

The Special Political and Decolonization Committee



Addressing the Territorial Dispute in the Kuril Islands

-Research Report-

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1. Introduction

The Kuril Islands, known as the Northern Territories in Japan, are a group of islands located between Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula and Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. The islands have been the subject of a territorial dispute between Russia and Japan since the end of World War II.

The dispute centers around the ownership of four islands - Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai - which were occupied by Soviet forces at the end of the war. Japan claims sovereignty over these islands, citing historical and legal precedents, while Russia argues that its possession of the islands is legal and recognized by international law.

The dispute has been a major point of contention between Japan and Russia, with both countries refusing to budge on their respective claims. Japan has repeatedly called for the return of the islands, which it says are an integral part of its territory, while Russia maintains that it has sovereignty over the islands and that their status is not negotiable.

2. Definition of Key Terms

Kuril Islands: A chain of islands located between Japan's Hokkaido Island and Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. The islands are currently under Russian control, but Japan claims sovereignty over the four southernmost islands.

Russo-Japanese War: A war fought between Russia and Japan in 1904-1905 over territorial disputes in Northeast Asia, including the Kuril Islands.

San Francisco Peace Treaty: A treaty signed in 1951 that officially ended World War II and provided for the transfer of Japanese territories, including the Kuril Islands, to the control of the Allied powers.

Triple Intervention: A diplomatic intervention by Russia, Germany, and France in 1895 that forced Japan to give up its territorial claims in the Liaodong Peninsula, part of present-day China, and the Kuril Islands.

Nonaggression Pact: A treaty signed by Japan and the Soviet Union in 1941, in which the two countries agreed not to attack each other for the duration of the war. The treaty did not address the issue of the Kuril Islands.

Ainu people: The indigenous people of the northern Japanese islands, including Hokkaido. The Ainu have long-standing cultural and historical ties to the Kuril Islands.

Potsdam Declaration: A statement issued by the Allied powers at the end of World War II, calling for Japan to surrender unconditionally and setting out the terms of Japan's post-war disarmament and governance. The declaration did not specifically address the Kuril Islands, but it did call for the restoration of territories that Japan had seized by force.

3. History

Between 1192 and 1867, Japan was a shogunate, or a hereditary military dictatorship, under the command of the shogun. In its last 250 years, Japan isolated itself completely from the world. This period was one of political and economic prosperity for Japan. Under the leadership of the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, settlers and soldiers were moved to the northern parts of the archipelago to expand the Japanese territory. This can be seen as the first productive action of soon-to-be imperial Japan. After reaching the northern lands of Hokkaido, the shogun started to advance even further into the Kuril Islands. On the other side of the Kuril archipelago, however, another ambitious imperialist nation was also expanding its claims, The Russian Empire.

In the first years of the 17th century, Russia managed to establish complete authority over Siberia. However, one of the major downsides was sea access. Consequently, Russia started to expand in the Kamchatka peninsula and from there south, into the Kuril Islands, where it met the Japanese. In 1811, Tsar Alexander I tasked Vasily Golovnin, a renowned explorer, with the mission of mapping the Kuril Islands. Upon approaching Kunashir Island, Golovnin's ship was captured and he and his crew were imprisoned by the Japanese for 2 years, until their release in 1813. The Tsar understood that a clear border definition between Russia and Japan was imperative. In 1855, *the Shimoda Treaty* was signed by the two nations, which ensured Japanese control over the 4 southernmost of the Kuril Islands, Russia claimed the rest of them, to the north, and the Sakhalin Island would be jointly administered by both.

In 1867, the Japanese shogunate period ended with the retirement of Yoshinobu and the instauration of the Meiji family for leadership, Mutshito being the first emperor of Japan. He began a dramatic development of the Japanese army and economy, transforming it into one of the greatest powers of the world by the 20th century. In 1875, due to further ambitions of both sides, the *Treaty of Saint Petersburg* was signed, through which Russia would give up the entirety of the Kuril Islands to Japan in exchange for full control over the Sakalin Island.

