

Original Paper

A SWOT Analysis of a Japan-Russia Peace Treaty

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Abstract

Japan and the Soviet Union/Russia have had a bilateral territorial dispute over four islands (Etorofu/Iturup, Kunashiri/Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai) over the decades. The Japanese government calls the four islands the “Northern Territories” whereas Russia regards the islands as the Southern “Kurile Islands”. The four islands used to be under the control of Japan until the Soviet Union occupied them at the end of the Second World War. Both countries had diplomatic negotiations for a peace treaty, but the endeavors resulted in failure. Why cannot Japan and Russia resolve the territorial dispute? Is there any feasibility for both countries to solve the bilateral territorial dispute in the post-Russia-Ukraine War period? To answer these questions, this research examines historical, political, economic, and social aspects of the bilateral territorial dispute. It moreover explores feasibilities of signing a Japan-Russia peace treaty in an application of a SWOT analysis.

Keywords

Japan-Russia peace treaty, Japan-Soviet joint declaration, Kurile Islands, Northern Territories, Russia-Ukraine War, Russo-Japanese War, SWOT analysis

1. Introduction: Research Case and Methodology

Japan and Russia had negotiated for the resolution of the bilateral territorial dispute regarding four islands (Etorofu/Iturup, Kunashiri/Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai) over the decades. The Japanese government calls the four islands the “Northern Territories” whereas the Russian government regards the islands as the Southern “Kurile Islands”. The four islands used to be under the control of the Japanese government until the Soviet Union occupied them at the end of the Second World War and even after Japan had surrendered. Both countries had conducted diplomatic negotiations for a peace treaty, but the endeavors resulted in failure so far. Why cannot Japan and Russia resolve the territorial dispute even after the end of the Cold War?

There are a large number of earlier research on the Japan-Russia territorial dispute from both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives (e.g., Swearingen, 1978; Rees, 1985; Hasegawa, Haslam & Kuchins, 1993; Nimmo, 1994; Goodby, Ivanov & Shimotomai, 1995; Hara, 1998; Hasegawa, 1998; Ivanov & Smith, 1999; Kimura, 2000; Rozman, 2000; Williams, 2007; Ferguson, 2008; Kimura & Ealey, 2008; Hara & Jukes, 2009; Bukh, 2010; Inoguchi, 2015; Paichadze & Seaton, 2015; Brown, 2016, 2018; Iwashita, 2018; Anno, 2019; and Serita, 2023).

Scholarly works, in particular, have tended to be rather pessimistic, emphasize difficulties of concluding a peace treaty, and to argue that it is highly unlikely that the four islands would be returned to Japan. At the same time, it is important and necessary to consider implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for the Japan-Russia bilateral territorial dispute in the Indo-Pacific era. To this end, this research employs an interdisciplinary approach as a research method and investigates historical, political, economic, social, individual aspects with regards to the possibilities and difficulties of resolving the bilateral territorial dispute. As a research method with the interdisciplinary approach, this study conducts a chronological analysis of these multiple aspects regarding the bilateral territorial dispute. Moreover, this research applies so called SWOT analysis to examine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in signing a bilateral peace treaty. Finally, this study examines the geopolitical influence of the Russia-Ukraine War for the feasibilities of the conflict resolution of the Japan-Russia territorial dispute.

Table 1. Chronology of the Japan-Russia Territorial Dispute

Year/month	Main events on the Northern Territories/Kurile Islands
1855/2	Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation (Shimoda Treaty) signed
1875/5	Treaty of Saint Petersburg (Sakhalin-Kurile Islands Exchange Treaty) signed
1905/9	Treaty of Portsmouth signed (after the end of the Russo-Japanese War)
1941/4	Soviet-Japan Neutrality Pact signed
1945/8	Soviet nullified the neutrality pact and waged war against Japan on August 9 Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration for unconditional surrender on August 15 Soviet started invading the Northern Territories on August 28
1945/9	Japan surrendered on September 2. Soviet stopped the aggression on September 5
1951/9	San Francisco Peace Treaty concluded
1956/10	Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration signed
1960/1	Japan-US Security Treaty revised
1973/10	Brezhnev admitted existence of a territorial problem in the talks with Tanaka
1991/4	Japanese-Soviet Joint Communique announced by Kaifu and Gorbachev
1993/10	Tokyo Declaration announced by Hosokawa and Yeltsin
1998/4	Kawana proposal expressed by Hashimoto to Yeltsin

2009/2	Aso and Medvedev explored a mutually acceptable solution
2014/3	Crimea invaded by Russia
2018/9	Peace treaty without any preconditions proposed by Putin
2022/2	Russia-Ukraine War broke out

Note. Created by the author based on this research.

2. Historical Legacy: The Origin of the Bilateral Territorial Dispute

It has been discussed that the Northern Territories/Kurile Islands problem is a historical legacy of the Second World War and the Cold War (e.g., Tanaka, 2006), but an origin of the territorial dispute dates back to the 1855 Shimoda Treaty as well as the 1904 Russo-Japanese War.

