***Japan-Russia Relations***

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**Introduction**

One of the most influential works on the history of Japan-USSR/Russia relations refers to the two countries as “distant neighbors” (Kimura 2000). Kimura’s book was published two decades ago but the term he uses to describe the state of bilateral relations during the late-Soviet and the early post-Cold War period is applicable not only to most of the 20th century but also to the current state of relations between Japan and Russia. Geographically, Russia is Japan’s closest neighbour. Even if one ignores the disputed islands the closest of which is located only 2 miles from Cape Nosappu, the distance between Sakhalin’s Cape Crillon and Hokkaido’s Cape Sōya is a mere 28 miles. Thus, even the possibility of connecting the two islands by a rail bridge has being discussed by policymakers on several occasions (Sharkov 2018).

This geographical proximity however is not reflected in the political, economic and other sets of relations between the two neighbors. Despite the end of the Cold War and the various important transformations in both the global and the regional structures of power, Japan and Russia are yet to conclude a peace treaty that would end the abnormal state of relations that existed between them since the end of World War II. Economically, the trade volume between Japan and Russia has experienced an impressive growth in the 21st century and reached the all-time high of 34.8 billion USD in 2013. Even during this period however, Russia was ranked at only 14th place among Japan’s trading partners, below such geographically remote or significantly smaller countries such as Australia, Taiwan and Germany (Okada 2014: 137). Similar trends can be observed in the movement of people between the two countries. While the numbers of visitors in both directions shows an impressive increase when compared to the 1990s, the number of Russian visitors to Japan in the year 2018 for example, stood at roughly 95,000, significantly less than from all other Japan’s neighbors, most of ASEAN countries and geographically distant countries such as France, Canada and Australia (JNTO 2019). The number of Japanese tourists also continued to grow. In 2017 it increased by 20% from the previous year and stood at 102,000 but this number is comparable to the number of Japanese tourists to many other Eastern European countries (JNTO 2019a) and does not reflect the geographical proximity between Japan and Russia.

Each of these trends has its unique factors and causes and the bilateral relations can be examined from various angles while applying a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches. This chapter however will focus mostly on the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories (known as Southern Kuriles in Russia); the four islands occupied by the Soviet Union in the waning days of the Asia-Pacific War, today administered by Russia and claimed by Japan. The focus on the territorial dispute is not simply due to the lack of space. Nor do I intend to imply that the territorial disputes alone accounts for the relative “distance” between the two countries in other sets of bilateral relations. The main reason for devoting most of this chapter to the Northern Territories, is the central theme of this volume, which is “evaluating Japan’s democracy.”

Political system’s responsiveness to the preferences of its citizens is one of the central themes in both the theory and the practice of democracy (Hobolt and Klemmemsen 2005). In the scholarship on the role of public opinion in Japan’s foreign policy, the “elitist” model that views the public opinion as being moulded by the policy makers rather than influencing it, has prevailed (Midford 2011:12). Interaction between public opinion and elites in foreign policy making however, is a rather complex process that defies generalization and cannot be reduced to neither the “bottom-up” model nor the “top-down” one (Risse-Kappen 1991). Thus rather than testing one theory or another, in this chapter I focus on Japan’s policy related to the Northern Territories dispute as a case study aimed at exploring inductively the relationship between public preferences and policy choices.

 With this in mind, this chapter will proceed as follows. The remaining part of this section will provide a brief overview of the history of the territorial dispute and related negotiations between Japan and USSR/Russia. The following section will explore the dynamics in the Japanese public opinion related to the dispute, the factors that shaped it and its relationship with state’s policy, both domestic and towards USSR/Russia. The second section will examine the role of the dispute in other areas of bilateral relations. In the concluding section, I summarize the arguments made in this chapter and offer some observations regarding the factors that explain the relationship between public opinion and policy making in the case of the “Northern Territories” dispute.

