nuclear deterrence—but also diminish its regional influence and economic prospects. In the face of a resurgent U.S.-Japan alliance and intensifying great power competition in the Asia-Pacific, the Kurils remain a linchpin of Russia's strategic ambitions and a non-negotiable element of its national security calculus (Rossi, 2021; Danube Institute, n.d.; CSS ETH Zurich, 2020).

Japan's pursuit of the Northern Territories—Habomai, Shikotan, Kunashiri, and Etorofu—faces a complex array of obstacles, both external and internal, that have rendered progress toward their return all but frozen in recent years.

Obstacles to Japan's Reclamation Efforts

❖ Russian Inflexibility and Legal Barriers

Russia has entrenched its claim to the islands through constitutional amendments that explicitly prohibit the cession of any Russian territory. Under President Vladimir Putin's 2020 constitutional changes, it is now unconstitutional to transfer any part of Russian territory to another state. Russian lawmakers have further reinforced this stance by passing legislation that imposes severe prison sentences (up to 10 years) for calls to relinquish territory, effectively criminalizing even public discussion of a territorial handover. This legal and political framework makes negotiations over the islands' status virtually impossible from Moscow's perspective (BBC News, 2020; Kaczmarski, 2020).

❖ Military Reality on the Ground

Russia maintains a continuous military presence on the Northern Territories, with an estimated 3,500 troops stationed across the islands. This deployment includes ground, naval, and aerospace units, along with ongoing infrastructure upgrades such as barracks and airfield improvements. The entrenched nature of these forces and the regular modernization of military facilities serve as a powerful deterrent to any change in the status quo, short of a dramatic shift in the regional balance of power (Gorenburg, 2016; Giles, 2019).

❖ The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance and Its Constraints

While the United States officially supports Japan's claim to the Northern Territories, its broader strategic priorities—particularly the focus on China and the avoidance of direct confrontation with Russia—limit the extent of American pressure on Moscow. Russia perceives deepening U.S.-Japanese military ties as a direct threat to its security, further hardening its stance on the territorial dispute. This dynamic constrains Japan's diplomatic leverage and complicates efforts to rally international support for its position (Green, 2019; Liff, 2017).

❖ Domestic and Regional Political Dynamics

Japanese public opinion remains strongly in favor of the islands' return, and the issue is deeply embedded in national identity and postwar justice narratives. However, Tokyo must balance these sentiments with pragmatic considerations, such as economic cooperation with Russia (notably in the energy sector) and the risk of escalating tensions that could harm broader regional stability. Within Japan, there is also evidence of emerging local dissent and shifting attitudes in communities like Nemuro, reflecting a gradual divergence between national policy and local aspirations (Tanaka, 2020; Kuril Islands dispute, 2003).

❖ Japan's Potential Measures

On the one side, having such tough challenges, Japan endures to follow a range of approaches intended at keeping the matter of Northern Territories dispute active and looking for incremental development. The below given suggestions may work in the best interest of Japan, these are:

❖ Diplomatic Engagement

Japan continues its discussion with Russia, highlighting the joint economic schemes and humanitarian interactions like arranging the visits for former inhabitants. Such types of initiatives are sensibly regulated to evade the actions that might be taken as legitimizing Russian control, while having the channels of communication uncluttered (Tanaka, 2020).

❖ **Internationalization of the Issue**

Japan forces multilateral mediums like G7 and the United Nations—to attract the international attention to this dispute, enclosing it as an issue of after the war justice and international law. This method pursues to build ethical and diplomatic burden on Russia, even if real consequences remain incomplete (Kuril Islands dispute, 2003; Tanaka, 2020).

❖ **Strengthening Alliances**

Japan endures to extend its security collaboration with the United States and the other regional associates, desiring to deter the additional Russian militarization and gesture its resolution without aggravating escalation. This approach contains mutual military exercises, intelligence distribution, and involvement in wider Indo-Pacific security projects (Green, 2019; Liff, 2017).

❖ **Soft Power and Public Diplomacy**

The efforts to encourage cultural and historical bonds to these islands, sustenance for previous Japanese inhabitants, and educational movements help to withstand public attention and international consciousness. These soft power approaches are critical for preserving the visibility and legitimacy of this issue in both domestic and global grounds (Tanaka, 2020).

Ultimately, Japan's options are tightly constrained by the realities of power politics and the security dilemma in Northeast Asia. While diplomatic engagement, international advocacy, alliance-building, and soft power can keep the Northern Territories issue on the agenda, the prospects for a negotiated return remain extremely limited as long as Russia views the islands as vital to its security and regional ambitions. Barring a fundamental transformation in the regional order or Russian policy, the dispute is likely to remain unresolved for the foreseeable future (Gorenburg, 2016; Green, 2019; Tanaka, 2020).

Conclusion

The Kuril Islands conflict depicts how past legacies, nationalist identity, and strategic benefits can erupt territorial disputes for decades. Despite over seventy years since World War II, Russia and Japan remain stalemated over the four southernmost islands, turned into a barrier for the formal peace treaty and impeding full normalization of relations. Russia's claim, heavily based on the postwar agreements and strengthened by constitutional and military measures, distinct sharply with Japan's affirmation based on prewar accords and rule of historical justice.

Strategically, the islands provide Russia vital access to the Pacific and valuable natural resources, deepening the stakes. The conflict also affects regional security mechanics, with the United States, China, and South Korea intimately looking at its implications for the Indo-Pacific balance of power. The conflict shows the security dilemma fundamental to Realist theory: defensive actions by one side are viewed as threats by the other side, upholding mistrust and deadlock.

While diplomatic attempts and mutual initiatives offer some prospect, the contemporary geopolitical status—marked by deepening great power competition—restricts prospects for a solid resolution. However, to overcome this territorial dispute requires extensive political approach and a mutual allegiance to cooperation. The resolution of this ongoing conflict over the Kuril Islands is beneficial not only for Russia and Japan, but it will also lead towards the regional stability and peace in the Northeast Asia.

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