On February 7, 1855, the Empire of Japan and the Russian Empire signed the Treaty of Commerce, Navigation and Delimitation between Japan and Russia in Shimoda, Shizuoka Prefecture. It is also known as the Shimoda Treaty and the first diplomatic trade treaty between the two countries. By the Shimoda Treaty, Japan opened the ports of Nagasaki, Shimoda, and Hakodate to Russian vessels for the purpose of bilateral commercial benefits. Significantly, the border between Japan and Russia was officially established on the line between Etorofu and Urup, whereas it decided that Sakhalin (Karafuto) would remain “unpartitioned” in Article 2 of the treaty (MOFA, 2001a).

In order to resolve the sovereignty of Sakhalin, the Meiji government dispatched Takeaki Enomoto as a special envoy to Russia in 1874, and the Empire of Japan and the Russian Empire signed the Treaty for the Exchange of Sakhalin for the Kurile Islands, also known as the Treaty of Saint Petersburg on May 7, 1875 (Northern Territories Issue Association, 2012). In the treaty, Russia obtained Sakhalin in exchange for the Kurile Islands. The Saint Petersburg Treaty remained into force until the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed on September 4, 1905 as a result of the Russo-Japanese War. Under the Portsmouth Treaty, Russia ceded the southern part of Sakhalin and the entire part of the Kurile Islands (Presidential Library, 2018).

During the Second World War, Japan and the Soviet Union signed the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact on April 13, 1941 to guarantee bilateral neutrality and non-aggression during the war (Yale Law School, 2008a). On August 14, 1941, US President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill released a joint declaration in the Atlantic Conference. The Atlantic Declaration stipulated that both countries “desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned” (Yale Law School, 2008b).

On December 1, 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced the Cairo Declaration to agree upon the military operations against Japan. The Declaration stipulates that they fought the war “to restrain and punish the aggression of Japan” and that “Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed” (NDL, 2003-2004).

In the Yalta Conference on February 4-11, 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Premier Joseph Stalin discussed the postwar reorganization of Europe as well as agreement regarding Japanese territories. In the conference, it was agreed based on the claims by the Soviet Union that: “the Soviet Union shall enter into war against Japan” on condition that “the southern part of Sakhalin as well as the islands adjacent to it shall be returned to the Soviet Union” and that “the Kurile Islands shall be handed over to the Soviet Union” (Yale Law School, 2008c). Still, the Yalta Conference does not have a legal basis for the case of the Japan-Russia territorial dispute because it is not a formal international law.

On August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union one-sidedly nullified the bilateral non-aggression pact and started military operations against Japan. On August 15, Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration for unconditional surrender and stopped the military operations against the Allied Powers, expressing a clear intention for surrender. Japan signed the official Instrument of Surrender on September 2 of the year. Despite Japan’s acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration and the official surrender, the Soviet Union continued the act of aggression, and invaded Kunashiri, Etorofu, and Shikotan from August 28 to September 2. The Soviet Union finally seized Habomai on September 5, completing the occupation of the four islands (MOFA, 2014a).

After the end of the Second World War, Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty on September 8, 1951. Article 2 (c) of the treaty stipulated that:

Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Kurile Islands, and to that portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it over which Japan acquired sovereignty as a consequence of the Treaty of Portsmouth (United Nations, 1952, p. 48).

The San Francisco Peace Treaty does not mention the Northern Territories however. It is difficult to comprehend that the Northern Territories should be regarded as “portion of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it”. If the treaty deals with the Northern Territories, it should have stipulated the four islands explicitly, or should have described them as the Southern Kurile Islands at least. Moreover, the Soviet Union did not sign the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories has remained throughout the postwar history of Japan-Russia relations.

3. Political Negotiations: Impasse over the Territorial Sovereignty

Both Japan and Russia have made political and diplomatic endeavors to resolve the territorial dispute, but the negotiations ended in failure throughout the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods. In the middle of the Cold War politics, the stance of the United States on the disputed islands was clearly supportive for the Japanese government. Regarding the bilateral territorial disputes, the US government announced its position on September 7, 1956 stating that:

The United States has reached the conclusion after careful examination of the historical facts that the islands of Etorofu and Kunashiri (along with the Habomai Islands and Shikotan which are a

part of Hokkaido) have always been part of Japan proper and should in justice be acknowledged as under Japanese sovereignty (Department of State 1956, p. 484).

Although the United States recognized Japan's sovereignty over the four islands, the Cold War politics made the return of the four islands and the conclusion of a peace treaty unfeasible. From a Russian perspective, the return of the islands means that the political and military influence of the United States in Japan could increase and would be disadvantageous for the security strategy of Russia. In other words, the structural dependence of Japan on the United States became a fundamental cause of political impasse over the territorial dispute (Tanaka, 2006).