During the roughly nine decades that passed since Commodore Perry’s “opening” of Japan and Emperor Hirohito’s August 15, 1945 speech that announced Imperial Japan’s surrender, Japan and Russia/USSR fought one major war (1904-1905) dubbed by some as “World War Zero” (Wolff and Steinberg eds. 2006) and engaged in a series of military clashes (1938-1939) during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Japan and Russia were also in a short-lived alliance during World War I (Burton 2011), interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution and followed by Japan’s intervention in the Russian Civil War, or the so-called, “Siberian Intervention” (1918-1922). Japan and Russia also concluded three treaties (1855, 1875 and 1905) that first delimitated and then shifted the border between the two countries. None of these treaties have placed the currently disputed territory under Russia’s jurisdiction. It is important to remember however, that prior to 1868 the disputed islands did not constitute part of historical Japan either. For centuries, they were part of lands inhibited by the Ainu, along with what today is known as Hokkaido and Sakhalin. In the second half of 19th century, the islands, along with Hokkaido, were incorporated into Japan proper as part of modernizing Japan’s northward expansion and over the following decades subjected to centrally organized colonization and “pioneering”. The process of colonization and its disastrous effects on the indigenous population has been outlined in detail is excellent works by scholars such as Emori Susumu (1987) Richard Siddle (1996) and Tessa Morris–Suzuki (1998 and 2000). By 1945 however, the population of the disputed islands consisted mainly of Japanese who have migrated there from other parts of Japan and stood at roughly 17,000 (Kuroiwa 2006), almost identical to today’s Russian population.

The Soviet Union joined the war in the Pacific on August 9, 1945, when it unilaterally abolished the USSR-Japan Neutrality Pact and declared war on Japan. From mid-August through early September, Soviet troops occupied the southern part of Sakhalin/Karafuto, the Kurile Islands/Chishima including its southmost islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu, and the islands of Shikotan and Habomai, located close to Hokkaido. Many Japanese residents escaped to Japan proper during or in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet occupation. The remaining population was expelled, and by February 1946, the occupied territories had been incorporated into the Sakhalin Oblast region.

As already noted, none of the territory that came under Soviet control was seized by Japan during the Asia-Pacific War. However, at the February 1945 Yalta Summit of Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt it was agreed that the Soviet Union would get the rights to Southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles (without specifying the exact scope of the Kurile chain) in exchange for the Red Army participation in the war against Japan. Six year later, on September 8, 1951, Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty (the Peace Treaty with Japan). The Soviet Union was not a party to this treaty, but nevertheless, according to Article 2c of the Treaty, Japan renounced all rights and claims to Southern Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands. Similarly to the Yalta agreement however, the treaty did not specify the geographical scope of the Kurile Islands. Hara (2006) convincingly traces this ambiguity in the treaty that was supposed to delimitate post-war Japan’s borders to the Cold War policy of the United States, the main occupying power in Japan and the chief architect of the settlement.

The territorial dispute crystalized and took on its present shape during the 1955-56 Japan-USSR normalization talks. After San Francisco, the government of Japan generally saw all of the Kuriles as being lost, and when the normalization talks started in June 1955, it was hoping for the return of only the Habomais and Shikotan, which were historically considered part of Hokkaido. However, during the talks, Japan’s positioned suddenly changed to a demand to include also the Southern Kurile Islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu. Secret instructions to the negotiators explicitly stated the return of the two islands as a precondition to a peace settlement but implied flexibility on the return of other territories seized by the Soviet Union, including the two islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu (Tanaka 1990: 165–68). The domestic political process that led to the sudden change in Japan’s position, and the emergence of the “four islands” demand during the negotiations, is thoroughly examined in Hellmann’s (1969) classic work. Hellmann and others (e.g., Hara 1998; Hasegawa 1998) trace the emergence of the demand for the four islands to the intra-conservative rivalry and the anti-Soviet sentiments of the right-leaning faction of the conservatives, who were not enthusiastic about the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The demand for four islands was rejected by the Soviet side and the negotiations resulted in a Joint Statement that formally ended the state of war between USSR and Japan, re-established diplomatic relations, included a promise to transfer the two small islands to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty, but did not demarcate the border between the two countries.

In the aftermath of the 1955-56 negotiations, the central government paid little attention to the territorial dispute. From late 1960s however it embarked on an extensive domestic campaign aimed at firmly entrenching the idea of the “Northern Territories” in the public discourse (Iwashita 2005). At the same time, the demand for the return of the four islands became the focus of Japan’s USSR-related policy.