In the following years, both nations continued to satisfy their imperialist desires by advancing into southern parts and "robbing" China of its territories. For instance, *the first Sino-Japanese war* (1894-1895), between China and Japan, ended with the *Treaty of Shimonoseki*, which obliged the Qing Dynasty, among others, to surrender to Japan the following pieces of land: Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, the Liaodong Peninsula. Moreover, it required China to pay 200 million taels in war indemnity and to open several ports to Japanese trade. This was followed by the cooperation of Russia, Germany, and France to introduce *The Triple Intervention*, in 1895, which required returning the Liaodong Peninsula to China, with the benefit of receiving 30 million more taels. Later, after the continuous insistence of Tsar Nicholas II, China agreed to lease Port Arthur to the Russian Empire for 25 years, therefore granting the Siberian country access to waters that do not freeze as often as those they were used to. They swiftly stationed their most powerful fleet in this port.

As retaliation for The Triple Intervention and due to rising tensions between the two powerful empires growing in each other's vicinity and fighting over the same territories, on the night of February 8-9, 1904, Japan's largest fleet surprise-attacked the Russian squadron in Port Arthur, without any formal declaration of war, and so started the 18 months *long Russo-Japanese War*. It ended in 1905 with Japan's victory and earning the south of Sakhalin.

In the following decades, Japan continued its expansion, conquering Manchuria by 1937. Many nations criticized the Insular State's aggression but no sanctions were yet implemented. The situation changed when Japan turned its eyes toward Indochina and Indonesia, intending to capture the oil-rich lands in these regions. Such a threat would not be overlooked by the United States, which immediately placed a complete oil and scrap metal embargo on Japan. This sanction could be drastic for Japanese further conquering plans, given the fact that almost 80% of its war machinery was fuelled by American oil. By this time *The Second World War* was imminent, and rising tensions existed all over the world. Japan entered the war as Germany's greatest ally, alongside Italy. In 1941, Stalin and Hirohito (Japan's emperor during World War II), signed a *non-aggression treaty* for 5 years. Although great enemies, with this pact, the two nations were able to concentrate their otherwise used military forces in Eastern Asia, in more concerning regions of the ongoing war. With Hitler's *Barbarossa Operation* from 1941, it would have been easy for Japan to break the pact, invade Russia, and bring Stalin's empire to a certain demise. However, its military was concentrated in the Pacific Ocean fighting the United States, which joined the war officially after its disastrous defeat at *Pearl Harbour*.

Before the end of the war, two important meetings between the United States, Great Britain, and The Soviet Union took place: the *Yalta Conference*, in which the US promised to Russia its lost territories during the Russo-Japanese war (including the Kuril Islands) if they attacked Japan, and the *Potsdam Conference*, during which Japan received an ultimatum from the US to surrender.

To further decide Japan's post-war international state, two more important treaties were ratified, which are more clearly explained in the Timeline section of this report: *The San-Francisco Treaty* (1951), which ended Japan's conflict with the Allies, in its text being mentioned that Japan renounces their rulership over the Kuril islands, among others, and the *Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration* (1956), which restored diplomatic relations between the two and settled most of their territorial disputes.

4. Key Issues

The territorial dispute in the Kuril Islands between Russia and Japan involves several key issues. Some of the main issues include:

Historical and Legal Claims: Japan maintains that the four islands were illegally taken from them by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II and that they have a legitimate historical and legal claim to the territory. Russia, on the other hand, argues that the islands were transferred to them legally as part of the post-war settlement.

Strategic Importance: The Kuril Islands are strategically located between Russia's Far East peninsula of Kamchatka and Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, and they provide a significant buffer for Russia against a potential attack from the east. Furthermore, the four southernmost islands that Japan continues to claim for itself are very valuable territory because the waters between Iturup and Kunashir islands do not freeze in winter. They are the only islands from the Kuril archipelago where this happens. For Russia, this would represent a major advantage for sending ships and submarines into the Pacific Ocean without them passing through western surveillance waters. Control over the islands also gives Russia access to valuable fishing grounds and potentially significant oil and gas reserves in the surrounding waters.

National Identity and Sovereignty: The dispute over the Kuril Islands is tied to questions of national identity and sovereignty for both Russia and Japan. For Japan, the islands represent an important part of their territorial integrity, and the dispute is seen as a matter of national pride. For Russia, control over the islands is seen as a matter of national security and sovereignty.

