

Russia's Territorial Disputes with China and Japan: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia and China have signed a number of agreements that have effectively put an end to the decades-long territorial dispute between the two neighbors. Comparatively, the prospects for resolving the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan seem almost as distant as at the height of the Cold War confrontation. This article will engage in a comparative analysis of the two disputes and attempt to answer the following question: "Why have Russia and China managed to solve their border problems, but Russia and Japan have not?" For this purpose, the article will consider the historical roots and political nature of the Russian-Chinese border dispute as well as the conditions that enabled recent settlement. Furthermore, it will determine the commonalities and differences between the two disputes from political, historical and legal perspectives. Finally, the article will make an attempt to assess how the experience of the Russian-Chinese settlement could be applied to the Russian-Japanese dispute.

Keywords

China, Japan, Russia, islands, territorial dispute, settlement, comparative study

Russia and China have a common land border that is 4,380 km (2,738 miles) long—one of the longest inter-state borders on earth. During the time of the Russian empire and during the Soviet era this border was even longer and was to be the longest in the world. There is also a long and complicated history of territorial dispute between Russia and China which was settled just recently (in 1991-2008).

The Chinese-Russian Territorial Dispute: Historical Roots and Recent Settlement

Unlike the Russian-Japanese border dispute, which is a legacy of the Second World War, the Russian-Chinese border debate was primarily a legacy of two treaties between the Qing Dynasty and the Russian Empire, namely, the Treaties of Aigun and Beijing concluded in 1858 and 1860, respectively. Amid China's defeat by Anglo-French forces in the Second Opium War, those treaties forced the Manchu dynasty to give up 1.2 million square kilometers of land in the region of the Amur and Ussuri rivers to the Russian empire. According to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, concluded in late 17th century, all those territories did not belong to either Russia or China and were very rarely populated. They were legally considered to be disputed land. During the Second Opium War China reluctantly agreed to recognize them as a part of Russia. In turn, the Russian Empire kept neutrality and did not support Great Britain and France militarily. However, the price of Russian neutrality was high, and both the treaties of Aigun and Beijing have long been regarded by the Chinese as unequal treaties.

After 1860 an eastern section of the Chinese-Russian border was demarcated by three rivers, the Aigun river from the tri-party junction with Mongolia to the north tip of China, running southwest to northeast, then the Amur river to Khabarovsk from northeast to southwest, where it was joined by the Ussuri River running southeast to northwest. Because of the political and military weakness of the Chinese empire in the 19th century, the Argun, Ussuri and Amur rivers were demarcated in non-standard manner: the demarcation line was on the right (Chinese) side of the river, putting the three rivers with all accompanying islands in Russian possession. According to international rule and practice, a demarcation usually uses shipping lanes. However, the Russian empire, and later the Soviet Union effectively controlled almost every single island along the rivers.

After the October Revolution in 1917, the new Bolshevik regime promised to abandon all semi-colonial concessions in China and to review bilateral treaties including the border ones. Lenin and Trotsky insisted, however, that such a revision should take place only upon victory of local communists. Later, with the rise

of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Moscow's foreign policy was increasingly based on national interest, and most of the former promises were forgotten.

A territorial issue could not but arise when in the early 1960s a Sino-Soviet split began. In 1960 the Chinese government suggested opening the border negotiations, and Chinese civilians and small military groups began to violate the Soviet border agreement. Soon such violations became numerous.

Border negotiations between the two countries took place for the first time in 1964, amid heightening tensions. Beijing demanded acknowledgement of the "unjust" character of all acquisitions of territories by Russia in the 19th century. The Chinese position was that the 19th century's border treaties were unequal and amounted to unfair annexation of Chinese territory. Moscow could not accept this interpretation. Nevertheless, the two sides were close to reaching a preliminary agreement concerning an eastern section of the border. But Chairman Mao Tse tung, who initiated the Sino-Soviet split, did not intend the dispute to be solved quickly and wanted to deepen confrontation with Moscow. In July 1964 he stated that tsarist Russia had stripped China of vast territories in Siberia and the Far East as far as Kamchatka. According to Mao, the total size of those territories was nearly 1.5 million square km. An interesting fact is that this historic statement was made by Mao Tse tung during his meeting with a delegation of the Japanese socialist party members—probably because Japan also had territorial claims with Russia (Vorobiev, 2011, p. 39). Outraged by Mao's comments, which were leaked to the public, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev refused to approve the preliminary border agreement, which had already been reached.