 The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union did not result in a drastic change in Japan’s policy related to the Northern Territories. The domestic campaign persisted, and Japan continued to demand the return of all the four islands. Contrastingly, Russia’s position underwent an important transformation. From 1960s onwards, the Soviet Union denied the existence of a territorial dispute between the two countries. This position was reversed during USSR’s first and last President, Mikhail Gorbachev’s April 1991 visit to Tokyo, when he accepted the four islands as objects of future negotiations. A more radical change followed in the next year, this time coming from newly independent Russia. A secret proposal brought by Foreign Minister Kozyrev, envisaged the conclusion of a peace treaty, accompanied by the transfer of two islands of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan in accordance with the 1956 Declaration. It also included plans for continued negotiations regarding the status of the remaining two islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu (Hasegawa 1995). However, despite this ground-breaking shift in Russia’s position the Japanese side failed to respond to this initiative and momentum for the resolution of the dispute was lost as bilateral relations started to cool from the latter half of 1992. Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the two sides conducted numerous negotiations aimed at resolving the territorial dispute. In 1997, the strong personal bond that gradually developed between Japan’s PM Hashimoto and Russia’s President Yeltsin facilitated the drafting of an optimistic declaration which stated both parties’ intention to solve the territorial dispute and to conclude a bilateral peace treaty by the year 2000. During the Kawana summit in the following year, Hashimoto presented Yeltsin with a detailed proposal that suggested approaching the territorial problem and the conclusion of a peace treaty not as a dispute but rather as a border delineation issue and envisaged a separate bilateral agreement to determine the actual timing and the modalities of the transfer of the islands (Satō and Komaki 2003:172–197). This proposal however was rejected by Russia and the idea of resolving the dispute by 2000 vanished into oblivion. From early 2000s onwards, following a series of scandals in MOFA that paralyzed Japan’s Russia policy, the negotiations on the status of the islands and toward the conclusion of a peace treaty entered a “dormant season.” Japan’s position relapsed to that of the Cold War era- the simple demand for the return of the four islands (Iwashita 2005: 10–14).

Japan’s stance of the territorial dispute started to change only in the second half of 2010s, under Shinzō Abe’s second premiership. PM Abe brought a drastic change to Japan’s Russia related policy by side-lining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and concentrating the policy-making process in the Prime-minister’s Office (Iwashita 2020). From the early days of his term in office, Abe prioritized the resolution of the Northern Territories dispute and put a considerable effort into establishing good personal relations with Russia’s President Putin. As of June 2019, the two leaders met twenty-six times, an unprecedentedly high number. In 2016, two months before the Nagato summit, the Japanese media reported that the government was considering a settlement of the territorial dispute involving a transfer of the two small islands of Shikotan and Habomai to Japan, and a joint administration of the other two (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2016). The Nagato summit however, did not result in any concrete agreements and the leaders even did not issue a joint statement. The negotiations continued and in November 2018 Abe and Putin agreed to facilitate the conclusion of a peace treaty based on the 1956 Japan-USSR Joint Statement. This announcement resulted in widely spread speculations in the media that Prime Minister Abe is now seeking the return of the two small islands and a face-saving arrangement regarding the remaining two islands (Satō 2018). Nevertheless, as of August 2019, the two leaders are still to come up with a concrete plan for resolving the dispute and signing a peace treaty. While the details of the negotiations have not been made public, it seems that this time the impasse is due to Putin’s reluctance to transfer even the two islands of Shikotan and the Habomai group to Japan (Yoshida 2019). President Putin’s reluctance to take such steps can be attributed to a variety of factors including the concern of US bases moving closer to Russia’s shores, and the fear that any kind of a territorial compromise may undermine his carefully cultivated image of the collector of Russian lands leading to further decline in domestic support ratings. Regardless of the factors that obstruct the progress in negotiations, it seems that PM Abe’s drive to resolve the territorial dispute has resulted in a fiasco (Iwashita 2020).

**Public Preferences and Japan’s “Northern Territories” Policy**

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that “public” is not a unitary actor and is comprised of various groups with different degree of interest in politics in general and in the issue in question. Following Risse-Kappen (1991), here I distinguish between three groups: mass public opinion, the attentive public with general interest in dispute and issue public, comprised of those groups and individual citizens who are affected by the territorial dispute.

 During the first two post-war decades, both the mass public opinion and the attentive public in Japan have shown little interest in the territorial dispute with the Soviet Union. For example, in 1954, *Soren Kenkyū* (Soviet Studies) journal conducted a poll among scholars, analysts, Diet members and bureaucrats titled “what should be Japan’s demands from the Kremlin?” Less than 20% of the respondents included the the return of the disputed territory in their list of demands, the scope of the territory varying from one respondent to another (*Soren Kenkyu* 1954: 2–16). This shows that the understanding of the territorial issue and the actual scope of the territory to be demanded back was rather vague even among those Japanese with expertise in bilateral relations. In terms of the mass public opinion, even on the eve of the first round of bilateral negotiations in 1955, over 50% of the respondents in a related opinion poll stated that Japan should have no special demands vis-à-vis the Soviet Union when negotiating the peace treaty. Few months later in November 1955, 40% of the respondents had no opinion when confronted with the question as to whether Japan should demand the return of all the four islands or compromise on only two (*Asahi Shimbun* polls cited in Mendel [1961] 1971: 203–209). This general lack of interest persisted well into the 1960s. For example, in a public opinion poll on current affairs conducted by the central government in 1969, only 4.7% of those polled mentioned the territorial dispute among the issues in which they were interested (Cabinet Office 1969). Even on Hokkaido, the general public showed little interest in the islands. Results of a poll conducted there in 1966 show that 55% of the polled did not have any knowledge regarding the historical justifications for Japan’s possession of the Northern Territories. Among the variety of current international issues, only 9% stated that they were interested in the Northern Territories as opposed to 44% that expressed their interest in the Vietnam War. Moreover, when asked as to which issue they were more interested in—the reversion of Okinawa or the Northern Territories—more respondents chose the former (Hoppōryōdo fukki kisei dōmei 1966: 2–12).