There were summit meetings by Japanese and Soviet/Russian top leaders over the decades, but a formal peace treaty has yet to be concluded. On October 19, 1956, Japan and the Soviet Union signed a joint declaration in order to terminate the state of war and normalize the bilateral diplomatic and trade relationship. Although it was not a formal peace treaty, the "peace declaration" was regarded as a formal trade protocol and a foundation for the future peace treaty (New York Times 1956). Importantly, the joint declaration stipulated future possibility of resolving the bilateral territorial disputes through the conclusion of a peace treaty. Article 9 of the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration guaranteed that the Soviet Union "agrees to transfer to Japan the Habomai Islands and the island of Shikotan, the actual transfer of these islands to Japan to take place after conclusion of a Peace Treaty" (United Nations 1957, p. 116).

Due to the conclusion of the 1960 Japan-US Security Treaty, the Soviet Union declared the "two islands transfer" based on the 1956 joint declaration "null-and-void" and there was "no territorial dispute" between Japan and Russia (Iwashita, 2013, p. 3). Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka had a summit meeting with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in October 1973. During the summit meeting, Brezhnev admitted that there had been a "problem" between the two countries (Fujita, 2020), yet the Soviet Union did not agree on the return of the Northern Territories in the midst of the Cold War politics.

After the end of the Cold War, President Michael Gorbachev paid an official visit to Japan on April 16-19, 1991. Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu and President Gorbachev announced the Japanese-Soviet Joint Communique in which the names of four islands were raised for the first time in a bilateral official document and the Soviet Union recognized the existence of the territorial problems regarding the attribution of the four islands. Also, the Soviet side proposed to establish "a simplified visa-free framework for visits by the Japanese to these islands" and to initiate "joint, mutually beneficial economic activities" (MOFA, 2001b).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Japan continued negotiations for a peace treaty with the Russian Federation. Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and President Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin announced the Tokyo Declaration on Japan-Russia Relations on October 13, 1993. The Hosokawa-Yeltsin Tokyo Declaration mentioned the names of the Northern Territories and expressed the bilateral agreement on the necessity of negotiations for an "early conclusion of a peace treaty

through the solution of this issue”. It also noted that constructive dialogue was taken place by the Peace Treaty Working Group and that the Joint Compendium of Documents on the History of Territorial Problems between Japan and Russia was published as a diplomatic fruit (MOFA, 2014b).

On November 1-2, 1997, Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and President Yeltsin had a summit meeting in Krasnoyarsk and reached an agreement on the bilateral cooperation for economic development as the Hashimoto-Yeltsin Plan. In the Hashimoto-Yeltsin Plan, six points, especially bilateral cooperation for investment and peaceful use of atomic energy, were agreed. Hashimoto and Yeltsin also agreed that both countries would pursue the conclusion of a peace treaty by 2000 (MOFA, 1997). On April 28, 1998, Prime Minister Hashimoto and Yeltsin had a summit meeting in Kawana of Shizuoka Prefecture. Hashimoto made a proposal to Yeltsin that both countries should draw the line of border between Etorofu and Urup as a solution to the bilateral territorial disputes (MOFA, 1998). Although the Kawana proposal was not accepted by Russia, Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and President Yeltsin had a summit meeting and announced the Moscow Declaration on Establishing a Creative Partnership on November 13, 1998. In the Moscow Declaration, both governments reaffirmed the importance of concluding a peace treaty “by the year 2000” (MOFA, 2001c). The Moscow Declaration also explored the possibility of the creative cooperation in an economic sphere (Zinberg, 1999).

On March 25, 2001, Prime Minister Yoshihiro Mori and President Vladimir Putin held a summit meeting in Irkutsk and announced a joint statement regarding the continuation of future negotiations for a peace treaty on the basis of official documents, such as the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, the 1991 Japan-Soviet Joint Communique, and the 1993 Tokyo Declaration. The Irkutsk Statement also confirmed the importance of the “Memorandum on the Preparation of a New Version of the Joint Compendium of Documents on the History of Territorial Issues and Enlightenment of the Public as to the Importance of the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty” signed by the Japanese and Russian foreign ministers (MOFA, 2014c).

Prime Minister Mori attempted to resolve the territorial dispute with the return of Habomai and Shikotan. Likewise, Muneo Suzuki as a Diet member of the House of Representatives proposed the return of Habomai and Shikotan “in advance” of the two other islands. Yet, after the Mori Cabinet collapsed, Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka of the Junichiro Koizumi Cabinet insisted on the return of the four islands “in a single package”, which was not acceptable plan for Russia. It was observed by a senior Foreign Ministry official that the foreign minister’s attitude made President Putin distrustful about Japan’s stance on the resolution of the territorial dispute (Mainichi Japan, 2018). Meanwhile, Junichiro Koizumi conducted an official inspection from the vessel for the first time as a Japanese prime minister on September 2, 2005. Koizumi stated that Japan would not be able to conclude a peace treaty with Russia without resolution of the bilateral disputes over the Northern Territories (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2004).