In 1966 the so-called "cultural revolution" started in China that led to a further deterioration on Sino-Soviet relations. In 1969 a second round of border talks started, but it ended abruptly because of an armed border conflict over Zhengbao (Damansky) Island in the Ussuri River. This incident is regarded by experts as a culmination of the Sino-Soviet split. The tiny island of Damansky was totally uninhabitable, its size was less than 0.7 square km, and it did not have any strategic or military value for either country. However, the Sino-Soviet relationship at that time was so hostile that the border clash over the island brought the two nations to the brink of war. A division-scale military combat over the island led to a Soviet military victory. An attempt of the Chinese army to seize Damansky island failed, and the status quo was restored. The Soviet army lost 58 military personnel. The Chinese losses were a few times higher, but a precise official figure is still unknown (Yang, 2000, pp. 21-52).

The border dispute forced the two countries to concentrate plenty of troops along their common border. In the late 1960s the Soviet Union had nearly 650,000 soldiers and officers along the border ready to fight, while the Chinese

had over 810,000 military men.

However, neither Moscow, nor Beijing wanted to unleash a big war, and took steps to lower the danger of a large-scale conflict. In September, 1969, Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin had historic talks with his Chinese counterpart Zhou En-lai in the Beijing airport. The two premiers agreed to resume border negotiations.

Bilateral relations remained sour after the conflict, despite the border talks, which lasted inconclusively for a decade. In 1982, a few years after Mao's death, a political tension in the Sino-Soviet relations began to decrease, and leaders on both sides adopted more conciliatory attitudes. In 1989 Gorbachev paid a historic visit to Beijing. He and Chairman Den declared that the 30-year cold war between the two nations was over. A normalization of political relations created prerequisites for the beginning of a constructive dialogue on border issues.

In this context the most important fact is that China gave up Mao's previously hostile and unrealistic claims concerning nearly 1.5 million square km of Russian territory. Still viewing the previous border treaties as unequal, Chinese leaders were willing to negotiate on the basis of the modern boundaries. That left about 35,000 square km of territory in dispute, with about 28,000 square km in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan, 6,000 square km elsewhere along the western border between China and Kazakhstan, China and Kyrgyzstan, and about 1,000 square km along the Argun, Amur, and Ussuri rivers on the eastern border. Sino-Soviet border negotiations were eventually resumed in 1987 at Gorbachev's initiative. The talks were quite productive, and in less than four years a deal was reached on the eastern portion of the border. The first border agreement was signed in May, 1991, seven months before the final dissolution of the USSR. The Russian Federation inherited most of the former Chinese-Soviet border, and ratified the agreement in February 1992, while the other post-Soviet republics negotiated separate border agreements.

This historic boarder agreement, signed in 1991, largely finalized the border conflict between the Russian Federation and China, except for two disputed areas. The agreement stated the intentions of both parties in resolving and demarcating the disputed border peacefully and identified the border as running through the center of the main channel of any river, based on the thalweg principle. The term "thalweg" means in geography the deepest continuous inline within the river. According to the agreement, a location of the main channel and the possession of various river islands would be decided in the course of the demarcation work. Other articles stipulated military usage, and traffic rights along the river borders. The two areas, Tarabrin and Bolshoi Ussuriysky Islands, were excluded from the agreement, and their status would not be resolved until 2004. Since numerous islands on the Argun, Amur, and Ussuri rivers often split the rivers into multiple

streams, the location of the main stream (and thus the border) is not often immediately apparent. Obviously, each country would receive a greater number of islands if the recognized main channel was closer to the opposite bank. Thus, the demarcation work was often controversial and subject to local protests over disputed territories. The demarcation work continued nearly up until its 1997 deadline and was completed successfully. It demanded enormous effort, patience, common sense, and good will of both sides.