This lack of interest in the territory seized by the Soviet Union among both the general and the attentive publics is not surprising and can be attributed to the relatively small size of the territory, its limited resources and the overall dire economic conditions in post-war Japan that forced the people to focus on issues with direct relevance to their livelihoods. There is one exception to this apathy however, namely, the reversion movement that formed on Hokkaido in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet occupation and epitomized the issue public directly affected by the territorial dispute.

The reversion movement consisted mostly of those with vested interests in the occupied islands, such as the former residents of the islands and the residents of the Nemuro area in Eastern Hokkaido, which, prior to the Soviet occupation, had deep economic connections with the islands. Groups that formed the early reversion movement were scattered across Hokkaido and varied greatly in size, membership, and the scope of their demands. For the purposes of this chapter, two are particularly worthy of mentioning. One is the Nemuro-based Commission for Entreating the Return of Islands Attached to Hokkaido (hereafter the Commission), which became the most noted organization in the reversion movement. The Commission, founded in December 1945 by Nemuro’s mayor Ishisuke Andō, was one of the first organizations in the movement, and, no doubt one of the most vocal ones. Moreover, the Commission had a relatively large membership. While many other groups were comprised of only a handful of members, in 1951 the occupation authorities estimated the Commission’s total membership at nine hundred (SCAP 1951).

The demands of the Commission comprised of Nemuro residents and former residents of the islands were driven by the economic interests of its members. Its first petition submitted to the Occupation Authorities and various Japanese ministries in August 1946, requested the placement of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands under the “protective occupation” of the United States (Nemuro City 1997: 2–5). For Nemuro, the two South Kurile Islands along with Shikotan and the Habomais played a vital role in its fisheries-centred economy (Kuroiwa 2006: 248). Hence, the scope of the territory that became the object of the Commission’s activism was limited to these four islands.

Subsequent petitions and resolutions adopted at citizens’ rallies organized by the Commission and addressed both to the Occupation Authorities and the Japanese government, continued to demand the return of the four islands to Japan. While the Commission used a variety of arguments to justify its demands, ranging from historical excursions to nationalist and occasionally internationalist frames, the main factor that instigated it actions was economic. The main parts of the petitions, as well as the debates within the Commission, show that the return of the islands was seen as a matter of vital economic importance for the Nemuro region (e.g. Nemuro City 1997: 64–65).

Another organization named Nemuro Area Peace Preservation and Revival Alliance (hereafter the Alliance) was formed in 1953 as a challenger to the Commission’s claims of representing the interests of Nemuro residents. The Alliance was led by Mamoru Togashi who, like Andō, was a Nemuro local and held various administrative positions in the local fishermen cooperative. However, he was more of a union activist rather than a member of the pre-war elite. Togashi was identified with the left, and in 1955 he was elected to the Nemuro City Assembly on a “reformist” platform. Unlike the Commission, the focal point for the Alliance was not the occupied territory per se but rather the economic revival of the border zone around Nemuro. Togashi and the Alliance saw trade relations with China and a fisheries agreement with the Soviet Union as key to resolving the Nemuro economic predicament. Accordingly, the activities of the Alliance focused mostly on lobbying Diet members from Hokkaido to support normalization negotiations with the two countries and a conclusion of a provisional agreement with the Soviet Union that would enable local fishermen to fish in the waters surrounding the islands (Honda 2011: 79–80) . In 1954, the Alliance had twenty-two hundred members (Matsuura at NDL Fisheries’ Committee, House of Councilors, April 1, 1954) and was almost four times bigger than the Commission. Rallies organized by the Alliance in Nemuro were attended by Diet members and high-ranking officials from the Japan-USSR Friendship Association and drew up to a thousand participants (Nemuro Shimbun 1955). The declarations adopted at these rallies demanded the central government to establish diplomatic relations with the USSR and China, and, while working on a peaceful resolution of the territorial dispute, to conclude an interim fisheries agreement with the Soviet Union (Hokkaido Prefecture 1955: 64–65).

