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The Kuriles

Passage or Obstruction to Regional Peace?

Lieutenant Commander Rex M. Takahashi, U.S. Coast Guard

THERE IS MUCH TALK these days about a new world order and the post-Cold War era. In the relationship between the economic superpower Japan and the military superpower Soviet Union, however, not much has changed. This past April, President Gorbachev visited Japan for three days of talks with Prime Minister Kaifu. Fifteen agreements were signed. These covered subjects ranging from trade fairs and cultural centers to air rights and fisheries accords.¹ As to the basic political and military relationship, however, a peace treaty formally ending World War II between the two countries remains unsigned.

At the respective national strategy levels of the Soviet Union and Japan, a mutual coldness persists. While a great deal of geopolitical change has occurred in central Europe over the past two years, the same is not true in Asia. The forces of the traditional superpowers, as represented in the Soviet Far East TVD (Theater of Military Operations) and in the U.S. Pacific Command, remain in their adversarial posture. The size of forces may change in accordance with "indications and warning" assessments, but the geopolitical relationships remain the same between the U.S.S.R., Japan, and the United States. It is, in an odd way of thinking, a comfortably stable condition in which all the country-actors know their roles.

Product, symbol, and possible catalyst for change in the affairs of the three countries are the Kurile Islands—or "Northern Territories," as the southern four islands are referred to in Japan. The dialogue on sovereignty over these islands is between the Soviet Union and Japan, but any change will dramatically alter the military strategic picture for the United States as well.

Where Are the Kuriles?

The Kuriles form a chain of thirty-two islands stretching between Hokkaido and the Kamchatka Peninsula. David Rees, in his book on the Soviet seizure of

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the Kuriles, states that postwar Japan considered its lost Northern Territories to consist of the entire Kurile chain and geographically separate south Sakhalin. However, since the 1960s the Japanese government has limited its definition of the Northern Territories (*Hoppo Ryodo*) to comprise only four islands: Kunashiri Island, Etorofu Island, Shikotan Island, and Habomai (actually the Habomai group of smaller islands).²

Unless otherwise stated, the term Kuriles in this article refers to the entire island chain, while Northern Territories will be used to refer to the islands involved in the present Soviet-Japanese sovereignty issue.

Rajan Menon and Daniel Abele describe the Kurile archipelago as a Soviet "protective barrier fencing off the Sea of Okhotsk from the Pacific Ocean," which in the hands of an adversary "is a restrictive cordon sanitaire with the potential to complicate further the adverse climatic and geographical circumstances faced by the Pacific Fleet based in Vladivostok."³

The Kuriles have the appearance of a terrestrial version of Orion's shield. Research by Michael Thompson has found the archipelago to be described by Soviet writers as a "1000 kilometer Cossack saber" and a Russian "screen of steel."⁴ Presently the Kurile Islands and Sakhalin form an administrative district (*oblast'*) of the Soviet Far East Region of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Militarily, they lie in the Soviet Far East TVD.

Ten miles of water separate the southernmost island, Kunashiri, from Cape Notsuke on Hokkaido. The Kuriles have excellent harbors from which to stage naval operations, as indeed Admiral Nagumo did at Etorofu in preparation for the 7 December attack on Pearl Harbor, and as General Gnechko did in completing the Soviet occupation of the Kuriles four years later in September 1945.

The Soviet-Japanese Gap in Thinking

Historical Resentment. The Kuriles have been the scene of clashing interests between these nations for two centuries. John Stephan in his history of Sakhalin writes, when "the expanding frontiers of Russia and Japan met in Sakhalin and in the Kurile Islands at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the 'island country' Japan faced the problem of a contiguous land frontier with a foreign power (moreover a European power) for the first time in her history."⁵ Japan, Stephan writes, met this challenge by exploring, colonizing, and economically developing Hokkaido, the southern Kuriles, and southern Sakhalin.

"Japanese historiography of the Kuriles sometimes resembles a mirror image of the Soviet view," writes David Rees.⁶ Soviets speak of "age-old" rights threatened by Japanese intrusion. Japanese authors claim the Northern Territories to be "inalienable" Japanese lands that are historically, legally, and culturally part of Japan.