The scale of the demarcation work can be illustrated by a few figures. So, on the Argun River 413 islands and islets along the river were disputed. A final apportionment has 204 islands in Russian territory and 209 islands in Chinese territory. Out of 320 islands along the Ussuri river, the agreement recognized 167 Russian islands and 153 Chinese islands. Some of these islands used to be sites of numerous clashes during the confrontation era. Damansky Island, which was a site of military incident in 1969, was transferred to Chinese hands. Out of 1680 islands along the Amur river, the agreement recognized 902 Chinese islands and 778 Russian islands (Stepanov, 2007, p. 232). Some of those islands were also sites of military clashes in the 1960s. Furthermore, a number of islands of the Amur river were subject to border clashes between Soviet and Japanese forces during the Manchukuo period in the 1930s.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union the former Chinese-Soviet border is shared by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. While a majority of the disputed territories lay in the west, the Russian Federation inherited only about 50 square km of the western section of the former Chinese-Soviet border. China negotiated separate agreements with each of the post-Soviet republics on its western borders. By now China has managed to achieve border settlements with all Central Asian republics and has signed border treaties with all of them (the latest one was concluded by China and Tajikistan at the end of 2011). In October, 1995, an agreement over the last 54 km of the western border stretch was reached by Russia and China.

The islands of Bolshoy Ussuriysky and Tarabarov near Khabarovsk, along the junction of the Amur and Ussuri rivers, were specifically excluded from the agreement and became a subject of further negotiations. There were at least two reasons for such exclusion. The first one deals with the economic and strategic significance of the islands. They are located very close to Khabarovsk which is the biggest Russian border city in the Far East. The second reason proceeds from the fact that the thalweg principle which became a legal basis for the Chinese-Soviet agreement of 1991 could not be applied to the islands. Precisely, if this principle had been applied to the disputed islands, they would have been given entirely to either Russian or Chinese hands, and this could not have been a basis for compromise.

To solve the problem President Vladimir Putin proposed a 50-50 percent division of the disputed land. The Chinese agreed on this compromise, and in October 2004 Russia and China signed a border agreement based on the Putin's initiative. Later on it was ratified by national parliaments. By 2008 the border had been demarcated, and in July, 2008, Russia and China signed a landmark document, officially ending all outstanding territorial disputes between the two powers.

Under the agreement, Russia handed over Tarabarov Island and half of Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri rivers. (In China Tarabarov Island is known as Yinlong Island, and Bolshoi Ussuriysky is known as Heixazi Island). The agreement signed in 2008 marked acceptance of their demarcation. An additional protocol with a map affiliated on the eastern part of the border was also signed.

The total size of 1,281 small river islands and swallows Russia ceded to China between 1991 and 2008 is nearly 851km², including 174 km² of the Tarabarov island and a half of the Bolshi Ussusiysky Island (Vorobiev, 2011, p. 42). In its stead, China has given up all its territorial claims to Russia. The agreement signed in 2008 became a final step in resolving the longstanding border issues. In October, 2008, Chinese and Russian flags were raised and new border markers were erected as part of the handover at China's far northeastern tip near the city of Khabarovsk. The Russian foreign ministry said in a statement on this occasion: "This event completes the delineation and the legal establishment of all parts of the Russian-Chinese border ... The border issue, a historical legacy that had been left to Russia and China, has received its complete and final resolution" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008, July 22).

So, the Chinese-Russian dispute is now solved. The two nations have settled it due to their good will, mutually accepted legal principles and, above all, because of radical improvement of their political, economic and humanitarian relations within the previous two decades.

The Chinese who initiated the territorial debates have got a number of small islands and thus "saved face" in this dispute. The Russians gained legally unambiguous Chinese recognition of the contemporary border line. Chairman Mao Tse-dung used to talk about nearly 1.5 million km² of the Russian territory to be given to China, then his successors reduced an amount of claims to a few thousand km², and finally Beijing was satisfied with getting a few hundred km² of unpopulated islands which economic value is rather symbolic. A common political benefit is that the territorial dispute is over, and now it does not prevent the two neighboring states from further developing of their friendly relations.

Russia's Border Disputes with China and Japan: Common Features and Differences

Let's now try to compare the Japanese-Russian border debate with the already settled Chinese-Russian dispute and to think over lessons of this settlement with regard to the Japanese-Russian case.

The two disputes have some common points. Both of them have long-term and complicated historical roots. Historical arguments have always been very important for all the parties involved. Both disputes also caused very serious damage to Chinese-Russian and Japanese-Russian relations. And it is islands that are subjects of both disputes.

At the same time, distinctions between the two cases seem to be more important. First of all, they have completely different historical connotations. Whereas the Sino-Russian dispute was rooted in the 19th century treaties which were concluded during peace time, the Japanese-Russian dispute is a direct result of the Second World War. The four islands which are known in Russia as the "Southern Kuriles," and in Japan as "the Northern Territories," were seized by the Soviet Army at the very end of the war. One should admit that it is more difficult to reconsider territorial results of wars which always imply human blood and human losses rather than the border treaties concluded in the peace time.

