



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# Japan-Russia Territorial Negotiations and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty

**James D.J. Brown**

Associate Professor of Political Science  
Temple University, Japan Campus

## **Abstract**

*As negotiations between Japan and Russia over the status of the disputed Southern Kuril Islands have accelerated under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's administration, Moscow has increasingly looked to connect the issue to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This is a longstanding tactic that Moscow has employed to encourage Japan to distance itself from its U.S. ally, and it has found renewed success in influencing Japan's foreign policy under Abe. Some may be tempted to intervene to remind Tokyo of where its priorities should lie, yet Washington should remain reticent since a heavy-handed intervention may be precisely what Moscow is hoping for. Abe's Russia policy may be naive and disconcerting to many in the West, yet it should be permitted to run its natural course.*

During his annual press conference on December 20, Russian president Vladimir Putin explicitly connected the ongoing peace treaty talks with Japan with security issues related to the U.S. military presence on Japanese territory. Specifically, he

raised the issue of U.S. bases on Okinawa, questioning the extent to which Japan has sovereignty over such deployment decisions. He concluded by saying that, “without an answer to this question it will be very difficult to make any crucial decisions.”<sup>1</sup> This may seem like a new development yet, in reality, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the Japan-Russia peace treaty issue have always been connected. As Japan-Russia negotiations heat up in 2019, U.S. policymakers will need to pay close attention to this subject and carefully consider their response.

## Territorial talks as a lever of Moscow’s foreign policy

Since returning to power in December 2012, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has made relations with Russia a priority. Above all, he has made clear his determination to resolve the countries’ long-standing territorial dispute before the end of his premiership. This disagreement relates to four islands off the northeast coast of Hokkaidō, which are known as the Southern Kurils in Russia and Northern Territories in Japan. These islands were occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, and Japan has vowed not to sign a peace treaty with Russia until their disputed status is resolved.

Prime Minister Abe has worked tirelessly to cultivate relations of personal trust with Putin, meeting with the Russian leader 24 times by the end of 2018. He has also promoted a “new approach” to Russia, which includes an eight-point economic cooperation plan as well as measures to encourage closer people-to-people ties.<sup>2</sup> This policy is designed to add dynamism to bilateral relations, thereby facilitating a territorial deal.

These efforts appeared to pay dividends in November 2018 when, meeting on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Singapore, Abe and Putin agreed to accelerate peace treaty talks based on the Japan-Soviet 1956 Joint Declaration.<sup>3</sup> This document officially ended the state of war between the two countries. It also

---

<sup>1</sup> President of Russia, “Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference,” December 20 2018, [http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press\\_conferences/59455](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press_conferences/59455).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan-Russia summit meeting,” May 7 2016, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e\\_000427.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page4e_000427.html).

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Nichiro shunō kaidan,” November 14 2018, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/erp/rss/hoppo/page1\\_000697.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/erp/rss/hoppo/page1_000697.html).

contains the offer by Moscow to transfer the two smaller disputed islands (Shikotan and Habomai<sup>4</sup>) to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the agreement reached in Singapore, it is assumed that Abe is pursuing a “two plus alpha” solution to the territorial dispute.<sup>6</sup> This would see Japan regain Shikotan and Habomai, plus secure enhanced access rights to the larger islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri (Iturup and Kunashir in Russian). In pursuit of this goal, the Japanese side has agreed to create a new framework for negotiations, which will be overseen by the countries’ foreign ministers. The first of these meetings was held between Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō and counterpart Sergei Lavrov on January 14, laying the foundations for Abe to meet Putin in the Russian capital on January 22. The underlying aim is to be ready to sign a framework peace treaty agreement when Putin travels to Ōsaka for the G20 Summit in June 2019.

From the United States’ perspective, what is most interesting about the 1956 Joint Declaration is the reasoning behind Moscow’s seemingly generous offer to transfer two of the disputed islands. By the mid-1950s, the U.S. occupation had ended, yet Japan’s place in the Cold War order had not been ultimately defined. Although the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty of 1951 was in operation, the Soviet Union hoped that Japan could still be persuaded to abandon the alliance and adopt a neutral position comparable to that of Austria. The Soviet leadership therefore prioritized improving relations with Japan and was willing to sacrifice the two smaller islands, which account for only 7% of the total disputed landmass, in order to achieve this.

The suspicion that the offer of two islands was part of an effort to encourage Japan to distance itself from the United States was confirmed when the revised U.S.-Japan Security Treaty was signed in January 1960, cementing Japan’s status as a long-term U.S. ally. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev responded immediately, issuing a memorandum in which he stated that the Security Treaty “makes it impossible for the Soviet Government to fulfill its promises to return the islands of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan.” He continued by saying that the two

---

<sup>4</sup> Habomai is not actually a single island but a group of islets. For convenience, however, the dispute is commonly said to be over four islands.

