

Japan Minister Flies By Disputed Russian Isles

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TOKYO — Japan's foreign minister on Saturday flew within sight of islands held by Russia but claimed by Japan, a month after a visit there by the Russian president set off a political fracas between the countries.

Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara's observation trip off the northern tip of Japan comes amid dissatisfaction over the government's handling of territorial disputes. Tokyo has also been in a row with China in recent months over islands to the south.

"We want to stabilize political relations and resolutely negotiate with Russia," he told reporters who accompanied him on the plane, the Kyodo News agency reported.

The group of four islands are called the Northern Territories by Japan and the southern Kurils by Russia. They are surrounded by rich fishing waters and are believed to have promising offshore oil and natural gas reserves, plus gold and silver deposits.

Under Russian control since the waning days of World War II, they have been neglected and

residents have fled since the fall of the Soviet Union. The islands lie as close as 10 kilometers from Japan's Hokkaido Island but are also near undisputed Russian territory.

Last month, President Dmitry Medvedev landed on the island closest to Japan, the first time a Russian president had done so. Tokyo immediately protested, temporarily recalled its ambassador and warned against future visits.

The dispute over the islands has prevented Tokyo and Moscow from signing a peace treaty to formally end World War II hostilities. Russia in 2005 suggested that it would cede two islands if Japan gave up its claim on the other two, but Tokyo has rejected that idea.

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