The Japanese-Russian dispute also has a geographical or terminological dimension, which the Sino-Russian dispute did not have. Japan and Russia cannot agree on a common understanding of geographical definitions and names. Both the former USSR and contemporary Russia have considered the four disputed islands as an integral part of the Kurils chain which stretches north across the Pacific Ocean from Hokkaido to the southern tip of Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. On the contrary, since the early 1950s the Japanese government has not recognized the four islands as part of the Kuril chain and call them "the Northern territories" which constitute a separate archipelago including Hokkaido as its biggest island. There has never been such a terminological discussion about river islands between Russia and China.

Another distinction deals with natural resources. The territories transferred from Russia to China did not have practically any of them, whereas the Southern Kurils are surrounded by rich fishing grounds. They also have offshore reserves of oil and gas. Rare rhenium deposits have been found on the Kudriavi volcano on Iturup (and this is the only rhenium deposit in the Russian territory) (Volcano Discovery, 2013; *BBC News*, 2013, April 29).

The two border disputes have different military and strategic significance for the parties concerned. Small river islands on the Amur and Ussuri rivers do not

have any defensive or military value for either China or Russia, especially taking into consideration the bilateral agreements concerning demilitarization of the border regions which were signed by the two countries in the 1990s.¹ At the same time Russia has repeatedly stressed a military significance of the Southern Kuril islands. Control over them gives Russia additional access to the Pacific Ocean. There exists Russian military presence on the island of Iturup. Moreover, Russia is now likely to boost its military presence on the whole Kuril chain. In particular, it is quite possible that some of the four Mistral assault ships that Moscow has contracted to buy from France in 2011 would be deployed in the Pacific Fleet, in part to defend the Southern Kurils (Gorenburg, 2011, May 23). Within the last few years Moscow repeatedly expressed its intention to expand the islands' military capability. Now it is looking to deploy a surface to air missile system on the islands in order to reinforce its message of sovereignty. In 2011 President Medvedev confirmed that Russia should deploy modern weaponry to ensure security of the Southern Kurils (*Sakhalin.info*, 2011, February 10). This military rhetoric and activity around the disputed territories is a direct consequence of the current border negotiations' deadlock.

One more considerable distinction between the two border cases is that all of the territories given from Russia to China were uninhabitable. But the Southern Kurils are now populated. A 30,000 strong Russian community lives on the islands, and its overwhelming majority supports the present status quo and does not want the islands to be transferred to Japan. When the Second World War began there were 17,000 Japanese residents on the islands, including members of Hokkaido's minority Ainu community. By 1949 the Soviet Union had deported all of these residents to Japan. There are still some people who had property there they want to reclaim. Lives, destinies and property of the former Japanese and the present Russian residents of the islands are also a part of the territorial dispute.

Another point of distinction deals with legal aspects of the two cases. The Chinese-Russian dispute originated in the 19th century treaties which came across to common international law practice in terms of defining inter-state rivers borders. The border debate between Russia and China was settled successfully primarily because both nations managed to agree on a common legal basis, namely on the above mentioned thalweg principle. In the case of the Russian-Japanese dispute the situation is completely different. Both countries do not share common legal approaches. Each of them think that international law is on its side.

1 Now Russia and China have limited troops within the 200km zone along the common border and do not deploy big military units close to the border.

“The Northern Territories are the inherent territories of Japan, and Russia's occupation has no legal basis under international law,” Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara said in 2011 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2011, February 15). Japan insists that Russian control over the disputed islands is illegal until the two countries conclude a peace treaty.

Russia has its own arguments. One of them is that under the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, signed between Japan and the Western Allies, Japan renounced “all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands” as well as over other possessions. Under the Treaty, Japan had to cede the islands but it was not specified that they would be given to the Soviet Union, because it did not sign the San Francisco treaty. This treaty is still in force. According to it, Japan recognizes that it lost Southern Sakhalin and the northern part of the Kuril chain. However, since the Japanese government does not recognize the four disputed islands as part of the Kuril chain, the treaty resolved nothing for Tokyo in terms of the “Northern territories” problem.

