

LESSONS FOR KASHMIR FROM THE KURILES



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.

Kuril Islands dispute:

- The Kuril Islands dispute, also known as the Northern Territories dispute, is a disagreement between Japan and Russia.
- Some individuals of the Ainu people over sovereignty of the South Kuril Islands, which stretch between northern Hokkaido and southern Kamchatka, in the Sea of Okhotsk.
- The San Francisco Peace Treaty signed between the Allies and Japan in 1951, states that Japan must give up “all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands”, but it also does not recognize the Soviet Union’s sovereignty over them.

- All Kuril isles are under Russian jurisdiction. However, Japan currently claims the 2 southernmost big-sized islands (Kunashiri and Etorofu), as well as the Habomai and Shikotan groups as the “Northern Territories” of Japan.
- The Kuril Islands dispute between Japan and Russia is over the sovereignty of South Kuril Islands.

Prominence about South Kuril Islands:

Among hyper-nationalist circles, territorial issues have always been questions of utmost sensitivity.

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.

On the other side of the dispute, the Japanese people, especially conservatives in Hokkaido, are emotionally attached to the islands and resource-starved Japan could certainly use the resource-rich Exclusive Economic Zone surrounding the islands.

Claims and counterclaims by Japan and Russia:

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.

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.

Moscow cannot be unaware that Japan and South Korea seem to be inching towards a future of relative independence from the U.S. in wartime operations.

Moving towards to build the Trust:

- 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.
- These proposals cover marine species and aquaculture, greenhouse strawberry and vegetable cultivation, development of package tourism, wind power generation, and the reduction and disposal of garbage.

- They also agreed to scheduled visits by Japanese families who sought to visit the graves of their ancestors, and two such visits have already taken place.
- The Japanese have further proposed safe opportunities for fishing salmon and trout without using prohibited driftnet methodology, and cooperation in disaster prevention.
- These may seem small steps, but underlying them is a serious purpose: to build trust. Summits and Foreign Ministers' meetings have become commonplace.
- Japan has no territorial or demographic ambitions in Russia other than the Kuriles, and has the capacity to transform the vast contiguous areas of Russia.

Towards greater collaboration:

Therefore, 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.

Mr. Abe, Japanese PM declared that Japan-Russia relations held "unlimited potential" and that the absence of a peace treaty was "an abnormal state of affairs". Mr. Abe stated that Japan-Russia relations are advancing at a degree never seen before.

The premise of the upcoming negotiations is solving the island issue and concluding a peace treaty.

Can Same can be replicated for Kashmir Issue?

The interactions between Japan and Russia probably hold scant interest for the Indian public.

Kashmir is essentially a territorial dispute of almost equal vintage as the Kuriles. 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.

But if both sides keep waiting for the most propitious time to make the first move, it will never come about.