<sup>5</sup> Joint Declaration by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan,” October 19 1956, <http://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/docs/19561019.D1E.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Suzuki Muneo, “Abe shushō wa ‘2 tō + arufa’ de ketsudan suru,” *Mainichi*, November 14 2018, <https://mainichi.jp/premier/politics/articles/20181113/pol/oom/010/001000d>.

islands would be transferred “only if all foreign troops are withdrawn from Japan and a Soviet-Japanese peace treaty is signed.”<sup>7</sup>

Since Japan had no intention of fulfilling Khrushchev’s condition, the proposal outlined in the 1956 Joint Declaration remained inactive for several decades. Indeed, it was only under the presidency of Vladimir Putin that the offer to transfer two islands was reactivated. As previously, the goal of distancing Japan from its U.S. ally appears to have been central to his calculations.

Putin’s comments at the annual press conference on December 20 are, in fact, just the most recent example of his efforts to connect the territorial issue and Japan’s security relationship with the United States. Speaking on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in November 2017, Putin presented Japan’s alliance with the United States as an obstacle to a territorial deal, stating that “It’s not a secret that we also need to look at what commitments Japan has towards its partners in the areas of defense and security, and how that will influence the progress of the negotiating process on the peace treaty between Russia and Japan.”<sup>8</sup>

More specifically, the Russian leadership has raised concerns about U.S. military facilities potentially appearing on Shikotan and Habomai after their transfer.<sup>9</sup> This is largely hypothetical since, even if Russia were to actually hand over the islands, it is unlikely that the United States would really seek to establish a base there. This is because the United States already has ample opportunity to deploy forces in northern Hokkaidō, in close proximity to the disputed islands, yet has never opted to do so on the basis that there is insufficient military justification. Asked about this issue on January 9, commander of U.S. Forces Japan Jerry Martinez stated that, “At this stage, the United States has no plans to deploy troops there.”<sup>10</sup>

Knowing this, Russian leadership’s real reason for raising this question is to get Japanese leadership to agree to place restrictions on the application of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, thereby introducing a point of friction into relations

---

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Joint Compendium of Documents on the History of Territorial Issue between Japan and Russia,” March 1 2001, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition92/period5.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Reuters*, “Putin links Japan peace treaty to Tokyo’s alliances,” November 11 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apec-summit-russia-japan/putin-links-japan-peace-treaty-to-tokyos-alliances-idUSKBN1DB0BZ>.

<sup>9</sup> *Gazeta.ru*, “My dolzhny smotret’ na eto bezvol’no,” June 1 2017, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/06/01/10703423.shtml#page1>.

<sup>10</sup> *Izvestiya*, “V SShA zaverili v otsutstvii planov razmeshcheniya voisk na Kurilakh,” January 9 2019, <https://iz.ru/832001/2019-01-09/v-ssha-zaverili-v-otsutstvii-planov-razmeshcheniia-voisk-na-kurilakh>.

between Washington and Tokyo. Moscow has already achieved some success in this regard. Specifically, in February 2018, Abe responded to a parliamentary question about this issue by stressing that Article 6 of the Security Treaty does not give Washington the right to put bases wherever it likes and that any new deployment is dependent on the agreement of the Japanese government.<sup>11</sup> Going further, in November 2018, Abe is reported to have explicitly promised Putin that no U.S. bases would be permitted on Shikotan and Habomai.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian side is, however, likely to claim that these verbal reassurances are insufficient, pointing to the allegation that the West broke similar promises about the non-expansion of NATO after the end of the Cold War. Instead, it seems certain that, as the territorial talks progress, Moscow will insist that Shikotan and Habomai be formally excluded from the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This would create a confusing situation in which the Senkaku Islands, which the United States does not officially recognize as sovereign Japanese territory, would be covered by the Security Treaty, but Shikotan and Habomai, over which the U.S. does acknowledge Japanese sovereignty, would not be covered. This raises the additional question of how the United States would respond if Russia were to retake the transferred islands by force, for example on the pretext of protecting the rights of the 3,000 Russians living on Shikotan.

Separately, Russia looks set to try to use the prospect of a territorial deal as a means of influencing Japanese thinking about the decision to deploy the Aegis Ashore missile defense system. This was made clear in December 2017 when chief spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova warned that the decision to purchase Aegis Ashore “will have a negative effect on the overall atmosphere of bilateral relations, including negotiations on the peace treaty issue.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in his comments on December 20, Putin condemned the U.S.-supplied missile defense system, stating that “we do not consider these to be defensive weapons” and implying that progress towards a peace treaty will require Japan to satisfy Russia’s concerns about this matter.

---

<sup>11</sup> TASS, “Abe zayavil, chto SSHA ne mogut razmeshchat' voyennye bazy na territorii Yaponii bez ee soglasiya,” February 14 2018, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4956360>.