Another Russian legal argument proceeds from the fact that in September, 1945, Japan signed an unconditional surrender. A legal essence of the surrender meant that Japan had to accept any political and territorial demands of the Allies. Moscow asserts that the Japanese “put themselves politically and territorially at the winner's mercy.” The Russian public believe that Japan's loss of Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril islands is in fact a punishment for unleashing aggressive war in China and in the Pacific during the Second World War.

In 1956, the Soviet Union and Japan signed the Joint Declaration which ended the state of war and restored diplomatic relations between the two nations. According to the Declaration, the Soviet Union agreed to hand over two smaller disputed islands to Japan after a peace treaty was signed. However, after Japan and the United States signed a security treaty in 1960, the Declaration was suspended by the Soviet government. This document could have become a joint legal basis of the territorial settlement. Now Russia recognizes the Declaration, but Japan in fact does not, demanding not only the two islands mentioned in the Declaration but all four disputed islands to be returned. From Japan's position, the fate of Habomai and Shikotan was agreed in 1956, but the fate of Kunashir and Iturup was not, and that was the only reason why there could not have been a peace treaty then. Tokyo insists that there has to be at least some kind of agreement on the fate of them in the subsequent peace treaty.

One more important difference between the two territorial cases deals with the fact that the Russian-Japanese dispute has become primarily a matter of national prestige for both Japan and Russia, and this is the worst possible starting point for serious negotiations. Russia, in particular, sees the Southern Kurile is-

lands as one of the symbols of its victory in the Second World War and sees no reason why it ought to make unilateral concessions concerning its legitimately won war prize.

During the era of Sino-Soviet split, a territorial dispute between China and the USSR also used to be a matter of national pride and ideological struggle. However, after normalization of bilateral relations in the 1980s the situation was changed. The two powers began to perceive the border dispute as a routine political and diplomatic problem inherited from the past which had to be solved by statesmen and diplomats in silence of negotiation rooms. When the border negotiations was going on, neither Chinese nor Russian officials did not make loud and dramatic statements and avoided appealing to the public of their countries in order to assert diplomatic pressure on each other. This is the case when successful diplomacy was hardly compatible with mass media campaigns. The Russian and Chinese public opinion, of course, followed the course of negotiations and sometimes even protested against border changes. For example, in 2005 there were demonstrations of Russian Cossack residents in neighboring Khabarovsk against handing over of some Russian-controlled islands to China (Abelsky, 2006, October). On the other hand, sections of the media in Hong Kong and Taiwan denounced Beijing for giving up China's claim not just to the river islands, but to all of so called Outer Manchuria, gained by the Russian empire in the 19th century (Chan, 2008, August 14).

However, both Russian and Chinese authorities have never encouraged such popular and media protests and never tried to take advantage of them. They seemed to agree on the principle: "The less public discussion over the border issue the better." The Chinese diplomats treated their territorial claims to Russia rather pragmatically, and such an approach helped them as well as the Russian negotiators to find a mutually acceptable solution. Russia and Japan, on the contrary, continue to discuss their dispute publicly and regularly make loud statements.

Both territorial disputes have deep historical roots, but the role and significance of historical arguments in these cases are different. During the Chinese-Soviet and later the Chinese-Russian border negotiations both sides were only slightly concerned about which nation was the first one to come to the disputed lands and started to live there, because a criterion of historical priority of possession was not a principle of the negotiated territorial division. On the contrary, since the Japanese and the Russians lack mutually accepted legal basis for a border settlement, the debates over the Southern Kurile are focused mainly on their history. Nowadays, it is Russian and Japanese historians who continue to provide arguments to bolster each country's claim to the Southern Kurile, or "the Northern Territories."

But in both cases historical arguments seem to have little relevance in what have essentially been political problems. The both disputes have always demanded political will and diplomatic solutions.

Political and strategic contexts of the two territorial disputes are also quite different. Russia and China are now strategic partners, but Russia and Japan are far from genuine political partnership. It is needless to say that a friendly atmosphere of bilateral relations is crucially important for a successful territorial settlement.

A political calculation behind the Russian-Chinese border agreements is clearly to strengthen Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in order to counter the growing pressure from the US and its NATO allies on both nations on a number of fronts. Former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Juechi described the agreement concluded in 2008 as a mutually beneficial “win-win” (Chan, 2008, August 14). Moscow agreed with his assessment. Russia conceded part of its territory to its key strategic partner. The latest Russian Foreign Policy doctrine released in 2012, declared that “Russia will expand the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in all areas, based on shared basic fundamental approaches to key issues of world politics” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013, February 12). Former President Medvedev paid his first official visit to China. Vladimir Putin who was re-elected as President in last March visited China three weeks after his inauguration.