Russia renounced its claim to the Kuriles in the 1875 St. Petersburg Treaty in exchange for the cession of Japanese rights on Sakhalin. The Treaty of Portsmouth of 1905, which concluded the Russo-Japanese War, gave the southern half of Sakhalin, below the fiftieth parallel, to Japan. Fishing concessions off the Kamchatkan coast were included as well. As David Rees observes, for “the next forty years Japan’s tenure of the Kuriles and South Sakhalin was unchallenged.”⁷

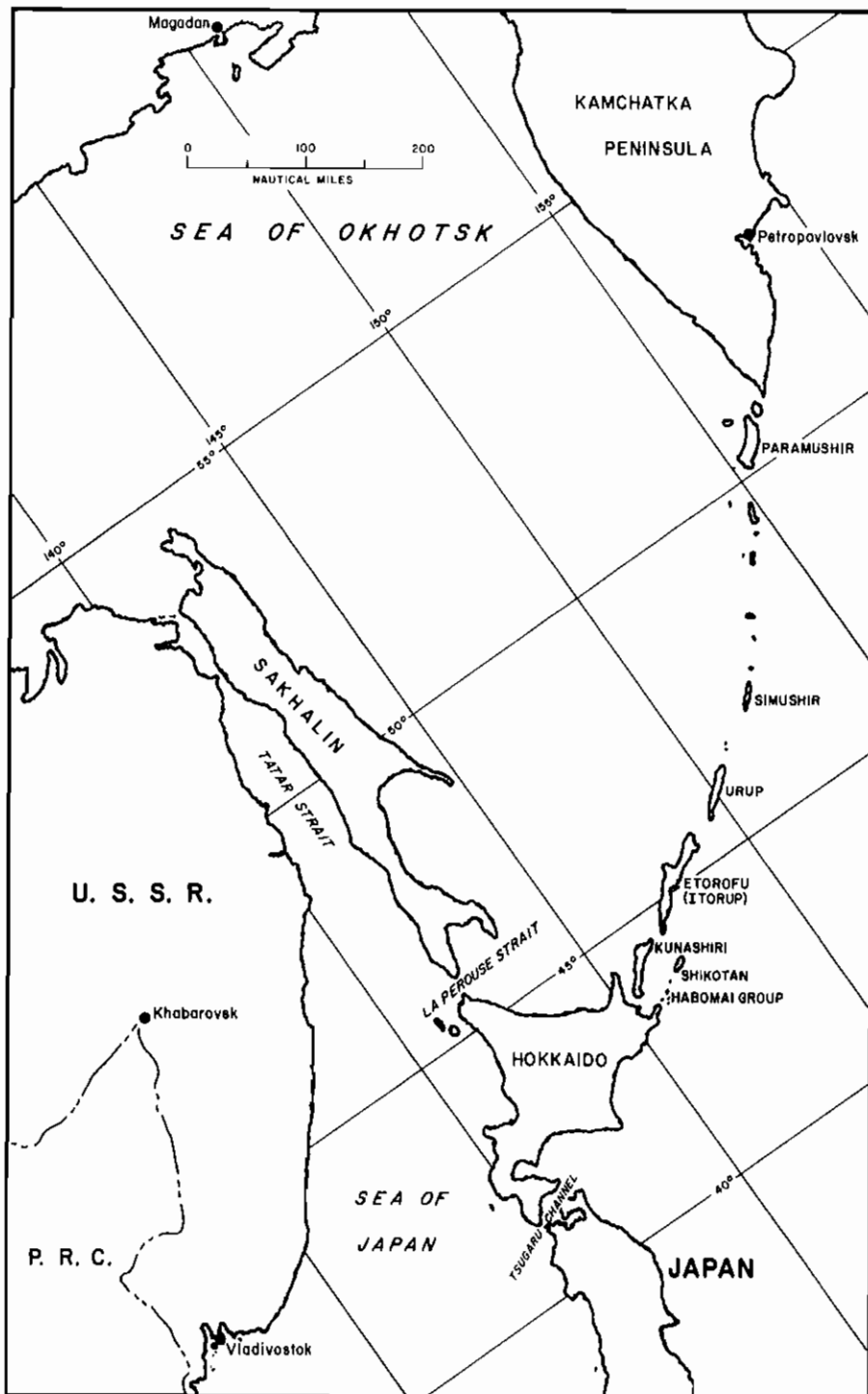
For Russia, the Japanese victory of 1905 was an insult to national dignity, and, as Mari Kuraishi Horne points out, the “paradox of the situation lay in the fact that until then Russia could assuage her own sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Western Europe with the certainty of her ‘superiority’ over the Asiatic nations, but it had been an ‘Asiatic’ fleet which had decimated the Imperial Navy at Tsushima.”⁸