Both the Commission and the Alliance seized their activities in 1955 on the eve of bilateral negotiations (for a detailed discussion, see Bukh 2020). Nevertheless, the compromising position advocated by the Alliance gained dominance in Nemuro (Nemuro City Assembly 1956) and was also voiced by various media outlets and local politicians on Hokkaido (Kuwabara 1962; *Sekai* 1956: 207).

To summarize the above, during the first two post-war decades, both the mass and the attentive public opinion paid little attention to the territorial dispute with USSR. Contrastingly, the issue public concentrated in Nemuro was divided in its position between the harsh stance advocated by the Commission and the more compromising one that emphasized the importance of fisheries agreement advocated by the Alliance. Now, let us turn to examine Tokyo’s policy related to the territorial dispute. Arguably, the demands voiced by the issue public had little if any effect on it. During the occupation period, Japan’s official position regarding the Soviet occupied territories was shaped mostly by its relations with the United States. In his speech at the San Francisco Peace Conference, Prime Minister Yoshida did state that Japan came into possession of the Kuriles and Southern Sakhalin through peaceful means and that its ownership over the South Kurile Islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri had not been questioned by Russia since 1855. He also stated that the Habomais and Shikotan were part of Hokkaido. There is no evidence however to suggest that this statement was in one way or another influenced by the reversion movement and was not a result of previous discussions at MOFA.

The “four islands” demand to which Japan’s position changed during the 1955 negotiations corresponded to the scope of territory that was the object of the Commission’s activism. For that reason, today Andō is referred to as the “father” of the reversion movement and is often mentioned in governmental and other publications related to the Northern Territories. The overlap in territorial demands, however, is more of a contingency than evidence of the Commission’s influence. As already noted in the Introduction, the change in the scope of the territory was an attempt to torpedo the negotiations by the prudent faction inside the LDP and their supporters in MOFA (Hellmann 1969; Hasegawa 1998).

We should note however that the government did not simply ignore the plight of Nemuro fishermen who lost access to fishing grounds around the disputed islands and suffered from detentions and boat seizures by the Soviet border guards. From early 1950s onwards, the government passed several laws aimed at providing financial assistance to detained fishermen and their families. In 1961, the government established a semi-governmental agency called the Northern Areas Association to administer the distribution of low-interest loans to owners of the “former fishing rights”—pre-1945 exclusive fishing rights in waters adjacent to the disputed islands. The government also encouraged the fishermen to purchase “seizure” insurance and started to provide “condolence money” payments, along with Hokkaido Prefecture, to the families of detained fishermen (Hokkaido Prefecture 1968: 1–8).

In 1963 the government concluded the Kaigara Island Kelp Agreement, which finally enabled the collection of kelp on Kaigara, one of the Soviet-occupied Habomai islands, in exchange for a certain fee. The agreement was concluded after years of active lobbying by the chairman of the Japan Fisheries Association, Tatsunosuke Takasaki and against initial strong resistance from MOFA. The agreement was designed as a nongovernmental arrangement between Japan’s Fisheries Association and the Soviet Council of National Economy in order to avoid undermining Japan’s territorial claims as feared by MOFA. The conclusion of the agreement had a significant positive impact on the lives of Nemuro’s residents, bringing an average gross annual income of 130 million yen from kelp alone in the mid-1970s (Ito 1974: 108; Honda 2006: 67–72). Incidentally, a similar agreement on fisheries, initially envisioned and advocated by the Alliance in the early 1950s, was concluded only decades later, in 1998. It is a complex legal arrangement designed to enable Japanese fishing activities near the disputed islands in return for a fee, while not undermining Japan’s territorial claims. As with the kelp agreement, its conclusion was made possible mainly due to efforts of one powerful individual. This time it was Muneo Suzuki, an MP from Eastern Hokkaido and at that time one of the LDP heavyweights, who managed to override the generally negative stance of MOFA and push through with such an arrangement (Honda 2006: 121–29).

