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Might Does Not Make Right With Kuril Islands

By Masahiro Matsumura

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Will Japan and Russia be able to settle the territorial dispute over the Northern Territory, referred to in Russia as the Southern Kuril Islands?

In an April 29 meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Moscow, Putin suggested dividing the disputed territory. But this approach is a nonstarter for the Japanese government and people.

Although a defeated nation, Japan rejects the legality of Russian occupation of the territory because Japan was not a party of the Yalta Agreement. Russia's position that "might makes right" is untenable. The Japanese public has not forgotten that the Soviet Union invaded Japan in the last minutes of the war, despite a bilateral neutrality treaty that was still in force.

Meanwhile, Russia is concerned about its declining nuclear deterrent. Its submarine-based deterrent, deployed in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean, has become increasingly

vulnerable to U.S. and NATO anti-submarine weaponry.

Consequently, the disputed islands are indispensable to secure Russia's nuclear deterrent in the Sea of Okhotsk. It would not be survivable should Japan place long-range radar and underwater sonar facilities on the two major Islands of Kunashir and Iturup. Also, the 1,300-meter-deep Iturup-Urup strait is a vital underwater sea-lane for Russian submarines whose home port is located in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky outside the Sea of Okhotsk. While, certainly, the Kunashir-Iturup strait is about 480 meters deep, the Kunashir nevertheless cannot easily be defended because of its proximity to Japan's mainland.

To make a breakthrough, the Japanese would have to accept the demilitarization of a reverted Kunashir and Iturup. They would even have to accede to a 50-year lease of the northern half of the Iturup, given that Japan's residual sovereignty would be confirmed. Yet a bigger headache for Japan might be how to persuade its major ally, the U.S.

Now that Russia is not an enemy, the U.S. does not have to use the territorial issue to drive a wedge between Japan and Russia. Instead, it is in the U.S. interest to see Japanese and Russian diplomatic alignment as a counterweight to China.

To open a new future, it is essential to nurture mutual trust. The Japanese public would agree to first negotiate economic cooperation with Russia, but most unlikely accept implementation of an agreed economic package without getting back all the occupied territory.

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