On September 8, 2007, Prime Minister Abe and President Putin had a summit meeting on the occasion of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Sydney. The two leaders discussed the mutual strategic interests, the necessity of signing a peace treaty, and the bilateral cooperation for Eastern Siberia (MOFA, 2007). On April 25-27, 2008, Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda paid an unofficial visit to Russia and had a summit meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev. Fukuda and Medvedev discussed the bilateral cooperation in the Far East Russia and Eastern Siberia where oil, natural gas, and minerals exist. They agreed to continue further negotiations for a peace treaty and the resolution of the bilateral territorial dispute (MOFA, 2008).

On February 18, 2009, Prime Minister Taro Aso visited Sakhalin to have a summit meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev. Aso and Medvedev discussed the territorial issue and considered a “new, original and nonstandard approach” as a “mutually acceptable solution” to the territorial dispute. In addition, the two leaders agreed on the bilateral cooperation for the development of the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia, especially the production and the supply of natural gas. They also confirmed the importance of the “four-island non-visa exchange” in terms of mutual trust and confidence building measure (MOFA, 2009).

During the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), on November 1, 2010, President Medvedev paid a visit to Kunashiri for the first time as a top leader of Russia. The purpose of Medvedev’s visit to Kunashiri was to inspect the development of infrastructure in the area, but it caused a diplomatic friction between Japan and Russia. In response, Prime Minister Naoto Kan called the Medvedev’s visit “regrettable”, whereas the Russian side called Japan’s response “unacceptable” as Russia had taken control of the island since the end of the Second World War. Likewise, Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara stated that Medvedev’s visit to Kunashiri would “hurt the feelings of the Japanese people” (BBC 2010). On November 12, 2011, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and President Medvedev held a summit meeting on the occasion of APEC in Honolulu. The two leaders confirmed the necessity of solving the bilateral territorial problems and signing a peace treaty (MOFA, 2011). Prime Minister Noda had a summit meeting with President Putin on the occasion of APEC in Vladivostok on September 8, 2012 (MOFA, 2012), but eventually the DPJ government was not able to resolve the bilateral territorial dispute.

4. Economic Cooperation: As a Solution for the Political Impasse?

Although the diplomatic negotiations to resolve the territorial dispute were confronted with deadlock, the Abe administration initiated the strengthening of the diplomatic ties with the Putin administration for economic cooperation. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who returned to power again in 2012, has proactively pursued a peace treaty with Russia stating, “during my time in office, I will do everything possible to resolve the territorial problem” (Brown, 2015, p. 1). Abe started making the best of the domestic needs of Russia to enhance its economic and energy cooperation with Japan. The bilateral

energy cooperation was driven by the fact that the bilateral trade in 2012 “reached more than thirty billion dollars” (Iwashita, 2013, p. 2).

Prime Minister Abe held a summit meeting with President Putin on the occasion of the G20 Saint Petersburg Summit on September 5, 2013. Abe and Putin affirmed that both countries would pursue a peace treaty “in a friendly, quiet and calm atmosphere”. They confirmed the importance of the bilateral cooperation in the field of economy and security (MOFA, 2013a). Abe and Putin had a summit meeting on the occasion of APEC Summit in Bali, Indonesia, on October 7, 2013. The summit meeting was held in a “genial atmosphere” representing the “trusting relationship between the two leaders has deepened on a personal level” (MOFA, 2013b). Thus, both leaders seemed to establish a personal trust and they were ready to accelerate the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty.

However, annexation of Crimea by Russia on March 1, 2014 paralyzed the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty between Japan and Russia. In response to the Crimean crisis, the Japanese government denounced that Russia had infringed on territorial integrity of Ukraine and strongly urged Russia to refrain from annexing Crimea by observing international law. As measures against the annexation of Crimea, Japan decided to suspend “consultation for easing visa regulations” and freeze “negotiations of a new investment agreement” (MOFA, 2014d). On October 17, 2014, Abe and Putin held a summit meeting on the occasion of the Asia-Europe Meeting 10 Summit Meeting in Milan, Italy. In the meeting, Abe told Putin that Japan expected Russia to ensure the “full implementation of the ceasefire agreement” in Ukraine (MOFA, 2014e). On November 9, 2014, Abe and Putin agreed to resume the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty in a summit meeting on the occasion of APEC in Beijing (MOFA, 2014f).

The Crimean crisis became a political hindrance to the bilateral negotiations temporarily, but it also provided an opportunity for the improvement of the Japan-Russia economic cooperation. This was because the Russian economy was affected by the international economic sanctions after the Crimean crisis (Tyll, Pernica & Arltová 2018), and the Putin administration desired to expand its economic and energy cooperation with Japan (Pajon, 2018; Yennie-Lindgren, 2018).

On September 21, 2015, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida held a ministerial meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow. Kishida explained Japan’s position on the disputed islands to Lavrov. Although the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty had been temporarily suspended, the diplomatic consultations were resumed by the visit of Kishida (MOFA, 2015a). On September 28, 2015, Abe and Putin held a summit meeting in New York on the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly. They agreed to continue the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty by utilizing the occasions of G20 and APEC summit meetings (MOFA, 2015b). On November 16, 2015, Abe and Putin held a summit meeting in Antalya, Turkey on the occasion of G20 Summit. They welcomed the constructive dialogue between the two nations for the bilateral economic cooperation as well as the vice-ministerial level negotiations for a peace treaty (MOFA, 2015c).