Geopolitical Considerations: The dispute over the Kuril Islands has broader geopolitical implications, as it is part of a larger struggle for influence and power in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan is seeking to expand its presence in the region and enhance its security ties with the United States, while Russia is seeking to assert its influence in the region and maintain its strategic position.

Economic Interests: The islands have significant economic potential, including fisheries, oil and gas reserves, and tourism. Both Japan and Russia have proposed joint economic development of the islands, but this has proven difficult due to the underlying territorial dispute.

These issues have made it difficult to resolve the dispute over the Kuril Islands, and the dispute is likely to continue to be a contentious issue between Russia and Japan for the foreseeable future.

5. Major Parties Involved

The territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands involves two main parties: Russia and Japan. The dispute is a long-standing issue between the two countries that have yet to be resolved. Here's a closer look at the major parties involved:

Russia: Russia currently occupies the four disputed islands (Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and Habomai) and maintains that its sovereignty over the islands is legitimate and recognized by international law. Russia argues that the islands were transferred to them at the end of World War II as part of the post-war settlement and that they have the right to maintain control over the islands.

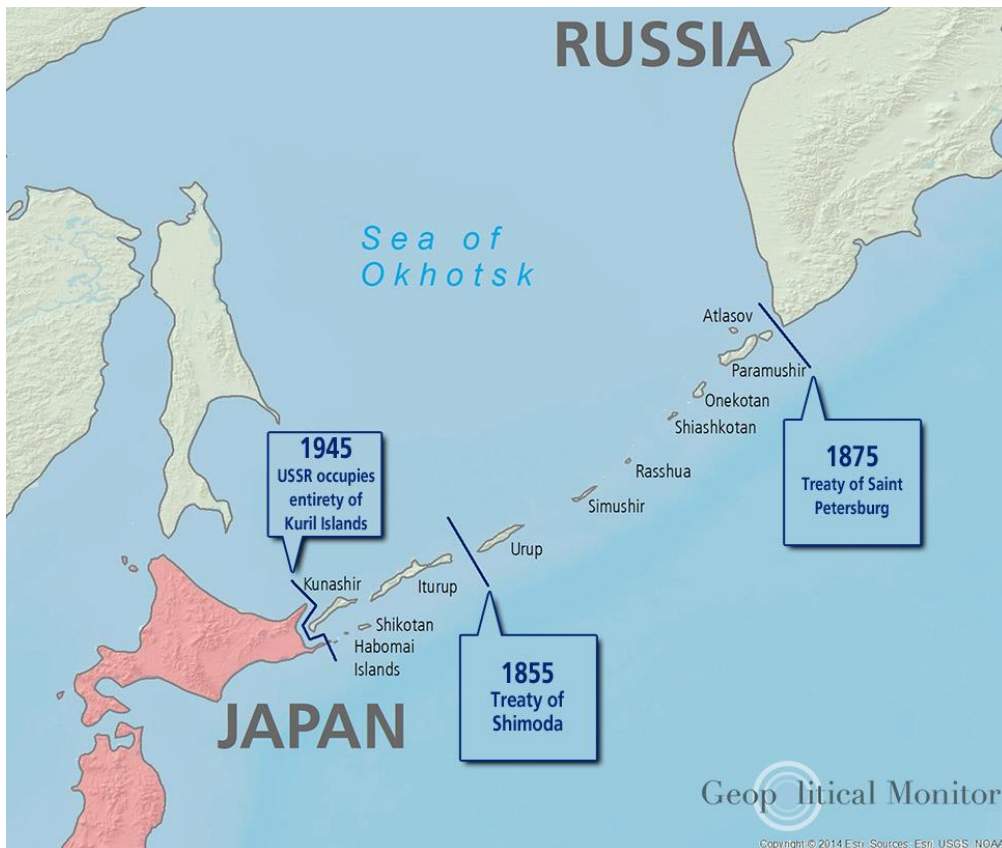
Japan: Japan claims sovereignty over the four disputed islands and refers to them as the "Northern Territories." Japan argues that the islands were illegally taken from them by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II and that they have a legitimate historical and legal claim to the territory. Japan has repeatedly called for the return of the islands and maintains that their control is critical to its national security.