World War II brought a reversal in sovereignty over the Kuriles. Over and above the territorial dispute, however, there now runs a current of Japanese distrust and antipathy because of the manner in which that acquisition took place. At Yalta, Sakhalin and the Kuriles were made part of the agreement which resulted into Soviet entry into the war against Japan, though some historians contend that the United States stated only that it would support Soviet claims at a peace conference. Mari Kuraishi Horne points out that the “Japanese may well feel that the Soviets did not deserve to be called victors” as they had achieved victory only indirectly, as a by-product of the war in Europe.⁹ In any event, the Soviet Union militarily occupied the Kuriles by August 1945, and for them, it was a matter of conquest.¹⁰

Following the Japanese defeat, 570,000 Japanese prisoners of war were used as slave laborers in Siberia in the late 1940s, in what Bruce Stokes calls “an internment that violated international agreements and cost thousands their lives” and alienated an entire generation.¹¹

The Japanese talk of Soviet treachery with regard to the loss of the Kuriles; the Soviets view the events as a reversal of the treachery inflicted upon Russia in the 1904 surprise attack on Port Arthur and the ultimate Russian defeat in 1905. The Soviet Union takes the position that the Kuriles are a natural extension into the Pacific of its territory. The attitude is, as Stalin noted in his victory address to the Soviet people on 2 September 1945, that southern Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands would henceforth serve not “as a means to cut off the Soviet Union from the ocean or as a base for a Japanese attack on our Far East, but as a means to link the Soviet Union with the ocean and as a defensive base against Japanese aggression.”¹²

Ideology vs. Economic Pragmatism. In most commentaries on Soviet-Japanese relations, historical antipathy is cited as the primary block to better relations. Countries, however, interact at various levels. Thus, while actions may actually



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be rooted in the national psyche, justifications must often be built on a different, logical, basis. A country's nationalistic feelings undergo a metamorphosis in an attempt to provide the world, or at least itself, a rational explanation.