On April 15, 2016, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida and Russian counterpart Lavrov held a ministerial meeting at the Iikura Guest House in Tokyo. Kishida and Lavrov discussed aspects for concluding a peace treaty, and emphasized the importance of economic cooperation in the trade and economic fields as well as the “law on alternatives to salmon/trout driftnet fishing” (MOFA, 2016a). During his unofficial visit to Sochi, Russia, Prime Minister Abe held a summit meeting with President Putin on May 6, 2016. Abe and Putin agreed that both countries would proceed the bilateral peace treaty negotiations through a “new approach” to overcome the diplomatic stalemate. Notably, Abe presented the so-called “eight plans” for promoting Japan-Russia economic cooperation: 1) extending healthy life expectancies, 2) developing comfortable and clean cities easy to reside and live in, 3) fundamentally expanding medium-sized and small companies exchange and cooperation, 4) energy, 5) promoting industrial diversification and enhancing productivity in Russia, 6) developing industries and export bases in the Far East, 7) cooperation on cutting-edge technologies, and 8) fundamentally expanding people-to-people interaction. The eight points were raised again by the prime minister in a summit meeting with Putin on the occasion of the second Eastern Economic Forum on September 2, 2016 (MOFA, 2016b, 2016c).

On December 15-16, 2016, Putin made an official visit to Nagato City, Yamaguchi Prefecture and Tokyo in order to have summit talks with Abe and to attend the Japan-Russia Business Dialogue. Abe and Putin confirmed the necessity of further negotiations for a peace treaty and stressed the necessity of economic cooperation, such as “decommissioning nuclear reactors and promoting the introduction of wind power generation” and the “expansion of greenhouse vegetable cultivation project in the Far East”. In addition, the two leaders agreed on “lifting the ban on exporting Russian heat-treated meats such as beef and pork to Japan” (MOFA, 2016d).

On April 27, 2017, Abe and Putin held a summit meeting in Moscow where they agreed to realize special “grave visits” by former Japanese residents of the Northern Territories by airplane and dispatch a joint public and private research team on the “joint economic activities” to the four islands (MOFA, 2017a). In a summit meeting held on the occasion of APEC in Da Nang, Vietnam, the top leaders confirmed the further realization of the “Eight-point Cooperation Plan” as a means of bilateral economic cooperation (MOFA, 2017b).

On May 25, 2018, the Japan-Russia Business Dialogue was held in Saint Petersburg in Russia where Abe made a speech on the significance of the bilateral business cooperation. He confirmed that the Eight-point Cooperation Plan with more than 130 projects, including construction of “LNG transshipment terminal” in Kamchatka and local production of Toyota Motor Corporation and Nissan Motor Corporation (MOFA, 2018a). In the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum held on May 25, 2018, Abe stated that “Japan is the world’s largest importer of LNG. The corporation that is the world’s largest buyer of LNG is also found in Japan”. The prime minister mentioned Russia’s Atlantic Ocean LNG as a possible trade partner of the Japanese corporation, and argued that the trade

deal would be a “win-win situation” for the both countries (MOFA, 2018b). On May 26, 2018, Abe and Putin held a summit meeting where they welcomed a “joint investment framework” established by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), and the bilateral cooperation for the “digital economy” (MOFA, 2018c). In a summit meeting on September 10, 2018, Abe and Putin agreed on aquaculture of marine products including sea urchins, greenhouse vegetable cultivation project including strawberries, and garbage volume reduction measures (MOFA, 2018d).

The Eastern Economic Forum was held in Vladivostok on September 10-13, 2018. In the forum, Putin stated: “An idea has just come into my mind... Let’s conclude a peace treaty before the end of this year, without any pre-conditions” (Pinchuk & Nikolskaya, 2018). The remark by Putin signified that the president desired the conclusion of a peace treaty first, and would like to resolve the territorial dispute afterwards (ibid.). However, Abe had no choice but to decline this sudden proposal, because the proposal was inconsistent with the basic stance of the Japanese government that has argued that a peace treaty should be concluded when the bilateral territorial dispute is resolved (Asahi Shimbun, 2018). Nonetheless, Putin’s remark accelerated the bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty. On November 14, 2018, Abe and Putin had a summit meeting in Singapore, and confirmed the importance of the joint economic activities and the humanitarian measures for the former island residents and agreed on facilitating the bilateral peace treaty negotiations on the basis of the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration (MOFA, 2018e). On December 1, 2018, Abe and Putin had a summit meeting in Buenos Aires on the occasion of the G20 Buenos Aires Summit. Abe mentioned the importance of “grave visits” by the former island residents as a humanitarian measure (MOFA, 2018f). On January 22, 2019, Abe and Putin met for a summit meeting in Moscow, and agreed on accelerating the bilateral peace treaty negotiations and holding a summit meeting on the occasion of the G20 Osaka Summit in June 2019 (MOFA, 2019).