Russian-Chinese strategic partnership seems now to be stronger than ever before. But close friends and neighbors cannot afford to have territorial disputes. That is why a friendly atmosphere of contemporary Russian-Chinese relations contributed a lot to the border settlement.

Russia and Japan are far from genuine strategic partnership. A fundamental fact which influences Russian policy is that Japan is one of the closest military and political allies of the United States and heavily depends on Washington in international affairs. Most of the Russian politicians and experts believe that even if Moscow decided to hand over all four islands to Japan, this dramatic concession would not lead to a breakthrough or to a long-term genuine improvement of Russian-Japanese relations and thus would not bring any political benefit to Moscow (Streltsov, 2013, pp. 65-67). Japan, in its turn, is not prepared to compromise on the amount of its territorial claims and continues to demand all the four islands to be given back. On the contrary, China gave up much of its territorial claims to Russia and was satisfied with relatively small possessions in comparison with its initial demands.

In this political context, any formula of settling Russian-Japanese conflict still looks like a “zero sum game.” Many Russian experts and politicians suspect that new concessions in the border dispute could be perceived in Tokyo as a signal of

Moscow's political weakness, rather than a signal of its good will, and therefore will lead to Japan's even stronger political pressure rather than to a more conciliatory approach.

Contemporary Chinese and Japanese attitudes towards territorial disputes with their neighbors are also different. Twenty years ago China had territorial disputes with almost all its neighbors. Now the situation has been radically changed. Within the last two decades Beijing exerted much effort to settle border disputes not only with Russia, but with other neighbor states. China signed border agreements with the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kirgizia and Tadzhikistan, demarcated its land borders with Mongolia and Vietnam, worked on settling border issues with India and so on. Now China does not have serious land border disputes with its neighbors. On the other hand, Japan, being an island state, is involved in three territorial issues: with Russia over the Southern Kurils, with South Korea over Dokdo islands, and with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In two instances, namely with South Korea and Russia, Japan does not physically control the territory, and is therefore referred to as a "challenger" state. But in the dispute with China, Japan controls the disputed territory and is said to be a "target" state.

A glance at a map is all it takes to realize how small and peripheral many of these disputed islands are. Dokdo and Diaoyu are particularly desolate and are both naturally uninhabitable. Some observers argue that these territories, particularly their surrounding waters are valuable both materially and strategically, but such claims are generally ill-founded: the fact is that by pursuing its territorial claims, a challenger state pays a much higher price in terms of opportunity costs, than it could gain by somehow winning control over the islands.

It is not a surprise that both China and South Korea sympathize with Russia in its territorial dispute with Japan. The reason behind it is obvious—in order to solve their border problems with Tokyo, they are not interested at all in Russian territorial concessions. An official newspaper "China daily" writes: "It is not wise for Tokyo to focus on the disputed islands if it wishes to improve ties with Moscow, which is unlikely to make concessions on this issue" (Cheng, 2011, February 11). Deputy chief of the Institute of Japan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Mr. Feng Zhaokui says that "Tokyo should not step up its rhetoric in the dispute if it aims to improve ties with Russia. "It will be hard to resolve the dispute in a short period of time. Instead, it will further stimulate nationalism in both nations, harming ties," Heng said (Xinyu, 2011, August 10). He also added: "If Tokyo sticks to the dispute, in which Russia is unlikely to make concessions, things will only turn worse" (Xinyu, 2011, August 10).

In Russia many experts believe that having border disputes with neighbors

is the Japanese way to strengthen national spirit as well as to gain instruments of political pressure on neighbor states.

Perspectives of Russian-Japanese Territorial Settlement

Let's now try to assess how the experience of the Sino-Russian settlement could be applied to the Japanese-Russian debates. My main conclusion is that the two countries should work on strengthening mutual confidence and be prepared for mutual concessions.