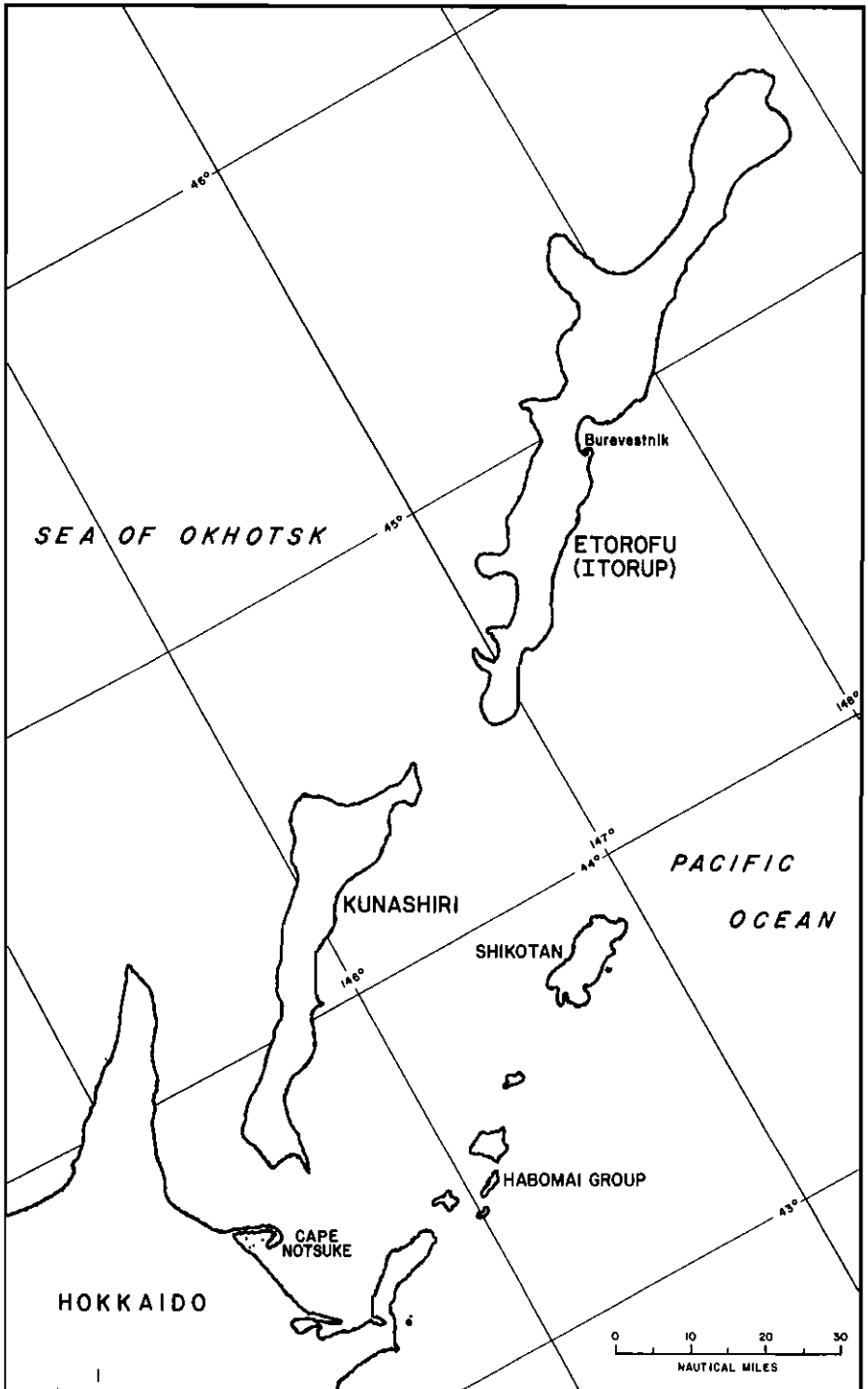
Thus the Soviet Union's most basic ideological view of Japan, as noted by Myles Robertson, has traditionally been that it is a "member of a capitalist bloc wracked by continual contradictions between the growth rates of mutually dependent states and the necessity to co-ordinate economic policies on the one hand and the antagonism of state monopoly to the limitation and regulation of economics on the other."¹³ Robertson further comments that while the Soviet Union views the Japanese economy as a special point of friction between capitalist nations, the need to maintain the unity of imperialism's political-military bloc limits that friction. Soviet political theorists debate whether Japan is victim or accomplice of American imperialism in the Far East. Nevertheless, the basic view is that the relationship endures despite the friction.

Just as the Soviet Union has trade relations with the countries of the capitalist west, it likewise conducts trade with Japan, some of it of long standing. In recent years this commerce "has revolved around the trading of energy resources of oil and coal, and timber in exchange for technology most directly required for the economic development of Siberia and the Soviet Far East."¹⁴ Robertson notes that the Soviets have kept their demands and positions free from obvious influences of ideology, have pursued negotiations in a businesslike manner, and have steered a pragmatic course.

Indeed, David Rees notes that in the late 1970s Japan was the U.S.S.R.'s second most important trading partner in the non-communist world, albeit in volumes accounting for only three or four percent of Japan's foreign trade. It should be noted that the 1970s was also the decade when the Japanese business community felt itself burned by certain investments in Siberia, which prevented any further swelling of fiscal optimism for the area.