Notably, Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) and the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs co-organized the joint meeting of the Japanese-Russian/Russian-Japanese Committees on Economic Cooperation on November 19, 2018. In the meeting, both parties recognized prospects for business cooperation in such fields as, chemical cluster, shipbuilding, machinery, pharmaceutical and petrochemical industries, electro-technical goods, containers for the transport of liquids, gas, and petroleum products, automobile transport, and machine tool building, etc. (Keidanren, 2018). According to the data by the Trade Statistics of Japan of the Ministry of Finance, Russia was the fifth largest exporter of crude oil and LNG to Japan, and was the sixth largest importer of Japanese cars in 2017 (Trade Statistics of Japan, 2019). It indicates that Russia became an important trade partner and an indispensable energy supplier for Japan, and the further bilateral economic cooperation was expected to create a mutually beneficial economic partnership. Nonetheless, the bilateral economic cooperation did not have a spillover effect on the resolution of the disputed islands and the signing of a

bilateral peace treaty by Japan and Russia.

5. Social/Individual Aspects: The Public Opinions and Personal Views

As well as historical, political, and economic perspectives, social/individual perspectives of the former residents of the Northern Territories also need to be taken into consideration with regard to the resolution of the Japan-Russia territorial dispute. Retrospectively, the Soviet participation in the Asia Pacific War caused physical and psychological sufferings to some 600,000 Japanese people detained in the Soviet Union. About 60,000 Japanese detainees died in the Soviet Union back then (Togo, 2011, p. 124).

Approximately 17,000 Japanese people used to live in the Northern Territories before the Russian Forces occupied the islands and expelled the Japanese residents. Indigenous Japanese people, Ainu people, originally lived in the Northern Territories as well as Sakhalin. The indigenous islanders have argued that “the Ainu people must be included as sovereign owners in any negotiations for the return of the Northern Territories” and established the Kurile-East Hokkaido Ainu Association in 2009 (Kuroiwa, 2013, p. 194).

In the meanwhile, the attitudes and needs of former residents toward the Northern Territories issue have changed overtime. According to a survey by the Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK or Japan Broadcasting Corporation), the former residents became more pessimistic about the possibility of the return of the Northern Territories to Japan (Hirose, 2018, p. 15). In 1991, 63.3% of former residents answered that the Northern Territories would be returned, but only 13.9% supported the possibility of the return of the islands in 2015. Still, the former residents of the Northern Territories have consistently desired the return of their hometowns to Japan. In 1991, 89.8% of the former residents claimed that the Northern Territories should be returned to Japan, and 75.9% supported the argument in 2015. On the other hand, the survey shows that whereas 30.0% of the former residents answered that they want to live in their hometowns in 1991, only 16.7% wished to live in the Northern Territories in 2015. In addition, 41.3% of the former residents answered in 1991 that Japanese and Russians should live together in the islands, and 35.2% of the former residents expressed their desire that Japanese should be able to visit the islands freely even without living rights in 2015 (*ibid.*, 16). Given the needs of the former Japanese residents in the Northern Territories, Yoko Hirose, a professor at Keio University, suggested it should be possible to “find another way other than the return of all four islands, if the right to visit the Northern Territories is secured” (*ibid.*, 17).

On the basis of the bilateral arrangements for exchange program without visa, 12,861 Japanese people visited the four islands, whereas 9,108 Russian residents of the islands visited Japan by the fiscal year of 2016. Moreover, 4,191 Japanese people paid a free visit to the four islands by the fiscal year of 2016. As a humanitarian measure for the former Japanese residents in the four islands, 4,504 Japanese people participated in the grave visits by the fiscal year of 2016. The bilateral visa free exchange program and

the free visits and grave visits by the former Japanese residents have contributed to the mutual understanding of the four islands which could be a foundation for the resolution of the territorial dispute (Cabinet Office, 2019). From the social and individual perspectives therefore, it should be possible for both the former Japanese residents and current Russian residents have cultural exchanges and peaceful relationship in the islands. However, the bilateral cultural ties would not have an impact on the conflict resolution between the two countries after all.

6. Implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for the Japan-Russia Territorial Dispute

So far, the historical, political, economic, and social aspects on the Japan-Russia territorial dispute have been analyzed. It has turned out that the bilateral diplomatic negotiations for resolution of the territorial dispute have been faced with the political deadlock. This section examines how the Russia-Ukraine conflict that occurred in February 2014, which escalated into the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022, influenced the Japan-Russia relationship as well as prospects for solving the bilateral territorial conflict. Ever since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that broke out in February 2014, which escalated into an overall war in February 2022, the Japanese government has continued criticizing the invasion by Russia, and placed economic sanctions against Moscow. In response, Russia announced in March 2022 that it would officially withdraw from negotiations for a bilateral peace treaty (Harada, 2022). Chikahito Harada, as a former ambassador to the Russian Federation, argued that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine should be taken as a warning to East Asia and especially to Japan, whose Northern Territories the Russians have illegally occupied since the end of World War II” (ibid).