To summarize the above, during the first two post-war decades, while adopting certain measures aimed at alleviating the plight of those directly affected by the dispute, the government paid little attention to the reversion movement and its demands. From late 1960s however, Tokyo’s Northern Territories related policy experienced a dramatic change. In 1969, the government established the Association for Countermeasures Related to the Northern Territories (hereafter the Association), a new quasi-governmental agency in charge of the domestic activities related to the Northern Territories which absorbed the Northern Areas Association. The Association continued to distribute low-interest loans but also embarked on an extensive public educational campaign related to the dispute. In 1972, the Headquarters for Countermeasures Related to Northern Territories was established within the Cabinet Office. The creation of these two organizations symbolized the formal institutionalization of the idea of the “Northern Territories” on the governmental level as an instance of injustice inflicted upon the nation (Iwashita 2005:204). The government further enhanced its Northern Territories-related domestic policy in the late 1970s, when the so-called thaw in relations between the USSR and the Western bloc ended and the Cold War entered its second and final stage. In 1978, for the first time, MOFA published its *Our Northern Territories* booklet, which provided detailed explanations of the illegality of the Soviet occupation of Japan’s “inherent territory” and the latter’s rights to the four islands. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, the government also built several Northern Territories-related facilities, including the hundred-million-yen observatory-cum-museum on Hokkaido’s Nosappu Cape, and in 1981 the Diet enacted a national Northern Territories Day. In 1980 the government also initiated an extensive program of economic assistance to those affected by the dispute, when Prime Minister Zenkō Suzuki declared that assistance to the Nemuro area was a “critical issue” for the government (Shibukawa 2004: 5). Two years later, the government passed the Law on Special Measures to Promote the Solution of the Northern Territories Problem. This law stipulated measures for supporting former residents and their decedents. Under this law, the government established a fund of one billion yen, which was to be used to assist areas adjacent to the disputed territories, including Nemuro and other nearby towns, in developing infrastructure, agriculture, fisheries, and medical care (E-Gov 2016).

This extensive campaign was not a response to the demands from the reversion movement, which by that time, was on the verge of extinction or to the plight of Nemuro residents but a result of domestic political calculations. An American diplomat reported that, based on private conversations with officials from MOFA and other governmental bodies, the actual reason for the creation of the Association was to be found in domestic politics and the Japan-US negotiations regarding the reversion of Okinawa. Specifically, through activities of the Association, the ruling LDP was hoping to sway public support away from the Socialist Party, which opposed the reversion of Okinawa with American bases (David L. Osborn cited in Ikeda, 2003: 42–43). The government-led campaign to “enlighten” the public quickly diffused throughout the country and numerous members of the attentive public took an active part in it. Countless books, pamphlets and articles by government-affiliated organizations and sympathetic scholars were published, drawing public attention to the historical injustice inflicted on Japan by the Soviet Union (e.g., Yoshida 1978; Kimura 1981). Newspapers, magazines, and even department stores quickly became mouthpieces of the reversion cause, featuring and depicting the miseries of the former residents (Stephan 1974). The economic rationale of the original reversion movement however disappeared from the narrative and nationwide awareness of the loss of “inherent territory” became an end in itself (for a detailed discussion see Bukh 2012).

It is hard to estimate the change the mass public preferences such a massive campaign has brought. Public opinion polls conducted by the government show that the awareness of the dispute has risen significantly. At the same time, the questions in these polls were structured in such a way that did not allow the respondents to express their views regarding the importance for the return of all of the four islands or other, more compromising scenarios (for example, see Cabinet Office 1969). Nevertheless, it can be plausibly argued that the idea of “inherent territory” and the injustice inflicted upon the nation as a result of its loss got firmly entrenched in Japan’s public discourse on the country’s relations with the Soviet Union. Contrastingly, the issue public comprised of those directly affected by the dispute adopted a pragmatic approach which however, received little attention from the policy makers. For example, a poll conducted on Hokkaido in 1974-75 among the former residents of the disputed islands showed that less than half of the original residents and their direct descendants were interested in relocating back to the islands, in case they were returned to Japan. Furthermore, among those that stated that they would return, it was not the longing for a lost homeland but more pragmatic reasons, such as property rights and the possibility to engage in fishing that prevailed in the explanations for their choice (Gyōsei shiryō chōsakai 1977:16). The pragmatic approach to the territorial dispute continued to enjoy a considerably broad support in Nemuro in the post- Cold War years as well, especially among those directly affected by the dispute and the younger generation (Iwashita 2006).