One has to question whether an expansion of the trade relationship is actually more stymied by asymmetrical levels of economic development or by political recalcitrance, which would of course bring us back to the Northern Territories issue. Prime Minister Kaifu, in an interview in the Soviet periodical *New Times* a year before the April summit, certainly gave the impression that the great stumbling block was the latter. Kaifu talked of problems to be settled in a significant order: the Northern Territories; concluding a peace treaty; normalizing bilateral relations; and supporting *perestroika* and the introduction of a market economy.¹⁵

The Soviet Union does, however, desperately seek to improve its economy. Prime Minister Kaifu addressed in the same interview the role of cooperation and economic prosperity in East Asia as the basis of regional political stability. At present, the Soviet Union needs an improved economy not only to join in that regional prospect but for its own domestic stability as well. The Northern



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Territories issue is the negotiating point that holds out the possibility for economic cooperation with Japan and broader economic participation in the region—but that same issue also determines the military position of the Soviet Union in Northeast Asia.

Strategic Importance of the Kuriles. The Kuriles is the gate protecting the Sea of Okhotsk. For the Soviet Pacific Fleet, the Sea of Okhotsk is the bastion for its Delta IIIs and other SSBNs, the sea sanctuary for units deployed at Petropavlovsk, and the passageway to and from the major military port of Vladivostok. For the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the Kuriles is the gate through which to launch an anti-SSBN campaign in this bastion. As Michael Thompson states, “the naval value of the Kuriles is found as much in the twenty navigable straits as in the islands themselves, linking the Sea of Okhotsk, Sakhalin Island, and the Pacific Ocean.”¹⁶

Japan, of course, living under the protective umbrella of the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty, sees its military interests as integral with those of the United States. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) can view the Kuriles as a two-way gate. Closure of the Kuriles by the JSDF can bottle up elements of the Soviet fleet in the Sea of Japan, making them vulnerable to allied destruction. On the other hand, closure of the Kuriles by Soviet forces would be part of a strategic option, as David Rees notes, of “enveloping and interdicting the sea lanes which sustain Japan and connect that country with its sources of energy and raw materials in the Middle East and North America.”¹⁷

The Kuriles fall within the Soviet “sea control” zone—an area which the Soviets will seek to dominate in wartime. According to the 1989 Department of Defense (DoD) annual report, *Soviet Military Power*, sea control in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan “represents the Soviets’ highest priority regional objective.”¹⁸

Soviet ground forces in the Far East TVD are expected to be reduced in coming years, but not in the areas opposite Japan, in the Northern Territories, on Sakhalin Island, or on the Kamchatka Peninsula. According to the 1990 DoD annual report, the Soviet Pacific Fleet will remain relatively constant in the 1990s, but its amphibious lift capability will continue to grow.¹⁹ David Thompson notes that the Kuriles could become an excellent platform for staging an assault on Hokkaido by “amphibious assault, parachute drop, heliborne assault, or a mechanized thrust across the 17 kilometer frozen channel (winter only) separating Kunashir from Point Notsuke.”²⁰

The Japanese Defense Agency 1989 White Paper estimates the combined troop strength in the Northern Territories to be the equivalent of a division.²¹ A permanent military base exists on Itorup Island (Etorofu in Japanese) where MIG-23 Flogger aircraft are deployed; Shikotan has facilities for handling assault helicopters. The White Paper states, the “Soviet Union has brought into these

islands not only weapons that are normally possessed by its divisions, such as tanks, APCs, various artillery pieces, anti-aircraft missiles and MI-24 Hind attack helicopters, but also 130-mm cannons which usually do not belong to the equipment of a Soviet division."

Facing this force on Hokkaido are four of the thirteen divisions of the Japanese Ground Self Defense Force. Behind this force stands the Japanese defense budget, which in 1990 amounted to a massive \$29.7 billion, less only than those of the United States and the Soviet Union. In such a situation, an attempt to cross forces from the Kuriles appears highly unlikely, at least in the initial stages of hostilities.

Soviet sovereignty over the Kuriles implies control of the gateway between Hokkaido and Kamchatka. One must, however, keep in view the prospect that combined U. S. and Japanese naval and air forces will wrest control of the Kuriles from the Soviet Union at the outbreak of hostilities. Additionally, the archipelago, being of such great length, can not be made impenetrable to submarines attacking into the Sea of Okhotsk bastion. To give up the segment of the Kurile chain represented by the Northern Territories would undoubtedly weaken the Soviet defensive capability; the Soviets must weigh for themselves the peacetime benefits that a compromise may provide compared to the advantages that an intact island barrier will bring in the event of a putative future war.