In particular, the Japanese government revised the draft of *Diplomatic Bluebook*, an official annual yearbook published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, in response to the aggression by Russia. Four points are worth confirming regarding *Diplomatic Bluebook 2022* with regard to the Japan-Russia relations. First, the report officially criticized that “Russia’s ongoing military invasion of Ukraine has brutally undermined the foundation of an international order built over the past 100 years” (Akimoto, 2022). Second, it described the Northern Territories as Japan’s “inherent territory” for the first time in 11 years. Third, it mentioned for the first time in 19 years that the Northern Territories had “illegally been occupied” by Russia. Fourth, it argued that “Japan is currently in no position to resume diplomatic negotiations toward a Japan-Russia peace treaty” (ibid).

On February 7, 2024, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida attended a government-sponsored rally, campaigning for the return of the Russian-held islands to Japan. At the rally held on Northern Territories Day, Kishida vowed that Japan would not abandon its policy toward a peace treaty with Russia including the return of the Northern Territories, stating “Although Japan-Russia relations are in a difficult situation, we will stick to our policy of resolving the territorial issue and concluding a peace treaty” (Japan Times, 2024). In response, however, former Russian president and current deputy chairman of the National Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, expressed his opinion on the territorial

issue with Japan as follows:

Well, nobody's against the peace treaty on the understanding that: (1) The "territorial question" is closed once and for all in accordance with the Constitution of Russia; (2) The Kuril Islands will be actively developing and their strategic role will be growing in parallel, including stationing new weapons there; (3) We don't give a damn about the "feelings of the Japanese" concerning the so-called Northern Territories. These are not "disputed territories" but Russia. And those of the samurai who feel especially sad can end their life in a traditional Japanese way, by committing *seppuku* (Bosack, 2024).

Medvedev's remark on the territorial issue by referring to the old Japanese custom illustrates how Kremlin officials are adamant to the territorial dispute especially in the post-Ukraine crisis. Michael MacArthur Bosack, a special adviser for government relations at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies, noted that it would be difficult for Japan to resolve the territorial problems at least "as long as the Putin regime remains in power" (ibid). Likewise, Aurelia George Mulgan, a professor at the University of New South Wales, pointed out that "Japan must now surely realize that trying to secure the return of the so-called Northern Territories from Russia is a fruitless quest and act accordingly" because of Putin's "imperialist" approach to territorial disputes (Mulgan, 2022). Mulgan mentioned that Russia gave "names to three uninhabited and unnamed islands in the Habomai group" in order to add "insult to injury" over the bilateral territorial dispute (ibid). Thus, geopolitical implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for the Japan-Russia territorial dispute indicate that the diplomatic negotiations for a permanent peace treaty and return of the Northern Territories to Japan would be virtually unattainable in the foreseeable future.

7. Discussion: A SWOT Analysis of the Signing of a Japan-Russia Peace Treaty

Although both the Japanese and Russian governments cannot compromise over the disputed islands, it is still feasible for both countries conclude a peace treaty as a first step toward a conflict resolution of the Northern Territories/Kurile Islands dispute. In an analysis of international relations including a formation of alliance with a formal legal obligation, it is useful to apply so-called SWOT as a systemic analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (e.g., Akimoto, 2024). For this reason, this section would like to apply SWOT analysis to examine whether the Japanese government and the Russian government would sign a peace treaty in the future.

Table 2. A SWOT Analysis of a Japan-Russia Peace Treaty

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Russian side may easily accept this option (the conclusion of a peace treaty) - Termination of war between Japan and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Japanese side may not accept this option (without the return of the Northern Territories)

Russia shall be legally and officially reconfirmed	-	The Russia-Ukraine War hinders this (as both countries halted diplomatic negotiations)
- Japan-Russia relations will be improved based on the peace treaty	-	The peace treaty may not resolve the territorial dispute (The Russian side prefers the scenario)
Opportunities		Threats
- The peace treaty may help resolve other territorial disputes in other countries	-	The peace treaty itself is unattainable in the status quo without the lack of leadership
- The peace treaty may be helpful for resolving Japan's other territorial disputes	-	The Russian side may not return the disputed islands despite the peace treaty
- The disputed islands could be unarmed neutral area for the bilateral peaceful coexistence	-	The United States may not approve of the signing of the peace treaty

Note. Created by the author based on this research.

First, there are a number of strengths or merits of signing a formal peace treaty for both Japan and Russia. Prior to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, the Russian side had occasionally suggested this offer of signing a peace treaty with Japan. One of the most significant examples of this offer was stipulated in the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration. More recently, Putin suddenly offered a permanent peace treaty with Japan without any preconditions. Although the 1956 joint declaration terminated the state of war between Japan and Russia, a formal peace treaty would officially reconfirm this aspect. Without a doubt, the conclusion of a peace treaty would contribute to making the bilateral relationship more amicable and peaceful.