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the important political transformations both domestic and in the Asia-Pacific region brought no significant changes to Japan’s stance on the territorial dispute. Besides occasional calls from Nemuro to revise Japan’s policy (Fujiwara 2006), certain members of the attentive public also questioned the utility of the “four islands” demand for Japan’s national interests (e.g., Wada 1999; Iwashita 2005). Such arguments however were quickly dismissed by hard-line conservatives as undermining Japan’s “basic principles” (e.g. Tamba 2007:240) and disappeared quickly from the domestic discourse. Initially a product of domestic and international politics of the Cold War, the idea of the Northern Territories became an end in itself for the Japanese conservative policy makers, firmly rooted in the discourse on “inherent territory” and injustice the nation has suffered as a result of its loss.

Contrastingly, mass public support for the rigid position taken by the government has been steadily declining. Already in 1992, a public opinion poll showed that less than half of the respondents supported the “four islands at once” demand, with only 30% support among respondents in their thirties. Furthermore, an equal number (30%) of younger respondents in their twenties chose joint administration of the islands and the return of the four islands (*Mainichi Shimbun* 1992). In a public opinion poll conducted by the left-leaning *Asahi Shimbun* in 1998 majority of the respondents (35%) favored “first two islands” solution over the “four islands at once” (28%). Furthermore, an overwhelming majority (56%) chose “economic cooperation” as the most important issue in bilateral relations, when only 33% argued the priority of the territorial issue. A similar poll conducted two years later by the more center-leaning *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* has confirmed this trend as 34% percent of the polled favored “two islands” solution over the insistence on the “four islands” (32.1%). Importantly, 26% percent of the polled, when replying to the same question, suggested that the territorial dispute should not be made a priority in bilateral relations. Even a poll on bilateral relations conducted by the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* in early September 2006, at the height of bilateral tensions and extensive media coverage surrounding the Russian coast guard killing of a Japanese “poacher” in the waters near the disputed islands three weeks earlier, did not show an overwhelming public support for the “four islands” at once solution. While this stance managed to get the majority of responses (39.5%), other less rigid options combined accounted for 45.2% of the votes.

It was only under Prime Minister Abe’s second premiership, that Japan’s policy on “Northern Territories” has undergone fundamental revision and if we are to believe the various reports in the media, changed to the demand for two islands of Habomai and Shikotan and some fa-saving privileges on the other two islands. This change initiated by PM Abe however, was not a response to public preferences. Rather, analysists attribute it to several factors such as Abe’s personal background and failures in other foreign policy. Namely, Abe direct relatives include Nobusuke Kishi and Eisaku Satō. Both served as prime-ministers and both are key figures in Japan’s post-war foreign policy. The former revised the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960 and the latter successfully negotiated the agreement on the return of Okinawa in 1969. Furthermore, Abe’s father, Shintaro Abe, served as Japan’s foreign minister (1982-1986) and saw the resolution of the Northern Territories dispute as one of his main goals. As such, Abe has a strong personal motivation to create a legacy as Japan’s prime minister who brought an end to the decades old territorial dispute and concluded a peace treaty with Russia. In terms of other foreign policy initiatives, Abe’s attempts to resolve the abductions issue with North Korea, one of the key slogans of his 2012 elections campaign, bore no fruit. His attempts to improve relations with South Korea also resulted in a failure with colonial history related issues such as the “comfort women” and the forced labor bringing bilateral relations to its lowest point in decades. As such, for Abe, success in the Northern Territories dispute could have been a foreign policy victory that overshadowed his other failures. The China factor is also an important point to mention as some policy makers in Japan believe that improved relations with Russia will create a certain deterrence for China (see Iwashita 2020 for a detailed discussion). To summarize, Abe’s drastic changes in Northern Territories related policy had little to do with public preferences but were mostly shaped by his personal ambitions and developments in Japan’s relations with other countries.

**Northern Territories, Economy and Security**

It is safe to say that despite its centrality in the domestic debates on Japan’s relations with Russia, the territorial dispute has played a minimal role in the trade between the two countries. Even during the Cold War years, despite the official policy of indivisibility of politics and economy, the territorial dispute exerted little influence on trade between Japan and USSR (Carlile 1994). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Japanese business engagement has been growing rapidly reflecting Russia’s transition to the creation of a suitable investment environment. While Japanese businesses have been active in Russia since the early 1990s, bilateral trade started to pick up only in 2003, reflecting the economic recovery in both countries and Russia’s introduction of numerous legal reforms such as in customs duty and tax administration, as well as measures to protect foreign investment (Ivanov 2005:10). In 2004, Japanese cumulative investment in Russia was estimated at 1.9 billion USD and direct investment was at 1.35 billion USD, making Japan the sixth largest investor in Russia (Bury 2004:12). Bilateral trade continued to grow steadily and in 2013 reached 34.8 billion USD, growing ten-fold as compared to 1992 (Okada 2014). Since 2005, Japan Business Federation (*Keidanren*) is conducting a poll among Japanese business leaders regarding doing business in Russia. Complexity of procedures, administration and lack of proper legal infrastructure usually top the list of the main factors that complicate doing business in Russia. Contrastingly, the territorial dispute is not mentioned at all (e.g., Keidanren 2018).Thus it can be plausibly argued that the growth in trade between the two countries but also its relatively low volume should be attributed to economic factors, unrelated to the Northern Territories. Similar factors probably account for the flow of people in both directions though there are no opinion polls that can support or refute this assumption.