Meeting at the Crossroads, Status Quo Preferred

President Mikhail Gorbachev was the first Soviet head of state to visit Japan. The results were predictable. The summit meeting paved the way for further high level cooperation on minor matters, but did little to solve the issue of the Northern Territories or arrive at a peace treaty now forty-five years past due. Since December 1988, there has existed at the vice-foreign minister level a working group on the peace treaty. Progress on the territorial problem, however, has always been blocked. Gorbachev and Kaifu played out at the summit roles carved deep in the pasts of their respective nations.

That the Soviet Union has at least acknowledged the existence of a territorial dispute, however, is viewed as a positive sign. Prime Minister Kaifu stated last year in the *New Times* interview that it looked as if the Soviets would foist acceptance of "postwar realities" on the Japanese, but he recognized that different opinions, previously impossible to state publicly, had appeared in the Soviet Union.

In this year of the Soviet-Japanese summit, Gorbachev has been regarded as the representative of the emerging "different opinions;" it came as no surprise that he could announce to the world that a territorial dispute did exist. That, however, was about as far as new thinking would emerge. In the Soviet Union,

resurgent hard-liners opposed return of the islands. Among the reformers, Boris Yeltsin was reported as saying the Russians would not "do another Alaska" over the islands.²² Soviet Defense Minister Yazov is reported to have insisted that all four islands are vital to Soviet national security and can not be exchanged for Japanese economic aid.²³ The implication is that the Soviet Union, though it has declared a military doctrine of "defensive sufficiency" that applies to Asia as well as Europe, notwithstanding does not intend to compromise its military superpower status in the East as it has in the West.

Hiroshi Kimura observes that Soviet scholars who are realistic enough to consider the territorial issue an obstacle to improving Soviet-Japanese relations have been unofficially proposing compromise formulae. All the proposals revolve around Japan being allowed to use the territories jointly or unilaterally but with the Soviet Union retaining sovereignty.²⁴ Kimura says such proposals are really meant to shelve the problem.

The alternative to shelving the problem is to achieve an acceptable solution—and for the Japanese there is only one solution, the return of all four islands of the Northern Territories. What is to be seriously discussed is the terms of the return. As early as 1956 Japan was offered a compromise package for the return of the Habomai group and Shikotan, which together constitute seven percent of the disputed area. The proposal was turned down then, and was declined again in 1991 by a Japanese nation now even more confident of its place in the international arena.

Kimura speculates that the Soviet Union will eventually decide to return all four islands to Japan. In 1988 Soviet spokesman Mikhail Titarenko had proposed the return of two islands upon conclusion of a peace treaty and agreement to postpone decision on the remaining two for the next generation. Though the Japanese found that idea unacceptable, what may be acceptable to Japan is return of the four islands on condition of demilitarization, using a Hong Kong-type formula in which two islands would be "returned upon the conclusion of a peace treaty" and "the remaining two by a definite deadline, say 1999."²⁵ Kimura states further that Japan would have to take into account the time and expense involved in evacuating Soviet civilians and withdrawing military bases from the islands, and that Japan, in cooperation with the United States, would work toward seeing that the strategic security of the Soviet Union in the Sea of Okhotsk would not become threatened. During the summit, no such large scheme was evident. Gorbachev only went so far as to propose as part of the joint declaration a "partial" reduction of Soviet military presence on the four islands.²⁶

The crucial question is: why would the Soviet Union agree to return the Northern Territories? Observers form around two poles, economic and military. Kimura believes that what the "Soviet Union wants from Japan is more than the signing of a legal document, but rather a fundamental change among the Japanese in their attitude toward the Soviet Union" that in concrete terms would lead to

“a long term, cheap-interest bank loan from the Japan Export-Import Bank, more active participation in joint enterprises and the ‘special economic zone’ in the Soviet Far East by huge Japanese corporations, Tokyo’s endorsement of the USSR’s entry in the Pacific Economic Cooperation Committee (PECC), and so on.”²⁷