United States: The United States is a major stakeholder in the dispute, as it has close security ties with Japan and has interests in maintaining stability in the region. The U.S. has taken a neutral position on the territorial dispute but has encouraged Japan and Russia to work towards a resolution.

Other countries: The territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands has implications for other countries in the region, including *China*, *South Korea*, and *North Korea*. These countries have largely stayed neutral on the issue but are paying close attention to any developments that could affect the balance of power in the region.

Despite numerous attempts to resolve the dispute over the years, there has been no progress toward a resolution. The dispute remains a contentious issue between Russia and Japan, and it is unclear when or if a resolution will be reached.

6. Timeline



I. Treaty of Shimoda (1855)

After the soon-to-be great powers of Eastern Asia, Russia, and Japan, crossed paths in the Kuril islands in their expansion process, both sides sought means of delimitation. Therefore, on February 1855, The Treaty of Shimoda was signed, which stipulated the Japanese sovereignty over the Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan, Habomai, and any small surrounding islands and Russia's sovereignty over Urup, Simushir, Rasshua, Shiashkotan, Onekotan, Paramushir, Atlasov and all of the remaining small nearby islands.

II. Treaty of Saint Petersburg (1875)

Its terms set an exchange between Russia and Japan: Russia would have full sovereignty over Sakhalin Island and Japan would receive the entirety of the Kuril archipelago. Interpretations of the original text in Japanese constitute one of the main reasons for the present dispute over the Kuril Islands.

III. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894 – 1895)

As Japan was advancing with its conquering mission to the south, it encountered a new civilization that was trying to win its independence from China, the Koreans. The Japanese

were highly interested in the Korean peninsula for its oil and iron reserves, but under Chinese domination, no friendly relations were in sight. Upon the break out of the Tonghak peasant rebellion in Korea, Chinese troops were sent to help disperse the attacks and as a result, Japan also sent troops because it considered China's implication "intolerable" and also sank the British ship bringing reinforcements. These events lead to the tensions that generated The First Sino-Japanese War. Normally, this war would have been an effortless victory for the great power that China represented, but Japan's swift military development and modernization in the previous decades aided it in defeating its enemy by March 1895. China was forced to sign peace through the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

IV. The Treaty of Shimonoseki (April 17, 1895)

It was the treaty that ended the First Sino-Japanese war and its terms require China to recognize the independence of Korea, to pay 200 million taels, and to cede the territories of Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaodong Peninsula. This victory represented Japan's uprising into the world of great powers.

V. The Triple Intervention (April 23, 1895)

Represented a diplomatic intervention of Russia, France, and Germany over the claims made by Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, to halt the Japanese fast expansion. At the end of the negotiations, Japan retreated its troops and returned the Liaodong peninsula to China in exchange for 30 million additional taels. This represented one of the factors that added to the stack of tensions that led to the Russo-Japanese War.

VI. The Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905)

After the victory against the Qing Dynasty, Japan created a modern and efficient navy and army to assert itself in Eastern Asia. Despite Japan's obvious intentions, Russia focused on gaining access to warmer waters, obtaining a lease from China for Port Arthur for 25 years. Due to rising tensions between Russia and Japan including influence over the Korean peninsula, resource extraction from Eastern Asia, The Triple Intervention, etc., on the night of February 8-9, 1904, Japan's main fleet attacked the ships stationed in Port Arthur by surprise, without any formal war declaration. In the months that followed, Japan made a blockade keeping the Russian forces between the Korean peninsula and the continent. The most important and decisive battle was The Battle of Tsushima (May 1905). The Russian navy suffered a heavy loss that ended with their surrender and eventually lead to the defeat of Russia in this war. Peace was signed with the Treaty of Portsmouth, by which Japan obtained the south of Sakhalin.

VII. The Second World War (1939 – 1945)

Started with the sudden invasion of Poland by Germany. Poland capitulates after only 3 weeks and its entire territory was annexed by Germany. Hitler continued to advance toward Belgium and France. After 2 years he dominated almost half of Europe. His main allies were the members of the Axis, Mussolini's Italy, and Hirohito's Japan. After the USA joined the war, the balance of powers started to favour the Allies and after 4 more years of battle on several fronts, Germany was defeated.

