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Russia Risks Japanese Ire With Far East War Commemoration

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China's President Xi Jinping shakes hands with veteran M.A. Gareev from Russia at a medal ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the Victory of Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, for World War Two veterans, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, Sept. 2, 2015.

Russia staged a military parade on Wednesday to commemorate seizing a group of Pacific islands from Japan at the end of World War II, a move likely to inflame tensions over a long-running territorial dispute with Tokyo.

The show of force, the first of its kind on the island of Sakhalin in Russia's Far East, is part of a push by President Vladimir Putin to showcase his country's military might at a time when ties with the West are strained over the Ukraine crisis.

State television showed Russian soldiers goose-stepping through streets lined with flowers and war veterans to celebrate what Moscow calls the liberation of Sakhalin and the nearby Kuril Islands from Japan in 1945.

The parade included 700 soldiers, 24 combat vehicles and 14 helicopters and planes, the Interfax news agency reported. Sakhalin, an island rich in oil and gas, is just over 40 kilometers from Hokkaido — the most northern of Japan's main islands.

A spokesman for Russia's Eastern Military district said it was the first time such a parade had been staged on Sakhalin. "This is the decision of the leadership of the country," he said.

The commemoration is likely to worsen already frayed relations with Tokyo which lays claim to the nearby Southern Kuril Islands, known in Japan as the Northern Territories. That dispute is so acrimonious that Moscow and Tokyo have still not signed a formal peace treaty after the war.

The parade took place as Putin prepared to visit Beijing to take part in events marking 70 years since the end of the conflict. Ahead of his trip, Putin said there had been attempts to distort history in both Asia and Europe, where Moscow is at odds with the West over its actions in Ukraine.

Russia has built up military facilities in the area of the disputed islands, laying claim to the seabed in the central part of the Sea of Okhotsk, which separates the Kuril Islands from the Russian mainland.

Putin has said he is ready to discuss the dispute with Japan, but has blamed Tokyo for a lack of dialogue.

A visit by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to the contested Iturup island in August prompted Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida to delay a planned trip to Russia.

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