A history of Japanese-Russian territorial dispute is first of all a history of missed opportunities (Togo, 2011, 2013). Many of them were missed in the era of perestroika when Gorbachev was in power in the Soviet Union. At that period China managed to get advantage of Gorbachev's "new political thinking" and concluded a first historic border agreement with the Soviet Union in 1991. Japan also had a chance for a border settlement, but missed it. Immediately before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when an economic situation in the USSR was desperate, there were hints that the Soviet leaders might cut a deal with the Japanese in return for a large sum of money to be given quickly and generously (Luzhkov & Titov, 2008, p. 188). In 1991 Gorbachev publically admitted after more than 30 year pause that the Soviet Union was prepared to cede two smaller islands on the bases of the Joint Declaration signed in 1956. However, Tokyo refused to discuss any possible scenario which could have included financial payments. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 strengthened hopes in Tokyo that the dispute with Russia would be settled quickly. In the early 1990s when Russia also suffered from extremely bad economic crisis Russia's first President Yeltsin could have probably agreed with such a deal too. However, the Japanese again rejected to discuss any compromise including financial compensation and getting less than all the four disputed islands. By now the economic situation in Russia has been radically improved, and any financial deal is already beyond discussion.

There have been ups and downs in bilateral ties between Moscow and Tokyo in the 1990s, with a warm period of friendly relations between Boris Yeltsin and Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. In 1993 Boris Yeltsin agreed in writing that Kunashir and Iturup were also objects of disputes. The Japanese side, in its turn, also expressed more flexibility. In 1997-1998 Tokyo made it clear that it would be satisfied with acknowledgement of "Russian de facto occupation of the four islands" on the condition of Russian acknowledgement of "Japan's de jure sovereignty over the four islands." Another important Japan's concessions in the 1990th were its support of Russia's membership in G7 and APEC, as well as its

readiness for more substantial economic cooperation with Moscow.

When Russian and Japanese leaders had an informal summit in Krasnoyarsk in 1997, Yeltsin was considering the above mentioned acknowledgement proposal made by Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, but eventually declined it. He came to a conclusion that such a formula of territorial settlement would ultimately enforce Russia to transfer all the disputed islands to Japan sooner or later and found this perspective unacceptable.

When Vladimir Putin became President in 2000, he soon made it clear that a further demonstration of Tokyo's good will could get the negotiating process off the ground. He indicated that the offer of a return of the two southernmost islands was still on the table, but showed no signs of relinquishing the two larger islands. At the bilateral summit in Irkutsk in 2001 the Japanese side made a new concession and proposed parallel negotiations on Habomai and Shikotan on the one hand and Kunashir and Iturup on the other. The Russian side found this scheme worth discussing. However, this Japanese negotiation position soon collapsed due to domestic political turmoil, and the parallel negotiations formula was not realized.

In 2004 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov again confirmed that Russia, as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, recognized the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956 and was ready to continue discussing the territorial dispute with Japan in accordance with the principles set forth in the declaration (Lukyanov, 2011, February 10). However, Japan decided that it could wait for Russia to make a more generous offer. But Moscow only suggested joint economic development of the islands and joint humanitarian projects, nothing more.

Since 2004 the situation around the disputed islands steadily became to change for the worse. In September, 2004, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi took a boat trip to view "the Northern Territories." He said the islands were Japan's inherent territories and no peace treaty would be signed until they were returned. Addressing a rally of his supporters, he said: "There is no change in our policy that Russia should make it clear that the four islands belong to Japan." He also added: "We should not become impatient. We should not give up our hope" (*BBC News*, 2002, February 7). Russia reacted angrily to this visit, and its foreign ministry said it would complicate efforts to resolve the dispute. Moreover, in 2006, the Russian government backed a 17bn-ruble (US\$630 million) plan to develop the Kuril islands' chain, including improving energy and transport infrastructure and construction of a new all-weather airport (*Menas Borders*, 2011, November 1).

In 2006-2009 the Japanese side sent signals to Moscow that it could incline to the Russian-Chinese style of "cutting the territory into half" along the agreement reached on Tarabrin and Bolshoy Ussurisky. In December, 2006, foreign

minister Taro Aso told a parliamentary committee in Tokyo that Russia and Japan could end the dispute over the islands by “splitting” them. He proposed informally that Russia keep 75 percent of Iturup, the largest island, and that 25 percent of it and all of the other three islands should go to Japan. Later a Foreign Ministry spokesman told journalists that Mr. Aso was not making a formal proposal. In 2007-2008 Japanese senior officials made a few more hints that “islands’ splitting schemes” could be subjects of bargaining. However, Moscow did not show interest to the “cutting principle” with regard to Iturup and Kunashir.