Second, there are weaknesses, however, regarding the signing of a peace treaty for both Japan and Russia. More often than not, the Japanese side may not accept this option without the return of the Northern Territories, because the Japanese government has consistently argued that a peace treaty with Russia should be concluded with the return of the Northern Territories. On the other hand, the Russian side would not return the four islands in a single package to Japan, even if a peace treaty could be concluded with Japan. This tendency has been strengthened inside Russia after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War and the following diplomatic friction with the Japanese government. Yet, if the peace treaty is concluded based on the 1956 joint declaration, Russia shall be obliged to return Habomai and Shikotan to Japan at least.

Third, despite the weaknesses above, the signing of a peace treaty between Japan and Russia would bring more opportunities for both countries as well as the international community. The signing of a peace treaty between the two major powers in Northeast Asia would surely contribute to the stability of the region. It is ideal that a peace treaty between Tokyo and Moscow would help resolve other

territorial disputes in other countries around the globe. The signing of a peace treaty between the two countries can be a precedence for a territorial dispute resolution, and may be also helpful for resolving Japan's other territorial disputes, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as well as the Takeshima/Dokdo Islands. In theory, it is ideal that the disputed islands could be an unarmed neutral area for the bilateral peaceful coexistence.

Fourth, there are threats or limitations with regard to the conclusion of a Japan-Russia Peace Treaty however. The peace treaty itself is unattainable in the status quo without the lack of strong leadership especially in the post-Ukraine crisis. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Russian side may not return the disputed islands despite the conclusion of a peace treaty with Japan. Moreover, the United States may not approve of the signing of a peace treaty as with the case of the intervention by John Foster Dulles during the negotiations for the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration (Kajiura, 1987). Of course, the geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia is different from that of the Cold War period, however, any compromise plans for a peace treaty with Russia would eventually influence Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, it is necessary for the Japanese government to consult with the US government regarding further negotiations for a peace treaty with Russia in the post-Russia-Ukraine period.

6. Conclusion

This research has investigated the historical, political, economic, and social/individual aspects of resolving the Japan-Russia territorial dispute and possibilities of concluding a bilateral peace treaty. First, it has been confirmed that the bilateral territorial dispute dates back to the origin of Japan-Russia relations, and reviewed several diplomatic turning-points, such as 1855 Shimoda Treaty, the 1875 Treaty of Saint Petersburg, the 1904 Russo-Japanese War, the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty, the 1941 Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, the 1943 Cairo Declaration, 1945 Yalta Conference, and the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty. It has been confirmed that the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the Japan-US military alliance made the bilateral territorial dispute complicated and unresolved.

Second, the political and diplomatic efforts toward a bilateral peace treaty were discussed. It confirmed the significance of the 1956 Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration, the 1991 Japan-Soviet Joint Communiqué, and the 1993 Tokyo Declaration. Nevertheless, the diplomatic negotiations for the resolution of territorial dispute as well as the conclusion of a peace treaty resulted in failure, owing to the lack of political compromise and accord between the two nations. Third, this study deliberated the economic implications for the resolution of the bilateral territorial dispute. Although the bilateral economic cooperation strengthened the bilateral business and economic ties, while side stepping the pursue of a permanent peace treaty, it eventually ended up with a fruitless result.

Fourth, this research shed light on the social/individual aspects of the bilateral territorial dispute by paying attention to the former Japanese residents of the Northern Territories as well as public opinions over the territorial dispute. It noted that the grave visit by the former Japanese residents to the disputed islands could be regarded as significant indicator for the possible peaceful coexistence among the Russian people and the former Japanese residents. Having said that, the political, diplomatic, economic endeavors toward a peace treaty and the conflict resolution became unrealistic after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. The current geopolitical situations over the Russia-Ukraine War made Japan-Russia relations deteriorated and bilateral negotiations toward a peace treaty have been suspended because of the war.

Finally, this research applied a SWOT analysis to examine the possibility of signing a peace treaty between Japan and Russia. Both countries would have benefits from the conclusion of a peace treaty, and it could have positive impacts on regional and global security environment as well as other territorial disputes Japan has been involved with. Nevertheless, there are also weaknesses, limitations, and threats in the signing of a peace treaty by Tokyo and Moscow. The conclusion of a peace treaty could signify that the return of only two islands (Habomai and Shikotan) to Japan at least as long as both sides pursue a peace treaty based on the 1956 joint declaration. The Russian side might not return any disputed islands to the Japanese side, especially after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. At this stage, any bilateral negotiations for a peace treaty themselves are virtually unfeasible due to the diplomatic tension between Tokyo and Moscow. Having said that, it is likely that the future Japanese government would restore the political ties with Russia after the end of the Russia-Ukraine War, and could resume further negotiations for signing a Japan-Russia peace treaty for the sake of the bilateral relationship as well as the peace and stability of the Northeast Asia region.

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