The extensive economic cooperation plan announced by PM Abe in 2016 as part of his strategy to resolve the territorial dispute can indeed facilitate the growth of economic relations between the two countries and create a direct linkage between the territorial dispute and economic interactions. At this point however it is too early to judge the plan’s results and effects. As of August 2019, both the number of projects implemented as part of this plan and their scale are rather limited (Embassy of Japan in Russia 2019). It remains to be seen whether the structure of bilateral trade will move away for the existing predominance of car exports from Japan to Russia and natural resources in the other direction (Hattori 2018).

In the realm of security, the threat perception of Russia in Japan’s defence community started to change in the second half of the 1990s. The emergence of new threats such as North Korea and China led to an important shift in Japan’s defence priorities and the security discourse on Russia (for a detailed discussion see Bukh 2008). Japan’s National Security Strategy of 2013, the more recently published Defence Charter (Ministry of Defence 2018), the beefing up of its military in the southwest islands as well as other measures and documents clearly indicate that, at least in the short to mid-term, Japan’s security community sees China and possibly North Korea as Japan’s main security threats. Indeed, the relatively limited nature of security cooperation between the two countries can be partially attributed to the predominance of the territorial issue in any security-related negotiations between the two countries. Regardless of the progress in the territorial dispute however, close security ties between Japan and Russia are rather improbable as long as the security treaty with the United States remains the main pillar of Japan’s foreign policy, and Russia and China remain in a “soft” alliance aimed at curtailing US power and influence.

**Conclusion**

The main argument of this chapter is that both the creation of the idea of the “Northern Territories” during the Cold War years as well as its partial demolition by prime-minister Abe were products of political calculations rather than reflection of either the general or the issue publics’ preferences. This should not be seen however as a simple endorsement of the “elitist” model in Japan’s foreign policy making. First of all, from mid 1950s, the government did adopt certain policies aimed at alleviating the economic plight of Nemuro residents directly affected by the dispute. Furthermore, the government has deployed a number of ideas and strategies of the reversion movement when designing its domestic educational campaign. Moreover, throughout the post- Cold War years, the centrality of “Northern Territories” in the domestic debate, was often seen by the decision makers as a reflection of public opinion and thus constrained their choices (for details see Satō and Komaki 2003). Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the elites played a leading role in shaping Japan’s “Northern Territories” related policy and the impact of public preferences was indirect at best.

There are a number of factors that can explain this pattern. First of all, as other studies have shown, foreign policy related issues play only a minor role in shaping voter’s behaviour in Japan (e.g., Ishibashi 2007). This enables the elites to pay less attention to public opinion in foreign policy related decision making. Other factors are more case specific. One such factor is the predominance of MOFA in shaping Russia-related policy until the recent emergence of the Prime Minister’s Office as the center of decision-making. Unlike politicians, the dependence of MOFA’s bureaucrats on public opinion is minimal, and its policy-making process has been dominated by incrementalism (Hara 2008) which makes the emergence of drastic changes in already established policy rather unlikely. It should also be remembered that the scale of the population directly affected by the dispute, or the issue public, has been relatively small and this has limited its potential to influence policy. Moreover, as we have seen in the previous section, the impact of the territorial dispute on other areas of bilateral relations has been minimal. This lack of practical consequences, has further contributed to the perpetuation of “Northern Territories” as a symbol of injustice inflicted upon the nation. PM Abe’s attempt to achieve a breakthrough in relations with Russia has led to the collapse of the idea of indivisibility of “Northern Territories” and related mythology without however, bringing a resolution to the territorial dispute. It is hard to imagine that in the foreseeable future any Japanese leader will give up completely on the mission for the return of at least part of the “Northern Territories.” Thus, unless Russia’s stance softens and shifts towards a compromising solution, the dispute will probably continue to haunt bilateral relations without however, exercising much influence over other areas of interaction between the two countries.

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