<sup>12</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, “Hoppōryōdo ni beigun, pūchin-shi keikai,” November 16 2018, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASLCH4VLiLCHUTFKooT.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Argumenty i Fakty*, “V MID Rossii otsenili posledstviya resheniya Yaponii razvernut' PRO SSHA,” December 28 2017, [http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/v\\_mid\\_rossii\\_ocenili\\_posledstviya\\_resheniya\\_yaponii\\_razvernut\\_pro\\_ssha](http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/v_mid_rossii_ocenili_posledstviya_resheniya_yaponii_razvernut_pro_ssha).

## The need for a measured response

Prime Minister Abe's determination to resolve the territorial issue and thereby burnish his political legacy has provided Russia with a valuable source of leverage. By convincing Abe that he is on the cusp of a territorial deal, the Russian leadership has succeeded in extracting the promise that the Japanese government would never permit its closest ally to establish a base on the islands. Furthermore, the Abe administration has been induced to take a soft line towards Russia on other international issues for fear of disrupting the territorial talks. This reluctance to criticize Russia was evident in Japan's response to the Skripal poisoning of March 2018, when Japan was the only member of the G7 not to respond to this nerve agent attack on British soil by expelling Russian diplomats.<sup>14</sup> It is also notable that Japan has been happy to host Russian officials who are under U.S. sanctions, including chair of the Senate Committee on International Affairs Konstantin Kosachev, Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, and chair of the Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Slutskii.

Alarmed by the idea of Abe making concessions to Russia that could damage the U.S.-Japan alliance, some U.S. policymakers may be tempted to undermine the territorial talks by pointedly reminding Japan of where its priorities should lie. This would, however, be a mistake since it would stir up resentment of the United States and permit Russia to blame Washington for the failure to reach a territorial deal. This is what occurred during the negotiations that preceded the 1956 Joint Declaration. Fearing that Japan was on the brink of agreeing a two-island deal that would see Tokyo recognizing Moscow's rights to Iturup and Kunashir, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned Japanese Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru in August 1956 that "If Japan tells the Soviet Union that it could have sovereignty over the Kuriles, then the United States will insist on sovereignty over the Ryukyus."<sup>15</sup> In reality, while Shigemitsu appeared in favor of a two-island deal, it is unlikely that this would have been approved in Tokyo. Nonetheless, Dulles's threat has made it possible for the Russian side to argue that an impending territorial deal in 1956 was torpedoed by the United States, thereby supporting Moscow's narrative that the alliance with the United States is counter to Japan's national interests.

---

<sup>14</sup> James D.J. Brown, "Japan and the Skripal poisoning: The U.K.'s fair-weather friend," *The Japan Times*, March 27 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/03/27/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-skripal-poisoning-u-k-s-fair-weather-friend/>.

<sup>15</sup> Department of State, "Memorandum of a Conversation Between Secretary of State Dulles and Foreign Minister Shigemitsu, Ambassador Aldrich's Residence, London, August 19, 1956, 6 p.m.," <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v23p1/d89>.

There is a danger that an intervention by the United States in 2019 would have the same effect. A wiser course of action is therefore for U.S. officials to maintain silence in public and to gently encourage Abe in private to reassess his stated view that Putin “is a man who keeps his promises” and someone who is “dear to me as a partner.”<sup>16</sup> This measured approach also carries fewer risks than might be assumed. This is because it is unlikely that even Abe would make concessions to Russia on issues of vital importance to the U.S. alliance, such as cancelling Japan’s procurement of Aegis Ashore. It is also doubtful that Russia is really sincere in its claimed desire to strike a territorial deal. Instead, Moscow’s ideal scenario is to drive a wedge in the U.S.-Japan alliance by provoking the United States into an intervention that Russia can use to justify ending the territorial talks. This would enable Russia to pocket the political and economic concessions that Abe has offered in the course of his “new approach” without providing anything of substance in return. Since Russia’s lack of seriousness about actually resolving the territorial issue would not have been revealed, Moscow would then be free to try the same strategy again in a few years.

Overall, while Prime Minister Abe’s policy towards Russia may be naive and disconcerting to many in the West, it should be permitted to run its natural course.

---

*James D.J. Brown is associate professor of Political Science at Temple University, Japan Campus. His main area of research is Japan-Russia relations. His work has previously been published in International Affairs, Asia Policy, The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, Europe-Asia Studies, International Politics, Post-Soviet Affairs, Problems of Post Communism, and Politics. His most recent book Japan’s Foreign Relations in Asia (edited with Jeff Kingston) was published by Routledge in 2017.*

---

<sup>16</sup> TASS, “Abe schitayet Putina derzhashchim obeshchaniye chelovekom,” February 13 2017, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4019491>; TASS, “Sindzo Abe: Prezident Putin mne dorog kak partner, s nim možhno pogovorit’ po dusham”, November 25, 2018, <https://tass.ru/interviews/5826060>.