



# Lessons for Kashmir from the Kuriles

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

- The Second World War left behind many problems inherited from history, not least in Asia in respect of multiple disputed territories.
- One of them concerns four islands in the Kurile chain that are claimed by Japan but occupied by Russia as successor state of the Soviet Union.
- Despite the passage of over 70 years, this dispute has defied solution and prevented the conclusion of a Russo-Japanese peace treaty to draw a final curtain over the detritus of the war.

### **Claims and counterclaims**

- The Kuriles are an archipelago of some 56 islands spanning about 1,800 km from Japan's Hokkaido to Russia's Kamchatka.
- All of them are under Russian jurisdiction but Japan claims the two large southernmost islands, Etorofu and Kunashiri, and two others, Shikotan and Habomai, as its 'northern territories'.
- These islands were occupied by the Soviet Union in August 1945, after which the entire Japanese population, numbering less than 20,000, was evicted.
- The islands are now populated by the various ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union, but only eight of them are actually inhabited.
- The prime value of the islands, however, is strategic.
- The Russians have deployed missile systems, plan a submarine project there, and intend to preclude any American military use of the islands.
- Public opinion in both countries is totally averse to any concession.
- Russian memory recalls the Japan-Russia war (1904-05) and the Japanese intervention with the U.S. and Europe during the early years of the Russian Revolution.
- Moscow's legal claim is based on the post-war settlements of Yalta and San Francisco, whereas the Japanese claim is founded on the Russia-Japan treaties of 1855 and 1875.

- Leaders in both Russia and Japan are aware that their domestic political positions would be severely at risk from right-wing and conservative circles were they to suggest even the slightest compromise.
- Among hyper-nationalist circles, territorial issues have always been questions of utmost sensitivity.
- While the Japanese government's official position is that it has "energetically been continuing negotiations with Russia", the reality is that it was only after the advent to power of President Vladimir Putin in Russia and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Japan that there has been any forward movement.
- After Mr. Putin's visit to Japan in 2016, both leaders have embarked on some joint undertakings on the islands without calling in question the claims and legal positions of either side.
- In two summits last year, they agreed to joint field surveys and joint economic activities with the identification of specific projects, the enterprises that would undertake them, and three levels of supervision.
- Moscow is concerned about Tokyo amending Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which disallows Japan from maintaining a military force or using force to settle international disputes, and views with anxiety the fact that Japan is among the world's biggest spenders on defence and has a very powerful military.
- Japan plays host to American bases and missile systems, and plans to spend \$240 billion up to 2024 on cruise missiles, missile interceptors, fighter jets and aircraft carriers.
- Responsible for this military build-up are trepidations about threats from China and North Korea.
- South Korea for its part has similar apprehensions and, apart from being the world's 11th major economy, has now become the 12th strongest military power.

### **Towards greater collaboration**

- It is hardly surprising that both Japan and Russia see merit in pursuing greater collaboration, although the U.S. has made no secret its displeasure at Japan's accommodating attitude towards Russia.
- The interactions between Japan and Russia probably hold scant interest for the Indian public.
- Nevertheless, although no two international problems are analogous, there are important lessons to be drawn from the manner in which traditionally hostile neighbours can identify common interests and explore unorthodox avenues along which to proceed in search of

innovative solutions to apparently insoluble disputes.

- This requires strong leadership and a bold imagination.
- Neither India nor Pakistan lacks either attribute. Kashmir is essentially a territorial dispute of almost equal vintage as the Kuriles.

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