The Ainu and the Pandemic of Japanese Territorial Claims

Not only has the coronavirus pandemic become worse in Japan lately, but so have the new government’s territorial claims. As soon as Fumio Kishida, Japan’s new Prime Minister, took office in October, he hastened to announce a new round of the land of the rising sun’s territorial claims. As regional media outlets stress, Tokyo has become increasingly assertive in demonstrating competing claims to all of its closest territorial neighbors, including the governments of Russia, North Korea and Taiwan.

According to new Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Russia needs to return all four islands of the Greater Kuril Chain to Japan. Shinzo Abe’s plan, which envisaged the return of only two, Shikotan and Habomai, is considered unrealistic by the new prime minister. Nor is he persuaded that these conditions lie at the heart of the declaration accepted by both sides in 1956.

In his statements, the new prime minister repeatedly referred to Japanese public opinion, pointing out that most Japanese, according to polls, did not support Abe’s “two-plus-alpha” deal. At the same time, Kishida admitted that economic ties with Russia were important but insisted that all projects in the Kuril Islands should not be under Moscow’s jurisdiction.

In its “Kuril claims,” Tokyo has not tired of sending Moscow its notes of protest in case of any Russian activity in the Kuril Islands, which belong to it by right after World War II, whether it be the official visits from Russian authorities,
Moscow’s intensified economic activities there, or training maneuvers of the Russian army amid the recent escalation of provocative actions of the Pentagon in the region.

In addition to the “Kuril claims,” Japan has recently begun to press its territorial claims against Russia regarding not just the Kuril Islands but also the territory of West Antarctica. In support of these new claims, the Japanese National Institute of Polar Research (NIPR) has even issued a report stating that the coast of Marie Byrd Land allegedly belongs to Japan, “as in West Antarctica in 1911-1912 there was a Japanese Arctic expedition.” At the same time, the presence of the Russian Station has been declared “illegal” by Tokyo based on this report. And the interest in this particular area of Antarctica is straightforward - gas reserves have been found there.

Japan missed the moment, that the given territories of Mary Baird Land, and Ellsworth Land were opened by Russian travelers long before the Japanese were there. In 1820, Russian explorers Admiral Faddey Bellingshausen and Admiral Mikhail Lazarev, who discovered the territory, arrived in Antarctica. Officially, the territory of Antarctica is neutral and claims to any areas are prohibited by the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, of which Japan is a signatory. Recently, however, Japan, like some other countries, has expressed an interest in certain territories by claiming them.

Russkaya is a Soviet and Russian Antarctic station located in West Antarctica on the coast of Mary Baird Land, on a small outcrop of bedrock near Cape Burks. Russia has seven active scientific stations in Antarctica. Another two stations were closed in 1989 and 1995.

As for the claims to the Kuril Islands, Japan continues to use, among others, the thesis of the alleged “indigenous population of the Ainu” there, which Japan recently began to more and more strongly refer to as the Japanese indigenous population. At the same time, the Japanese government continues not to fulfill the already announced claims of Ainu activists, such as bringing national legislation on the Ainu people into full conformity with the provisions of the relevant UN Convention, immediately granting the national minority the right to continue traditional fishing without restrictions, etc.

However, the ardent advocates of such a policy in Japan should not forget that their active exploitation of the northern territories, including the emphasis on “the Japanese origin of the Ainu population,” may cause the “southern territories issue” to arise in Russia as well.

The aboriginal population of the Kurils Islands, Sakhalin and Japan (Hokkaido and Ryukyu) are not the Japanese, as the ignorant people suppose, but the ancient people of Ainu who appeared in the Far East more than 12 thousand years ago and created the Neolithic culture called Jōmon, with the necessary scientific evidence written in the book “The History of Japan since ancient times until 1868,” by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Even many of the names we mistakenly ascribe to Japanese origins are actually derived from the Ainu language. For example, Tsushima (島, a Japanese island (now archipelago) in the Sea of Japan (part of Nagasaki Prefecture, it was a separate administrative unit until 1872), means “far away” in the Ainu language and has nothing to do with the Japanese language. Mount Fuji is one of the main symbols of present-day Japan and means “granny” in the Ainu language. The name of an early Japanese state in the Yayoi period that is mentioned as early as the Chinese historical chronicle Yemayi guo (Jpn 邪馬台国 Yamatai koku) translates to “here the sea cleaves the land” from the Ainu language. The Japanese came to the Japanese islands ten millennia after the Ainu from the Korean Peninsula.

The Ainu differs from the Mongoloid populations of the Far East and Asia. They are tall, have light skin, Caucasian features, abundant hair on the head, face and body, and the women’s clothing resembles the Caucasus’s. Unlike Japanese traditions, the Ainu lived in log cabins and were excellent warriors, proficient in the art of fighting with two swords. It was from them that the Japanese adopted the Samurai code of conduct, known as Bushido, and the harakiri. The Japanese had been at war with the Ainu for a long time and pushed them to the north, but they could only take over in the 18th century after the invention of artillery. The surviving Ainu fled to the mountains or by sailing to the islands of their tribesmen.

The Russian Empire took the Ainu people under its patronage, and under the treaty of 1855, it never rebelled. The indigenous people of South Kurils were also indigenous to northern Hokkaido, and today they continue to live on that island, which is part of Japan.

So Russia, in response to Tokyo’s recent territorial pandemic, also has every reason to take them under its protection again, as it did two hundred years ago, asserting its rights to Hokkaido.

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