After Dmitry Medvedev was elected President, Russia’s attitude towards the disputed islands became tougher, and this led to a few tough statements from Tokyo. In November, 2010 Mr. Medvedev paid the first visit by a Russian president to the disputed islands, sparking a diplomatic row with Japan. Medvedev met local residents in Kunashir and pledged more investment in the region. Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan said on this occasion: “Those four northern islands are part of our country’s territory, so the president’s visit is very regrettable (*Japan Probe*, 2010, November 3).” Separately, Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara warned that the visit would “hurt the feelings of the Japanese people” (*BBC News*, 2010, November 1). At a rally of Tokyo in February, 2011, to call for the return of “the Northern Territories,” Mr. Naoto Kan called Medvedev’s visit to Kunashir Island “an unforgivable outrage” (*Polit.ru.*, 2011, February 7). Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov condemned Japan’s reaction as “unacceptable.” He said: “It is our land and the Russian president visited Russian land” (*CNN*, 2010, November 2). In July, 2012, Medvedev in his new capacity of prime-minister paid his second visit to the disputed islands, and this again led to a new round of mutual critique and accusations.

Shinzo Abe’s visit to Moscow in April, 2013, which was the first visit of the Japanese Prime Minister to Russia in ten years, created new hope for improvement of Japanese-Russian relations. However, it did not lead to real progress in settling the territorial dispute. The two sides simply agreed to resume discussions on this issue which were frozen a few years before. At a final press conference President Putin made it clear that Russia would continue to build up infrastructure on the Southern Kurils, despite Tokyo’s protests. “We did not gather here to discuss a peace treaty ... But you can ask harsh, direct questions to which you will always receive equally harsh, direct answers”—he said to the Japanese reporter who raised the territorial issue (President of Russia website. 2013, April 29).

So we can conclude that the Russian approach towards the border dispute has become tougher than it used to be in the 1990s and even during the first Putin’s presidency. Instead of repeating its offer to hand over the two smaller islands to Japan, Russian top officials said for a few times that all the four islands are “Russian land.” These statements are a result of a deep disappointment in Moscow

and a reaction towards Japanese unwillingness to accept all conditions of the Joint Declaration of 1956. Japanese top officials, in their turn, repeated for a few times that Tokyo's claim over the all four disputed islands remained "absolutely unwavering" (*RIA Novosti*, 2011, February 12).

So, the situation around the islands has become tenser. A few last Japanese cabinets—predecessors of the current Shinzo Abe's government—escalated the rhetoric to almost Cold War levels. At the same time, they were reacting to Russia's more assertive stance toward the Southern Kuril Islands. However, the more forcefully Tokyo speaks out against visits of Russian top officials to the disputed islands, the stronger Moscow's desire to make its point.

Many experts in Russia believe that Japan's approach is a reflection of its concern and disturbance in the face of a rising China, an unpredictable North Korea, and Russia's greater involvement in Pacific affairs. At the same time they regard Tokyo's approach to the dispute as too tough and uncompromising, and believe that sooner or later the Japanese government will have to take a different track (Streltsov, 2013, pp. 63-67).

The territorial dispute has long soured relations between Tokyo and Moscow. It has caused great damage to both nations. It also asserts very detrimental effects on regional security and inter-state cooperation. Because of the dispute Russian-Japanese relations have been within the last seven years (up to the latest Shinzo Abe's visit to Moscow) at their lowest point since the fall of the Soviet Union. In those years the both countries stepped up their rhetoric. Chances of an early resolution to the dispute look very slim, and at present the positions of Russia and Japan seem to be irreconcilable. Moreover, since years pass, and the Second World War belongs to the more remote past, Russia becomes less interested in concluding a formal peace treaty with Japan.

Conclusion

What has to be done? If we again look back at the Russian-Chinese border settlement, we will see that it was primarily a radical improvement of political, economic and humanitarian relations between the two nations that made the border compromise possible. A Japanese-Russian border settlement could not be a precondition, or prerequisite of general improvement of bilateral relations. On the contrary, it will be a final result of such improvement. First of all, a political atmosphere of Russian-Japanese relations should be changed for the better, and an economic cooperation should develop more rapidly. Otherwise the two countries will have no choice but to leave the territorial dispute to future generations.

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