

Japan-Russia New Framework: Will it Result into Conclusion of a Peace Treaty?

Speaker: Dr. Shamshad Ahmad Khan (Visiting Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies)

Chair: Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa (Member, Governing Council, ICS and Former Ambassador from India to Japan, Sweden and Qatar)

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The event started with Ambassador Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa's opening remarks drawing an introductory outline of the topic. It briefly analysed the growing number of interactions between Japan and Russia and the special interest of the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Russian President Vladimir Putin in reaching an agreement between these two countries to make a formal end to the Second World War with a treaty of peace. Welcoming the speaker, the Chair commended the broader East Asia focus of the Institute of Chinese Studies and Dr Shamshad's expertise in the Japanese politics.

Dr Shamshad began his talk by explaining why Japan and Russia failed to reach a peace treaty after the Second World War. He pointed out the major area of dispute between these two countries and their contentious views on reaching a peace treaty without having a resolution to the territorial dispute. With a detailed map in projector, the speaker helped the audience to make a sense of topography of the Russo-Japanese territorial dispute which creates tension in the southern part of what is called the Northern Islands in Japan and the Kuril Islands in Russia. He drew attention to the core area of contention which includes four major islands, two larger islands called Kunashir and Iturup and two smaller islands called Shikotan and Habomai Islands. These four islands, located in the southwest of Sea of Okhotsk, are currently under the Russian administration.

Explaining the on-going effort for settling the dispute, the speaker said that as of now 24 major talks were held between Putin and Abe since they assumed power. In their last talk, on the side-lines of 13th G20 Summit which was held in Argentina's capital Buenos Aires between 30th November and 1st December, both leaders agreed that they would develop a new framework for settling the dispute. The meeting directed Foreign Ministers of both the

countries to steer the process for developing the new framework. The Japanese Prime Minister expects to have a new framework by 14th G20 Summit which will be held in Osaka, Japan, in June 2019. However, there are many concerns regarding the ability of both parties to resolve the area of disagreements within a period of six months.

The speaker briefly narrated geopolitical history of the disputed territory to provide an in-depth sense of territorial dispute between these two countries. He asserted, the Japanese sources claim that it was them who discovered and surveyed these islands in the very first place. The early inhabitants of the islands included both the Japanese and the Russian people. In 1855, for the first time, Russia and Japan signed a treaty, the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation, also known as the Treaty of Shimoda, which define the sovereignty of these islands. In this treaty both parties agreed that the border of these two countries would lie between the islands of Iturup and Urup. It left undefined the status of Sakhalin Island, located in the west of Sea of Okhotsk, which was under the Japanese control. In 1875, they made another agreement, known as the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, to settle the tension left by the previous agreement. This time, Japan gave up its claim over Sakhalin and took all the Kuril Islands. Technically, with this agreement Japan became a peninsula, as a portion of its border became connected to the mainland. However, the status of the region transformed again in 1904-05 period when Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. Following the war, with the Treaty of Portsmouth which was signed in 1905, Japan took back half of Sakhalin, which they ceded to Russia in 1875, as reparation of the war. The status continued until 1945, though there were many ups and downs in the tension between these two countries during this period. In 1941, when the Second World War was redrawing the geopolitical landscape of the world, they signed the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact and refrained from attacking each other in the initial years of war. However, since the Big Three alliance, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, was formed, the United States wanted the Soviet Union to resist the Japanese expansionism in the east.

In Yalta Conference which held in early 1945, the Allied Powers agreed that the Soviet Union would enter into war against Japan after the defeat of Germany. They all agreed that the 1904 Japanese attack on Russia was a treacherous act and the southern part of Sakhalin and the islands adjacent to it, which Japan occupied after the war, will be returned to the Soviet Union. They also agreed that the Kuril Islands will be handed over to the Soviet Union. The speaker observed that it was the United States who mediated the Portsmouth Treaty in 1905 and both the US and the UK were extending their tacit support to Japan during the

Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. On 8th August 1945, after the Hiroshima bombing and when the Japanese surrender was almost certain, the Soviet Union entered into the war against Japan. The speaker asserts, the Japanese historical sources say that the Russian onslaught on Japan continued till September 5, even though Japan surrendered in mid-August. In this period, the Soviet Union occupied entire Kuril Islands up to Hokkaido.

After the Second World War, in 1951, Japan and other major powers, except the Soviet Union, signed a peace treaty called the Treaty of San Francisco. In this treaty, Tokyo agreed that it will give up its claim over Kuril Islands and the southern part of Sakhalin. However, in terms of the Japanese understanding, the four islands in the southwest part of the island group in the Sea of Okhotsk is not part of Kuril Islands. In their view, these four islands are part of their own Northern Territory. They argue that these four islands were undisputed territory of Japan much before the beginning of Japanese Expansionism. Though it did not accept the Japanese understanding of Kuril Islands, in the Joint Declaration signed in 1956 the Soviet Union agreed to hand over two small islands, Shikotan and Habomai, to Japan to settle the dispute and sign a peace treaty. It was agreed upon between the leadership of both Japan and the Soviet Union and ratified by the Japanese Diet and the Russian Duma. However, due to widespread domestic sentiments against this move, Japan delayed the signing of this agreement. The speaker observed that the Cold War politics also played an important role in blocking this agreement. There was no other notable effort during the Cold War to settle the dispute.

Since the end of the Cold War many negotiations were held between Japan and Russia to settle the dispute and sign a peace treaty. However, these talks didn't shape any positive direction until Putin came to power. After assuming the power, Putin declared that the 1956 Joint Declaration should be the basis of further negotiation and Russia is ready for *Hiki-wake*, a tie or draw in the dispute. The Japanese leadership welcomed the Russian move for *Hiki-wake* with a hope that Russia is willing to giving up half of the disputed territory. However, here again the Japanese definition differed from the Russian understanding. In Japan, the judo term *Hiki-wake* means two equal halves, which means the disputed territory will be divided equally. On the basis this, Japan demanded that Russia should cede at least three islands in the Japanese side. Meanwhile, what Russia meant by employing the term *Hiki-wake* was half of the four, which is two, as agreed in 1956.

The speaker talked about various discourses in Japan regarding the process of settling its dispute with Russia. He analysed different narratives in the Japanese media to reveal the discursive transformation in recent years in Japan's approach towards the dispute. He expressed hope in the new Japanese approach which is willing to accept the Russian settlers in the disputed islands. Talking about the strategic implications of settling the dispute, the speaker said that Russia is highly concerned whether Japan will allow the United States to establish its military stations on the islands if they ceded them to Japan. Russia is seeking assurance from Japan that it will not allow any military presence, neither the American nor the Japanese, on the islands once they are ceded to Japan. Referring to the Japanese media sources, he said that the Prime Minister Abe is willing to make the area a demilitarized region by accepting the Russian demand. However, it wants Russia to express similar concern and limit their military presence in the region. The speaker concluded the talk by arguing that both the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Japanese Minister Shinzo Abe are seeking an image makeover and the settling of the dispute will definitely have positive impacts on the legacy of their leadership.

Report prepared by Muhammed Kunhi, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies

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