VIII. The Non-Aggression Agreement between Russia and Japan (1941)

In 1941, in the middle of the war, both Russia and Japan, despite their existing tensions, had much bigger problems to worry about. Therefore, they decided to sign a non-aggression agreement for five years. This would allow both to focus on their separate, opposite fronts (Russia in Europe and Japan in the Pacific Ocean against the US). However, in April 1945,

Russia renounced the pact as a consequence of the decisions at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences.

IX. The Attack on Pearl Harbour (1941)

On December 7th, 1941, Japan conducted coordinated attacks using fighter, dive bomber, and torpedo bomber aircraft, in two waves launched from six aircraft carriers onto the port in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Japanese losses were minor, but the American losses were catastrophic: almost 20 warships were sunken or damaged, including battleships, cruises, and anti-aircraft ships, almost 200 US aircraft were destroyed and 2403 Americans were killed. This event led to the US entering World War II.

X. The Yalta Conference (1945)

Between February 4 and 11 of 1945, British prime minister Winston Churchill, American president Franklin Roosevelt, and the soviet leader Joseph Stalin met at Yalta to discuss post-war courses of action. As Germany's defeat was in clear sight by this time, it was settled that the land will be divided between US, British, French, and Soviets, and that the German military industry would be abolished and confiscated. Furthermore, captured war criminals would face a trial at Nurnberg and a "hunt" for escaped nazi criminals would be started. More important for this topic is the situation in the Pacific. A secret protocol took a course, during which Roosevelt and Churchill promised Stalin that if he declared war on Japan, he would retrieve all lost territories from the Russo-Japanese war. However, more clarifications on this matter were going to be settled at their next meeting, The Potsdam Conference.

XI. The Potsdam Conference (1945)

American president Harry Truman, British prime minister Winston Churchill, or Clement Atlee (who was elected during the same period of this conference), and the soviet leader Joseph Stalin met at Potsdam between July 17 and August 2 to finalize negotiations for the post-war world. The administration of defeated Germany's territories was settled, the reimplementing of Poland's borders was resolved, the Soviet Union's purpose in Eastern Europe was defined, post-war reparations were fixed and further war prosecution of Japan was decided. The latter of those is of major concern for the topic discussed. This conference was the first official meeting to have such a great impact on its state until then. Truman told Stalin about the secret nuclear development project and on the 26th of July, an ultimatum was issued by the members of the conference to Japan, requiring it to surrender or major consequences would come upon them. After two weeks of no response on behalf of the insular country, on the 6th of August, 1945, an American aircraft carrying the atomic bomb named "Little Boy" flew over and dropped it directly on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Just two days later, Stalin renounced the non-aggression pact with Japan and officially declared war. On the 9th of August, 1945, the second atomic bomb, "Fat Man", was dropped on Nagasaki and the Russian military invaded Manchuria and the Kuril Islands. During the invasion, the Russian military forcibly expatriated the Japanese population and deported people of their own to these territories, including Russians and Ukrainians.

XII. The San-Francisco Treaty (1951)

Represented the peace treaty between Japan and the Allies after World War II. In its terms, many stipulations are provided regarding Japan's new territories, relationship with the West, application for the United Nations, damage compensations, and many more. In Article 2, section (c) of the agreement it is stated that "Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the

Kurile Islands". This is one of the main arguments of Russia in the present dispute over these lands. The Soviet Union did not sign the treaty, nor did it attend the conference.

XIII. The Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration (1956)

This document represented the pact that would end the war state between the two nations and restore diplomatic relations. However, it did not settle peace, it only approved future peace negotiations. Peace could be achieved only after solving all disputes between these countries, including the fight over the Kuril islands, more specifically, over the four islands closest to Japan. Russia proposed a "two island transfer", an offer that remained available for Japan until very recently, in which Russia would give Japan the two smaller islands of the four, Habomai and Shikotan. Japan is majorly unsatisfied with this proposal and demands the "four-island return", with which Russia has not and still does not seem to comply with.

XIV. The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022)

On February 24, 2022, the Russian military invaded Ukraine, an action that shook the world. Japan was the only Asian country to impose sanctions on Russia during the Crimean invasion and now was the first to do so again only two weeks after the attack. As a result, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, formally declared that he renounces any peace negotiations with Japan on the Kuril Islands dispute and even practiced military exercises on most of the archipelago's islands, including those claimed by Japan as a form of intimidation.

