The current Russian - Japanese relations can be described as controversial. On one hand, there are no strong political contradictions between the 2 states. Russia and Japan are trying their best to develop their great potential for cooperation in various areas. On the other hand, the issue of the Kuril Islands stands in the way of fully fledged cooperation, remaining a heavy burden for the Japanese leadership and hindering any progress.

After World War II finished in 1945, the Soviet Union, in accordance with the international treaties, received a number of territories including the Kuril Islands. However, in 1951, a peace treaty between a number of Allied countries and Japan was signed in San Francisco (US), which did not stipulate the USSR sovereignty over the Kuril Islands. This ran contrary to the previous agreements between the USSR, the US and the UK. The Soviet Union and several other states did not sign the document, though Japan was thus given a pretext to contend about the USSR right to the Kuril Islands. It was then that the longstanding and low-intensity Soviet-Japanese dispute over this issue began; after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the issue was inherited by the Russian Federation.

Over the previous decades, Japan persistently demanded that Russia return the Northern Territories and invariably received a refusal backed by international law. The Japanese claims did not bother anyone very much, however, it is because of them that no peace treaty has been signed between the Russian Federation and the Land of the Rising Sun as yet. This complicates the cooperation between the 2 states which could prove useful to both parties. Japan, the 3rd largest economy in the world that is fully dependent on foreign energy resource shipments, and Russia, its closest neighbor that has great hydrocarbon reserves, could have cooperated for a long time by now to a great mutual benefit, but the Russian - Japanese cooperation potential has not been implemented as yet.

Nevertheless, one must note that there has been a considerable rapprochement between Russia and the Land of the Rising Sun lately. Without stating it officially, Tokyo began to relegate the Northern Territories issue, as it hampered resolving other existing issues of much greater importance. One of Japan’s main issues is that of energy security.
After the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster of 2011, the Land of the Rising Sun began to review its energy policy. A lot of nuclear power plants around the country were closed and Japan became way more dependent on hydrocarbon fuel which is not found in its territory. Most of the hydrocarbons go to Japan from the Middle Eastern countries, a highly unstable region with a high level of terrorist threat. The fuel is shipped by sea. Considering the distance between Japan and the Middle East, the energy resource transportation costs Japan too much, both in terms of money and time. It would be much more convenient for Japan to import oil and gas from Russia, its closest neighbor.

There is another reason for Tokyo to strengthen its ties with Moscow: the security issues. The fast growing power of China, the aggressive policy of North Korea with its nuclear weapon tests and the increasing terrorist threat around the world are reasons for concern in Japan. Especially if one takes into account that these processes are taking place against a backdrop of the decrease in the US influence, the US being the main Japanese partner in the defense area. After World War II, Japan was given considerable restrictions that prevent it from developing its military potential in full. For many years, the US served as the party responsible for security in the Land of the Rising Sun where US military bases were deployed. However, the situation is changing at the moment. The US presence is weakening and Japan needs a new partner with powerful armed forces. Yet again, Russia turns out the most suitable candidate.

The visit of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe to Moscow in April 2013 and his meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin can be considered the beginning of a new stage in the Russian-Japanese relations. According to the Japanese Premier, this visit became a positive step towards strengthening the cooperation between the 2 states. Shinzō Abe visited Russia 6 more times since then. Over all these years, Russia and Japan have been actively strengthening their cooperation in such areas as energy, environmental protection, mining, hydrocarbon fuel trade, joint development of the Far East, etc.

Occasionally, loud exclamations are heard in Japan demanding that Russia give back the Kuril Islands. The latest incident of the kind took place in April 2018 when Russia carried out large scale maneuvers on the Kuril Islands with the participation of over 2,500 soldiers. Just as anticipated, Tokyo expressed its protest to Moscow and reminded it that it was high time the issue of these territories be resolved once and for all. The Japanese leadership yet again claimed that they were going to resume negotiations concerning Russia’s returning the Northern Territories to Japan.

However, despite Japan’s sharp rhetoric, the Russian-Japanese relations did not become more complicated. The 4th Russian-Japanese Points of Contact Forum was held in Moscow during that same month. The Japanese Ambassador to Russia Toehisa Kodzuki, who partook in the event, read the welcome address of Shinzō Abe to the Forum’s participants. In his message, the Japanese Prime Minister expressed his strong willingness to bring the Russian-Japanese relations to a new level in a joint effort with Vladimir Putin.

A large Japanese delegation comprising over 200 high-ranking officials partook in the event. The Japanese guests and their Russian colleagues discussed many issues that have to do with business cooperation prospects. Cooperation in such areas as energy, tourism, education, urban infrastructure development and investment was discussed. A lot of attention was paid to the Japanese plan for developing the Russian Free Port of Vladivostok and its transport infrastructure. The discussion also touched upon the strategic cooperation issues concerning security. However, no one mentioned the Russian maneuvers on the Kuril Islands and Tokyo’s protest.

Soon after the Points of Contact Forum, in May 2018, Shinzō Abe visited Russia yet again. The Japanese Prime Minister arrived in order to partake in the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum.

In September 2018, Vladivostok hosted the 4th Eastern Economic Forum where Shinzō Abe and Vladimir Putin met again. It was then that the Russian President made a sensational offer to the Japanese Prime Minister that received a lot of media coverage: Putin offered Abe to sign a Russian-Japanese peace treaty by end of 2018 without preliminary conditions and postpone the resolution of the Kuril Islands issue for the future. Many Japanese politicians were shocked by this suggestion, some of them even considered it a kind of mockery on the part of the Russian leader. However, according to Vladimir Putin, this move would facilitate the resolution of the issues that Russia and Japan have been trying to resolve for 70 years by enabling them to sort out the issues on friendly terms.

Japan has not yet provided an official answer. Many people doubt that Japan would agree. Nevertheless, the forthright and confident communication of the Russian and Japanese leaders and the common interests of the 2 states indicate that the Russian-Japanese negotiations are slowly going in the right direction.

The fast developing Russian-Japanese cooperation shows that there are no fundamental disagreements between the 2 states and that both countries are willing to ensure large scale and mutually beneficial cooperation despite the fact
that the Kuril Islands issue remains unresolved. Probably, the Kuril Islands issue cannot be resolved in the near future, since both Russia and Japan have not only practical interests in this respect, but also those of national prestige. Nevertheless, both parties are wise enough to relegate this territorial dispute and focus on the challenges at hand.

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