At the summit, Kaifu did not even mention an expected aid package of \$450 million to finance repayment of overdue Soviet debts to Japanese creditors; this would have wiped clean the debt slate and presumably would have instilled confidence for future Japanese investment. Even that \$450 million pales in comparison to the \$26 billion that some believed would be offered by Japan for retrocession of the islands.²⁸

If a deal had been concluded, the next question would have been: what effect would retrocession of the islands have for the U.S.-Japanese alliance? Denis Warner, prior to the summit, had put forth the scenario that the threat of nuclear war has receded and that the extra security provided at the southern end of the Kuriles is no longer a strategic imperative for the Soviet Union. A deal with Japan, he foresaw, could create pressure against increased Japanese military budgets and give renewed emphasis to Japanese anti-Americanism, which would in turn challenge continued U.S. military presence and U.S. military bases. Warner, however, saw that scenario and any such resolution of the Northern Territories issue as highly unlikely, since to the Soviet Union “it would be tantamount to an acceptance that the world is no longer divided into two social adversary systems and that nothing should ever be done to lower the Soviet Union’s guard.”²⁹

The converse to the “break Japan from the U.S.” scenario is the “military abandonment by the U.S.,” which the Japanese fear may occur as the Soviet threat further recedes with abandonment of the southern Kuriles. In this view, the Soviet threat to U.S. regional interests would disappear in the eyes of a majority of Americans, and, amidst American clamor over unfair trade arrangements and Japanese failure to carry their military fair share, Japan would lose the protective U.S. umbrella and find itself isolated.

Suffice to say, the 1991 Soviet-Japanese bilateral talks ended without a Kuriles resolution; any illusions that the alliance between the United States and Japan would not remain “a centerpiece of our security policy and an important anchor of stability” should have quickly evaporated.³⁰ The Kuriles stalemate has kept alive the regional *status quo ante*, and a cold relationship maintains itself in this corner of the post-Cold War world. A peace treaty with the Soviet Union remains unsigned. Soviet forces remain off Hokkaido. The submarine bastion’s archipelagic shield remains intact under Soviet sovereignty. The sea passages between the islands remain subject to penetration by U.S. and allied attack submarines.

Non-resolution of the Kuriles issue at the April summit was predictable; in a long-term perspective, however, it may not have been regrettable. As it is, the security alliance between the United States and Japan remains unchallenged by political aberrations that may have resulted on either side of the Pacific, from the return of the Kuriles. The Soviet Union, for its part, did not commit itself to a cash deal that its population for the most part opposed and which, in future years with a different Soviet leadership, could have resulted in increased resentment.³¹ The search for an end to the Kuriles dispute can at least continue now in a region marked by stability and where the political doors now opening offer the promise of a lasting peace.

Notes

The author wishes to express his appreciation to a number of members of the Naval War College community for their time and thoughts on the subject of the Kurile Islands: Professor Paul Holman, National Security and Decision Making Department; Captain Dave Van Saun, USN, Strategic Studies Group; Commander Dave Butler, USN, War Gaming Department; and Mr. Frank Uhlig, Jr., *Naval War College Review*.

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29. Denis Warner, "Chinese Card Today - the Japan Card Tomorrow?" *Pacific Defence Reporter*, May 1989, p. 48.

30. The phrase "a centerpiece of our security policy and an important anchor of stability" comes from the White House, 1990 National Security Strategy of the United States.

31. A similar statement was made by Kazuo Chiba, former ambassador to the United Kingdom, in a 7 December 1990 interview in London. He stated: "We don't want to get back those islands and then create a lasting dispute that is exploited by successive leaderships. We only want a deal if both sides realize that it is a good deal. If the Soviet Union disintegrates into chaos then the Slavs might think we have taken their land and we do not want that kind of festering dispute. We want whoever is the ruler of Russia to give back the islands in a lasting way." (See "Japan and the New World Order," *The Pacific Review*, 4, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1-4.)

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—A NEW JOURNAL—

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