7. Evaluation of Previous Attempts

World War II: The dispute over the Kuril Islands began at the end of World War II when Soviet forces occupied the islands that had previously been under Japanese control. Japan and the Soviet Union signed a joint declaration in 1956 that ended the state of war between the two countries but did not resolve the issue of the islands. There were several reasons why the joint declaration did not resolve the issue of the Kuril Islands. Firstly, the Soviet Union had established settlements and military bases on the islands, and it was reluctant to give up control over them. Secondly, Japan and the Soviet Union had fundamentally different views on the ownership of the islands. Japan claimed that the islands were part of its territory and had been illegally occupied by the Soviet Union, while the Soviet Union argued that it had legal control over the islands as a result of its victory in World War II. Even though it did not solve the conflict, the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two parties was crucial in enabling the possibility of a consensus.

Tokyo Declaration: In 1993, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa signed the "Tokyo Declaration," which acknowledged the existence of a territorial dispute between the two countries and expressed a commitment to work towards a resolution. The Tokyo Declaration expressed a commitment by both countries to work towards a solution to the dispute through negotiations, based on international law and taking into account the interests of both sides. The declaration also stated that the dispute resolution would contribute to the strengthening of overall bilateral relations between Russia and Japan. Despite the commitment expressed in the Tokyo Declaration, however, the issue of the Kuril Islands remains unresolved to this day. Negotiations between Russia and Japan have continued, but progress has been slow, and there are still significant differences in the positions of the two countries. The Tokyo Declaration remains an important milestone in the efforts to resolve the dispute, but it also highlights the challenges involved in reaching a mutually acceptable solution.

Military actions: Both Russia and Japan have taken military actions related to the dispute over the years. In 2018, for example, Russia deployed anti-ship missiles to the disputed islands, prompting protests from Japan. Meanwhile, Japan has increased its military presence in the region, including through the deployment of new military assets to its northernmost island of Hokkaido. Military intimidation tactics have proven inefficient as both countries are great, modern powers of the world, and in both ideologies, threats must be treated with an equally aggressive response. Thus, military implications only led to rising tensions in the region.

8. Possible Solutions

Mediation: If direct negotiations are unsuccessful, a third-party mediator could be brought in to help facilitate talks between Russia and Japan. The United Nations or other international organizations could play a role in this process, providing a neutral forum for the two countries to discuss their differences. A mediator could help to bridge the gap between the two sides and find common ground for negotiations. The mediator could be a person or a group of people who have experience in mediation, conflict resolution, and international law. They could act as a neutral third party, helping to facilitate talks and finding areas of compromise that may be acceptable to both parties.

Economic cooperation: Japan and Russia could focus on economic cooperation as a way to build trust and improve relations. This could include joint development of the islands and the surrounding waters, as well as other forms of economic collaboration that could benefit both countries. One possible area for economic cooperation is the joint development of the islands and the surrounding waters. The islands and their waters are rich in natural resources, including fish, oil, and gas, and managing these resources jointly could be a way to create economic benefits for both countries. By collaborating on these projects, Japan and Russia could share the costs and risks of development and maximize the potential benefits.

Legal action: Both Russia and Japan could seek legal action to assert their claims to the islands. Japan could seek international arbitration or take the issue to the International Court of Justice, while Russia could continue to assert its sovereignty over the islands through diplomatic channels. Japan could seek international arbitration, which involves submitting the dispute to a neutral third party for a binding resolution. International arbitration has been used to resolve territorial disputes in the past, and could be an option for Japan to assert its claims to the islands.

Status quo: Another possible option is to maintain the status quo, with Russia continuing to control the islands and Japan recognizing Russian sovereignty. While this may not be a satisfying solution for either side, it could provide a way to avoid escalating tensions and preserve stability in the region. This approach may not be a pleasing solution for either country, as both Russia and Japan have strong claims to the islands and the issue has been a source of tension between the two countries for decades. Japan would have to accept the loss of the islands, which would be difficult for the government and the public to accept. Russia would need to continue to defend its sovereignty over the islands, which may not be feasible in the face of continued Japanese diplomatic pressure and international criticism.

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