Critical Issues Confronting China: Can Sino-Russian Territorial Dispute Settlement be an Example for Russia and Japan?

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Alexander Lukin and Olga Puzanova are respectively experts in Sino-Russian and Russian-Japanese relations. During their talk, Lukin analyzed how the improvement in Sino-Russian relations helped both sides to reach a resolution of their four-decade territorial dispute in 2004. Puzanova delineated the history that led to the Russian-Japanese territorial dispute and concluded that their bilateral relations have not reached the amicable level of Sino-Russian relations of 2004.

Lukin, Head of the Department of International Relations at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow and Director of the Center for East Asian and Shanghai Cooperation Studies at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), first explained the history of the Sino-Russian territorial dispute. Russia acquired two pieces of land bordering China’s northeast province, Heilongjiang, through the Aigun Treaty of 1858 and the Beijing Treaty of 1860. However, neither of these treaties specified where the exact dividing line lay. Russia assumed that the border lay at the Chinese banks of the Amur River (黑龙江) and of the Ussuri River (乌苏里江), but China insisted that the middle line of the rivers was the border.

In negotiations in 1964, the USSR agreed to the Thalweg Principle, for instance, using the middle of the primary navigable waterway as the dividing line, but these talks collapsed for political reasons. This failure culminated in military clashes on the Damansky Island (珍宝岛) in 1969. Throughout the 1970s, China thawed its cold war relationship with the U.S. In 1982, China then declared it would carry out independent foreign policy. It identified four obstacles to normalizing relations with the USSR, while opening the border for bilateral trade. This progress led to the summit meeting between Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev and the Chinese paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, in 1989. Through a series of agreements in the 1990s on border management and confidence-building measures, bilateral interactions and cooperation were further enhanced. Russia became a member of the China-initiated Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001. By 2003, Russia became the fourth largest trading partner with China.

In this atmosphere of general improvement in bilateral relations, the irritating territorial dispute was finally settled in 2004, with Russia confirming the Thalweg principle and China upholding the freedom of navigation, including in Tumannaya River (图们江). The three disputed
islands were carefully negotiated, resulting in each side owning approximately half of the total land area. Lukin underlined that the overall amicable bilateral relationship made the eventual compromise possible, rather than the other way around, resolving territorial disputes first and then improving relations. He pointed out four differences between Russia’s territorial disputes with China and with Japan, making the Sino-Russian resolution template difficult to suit Japan. First, Russia’s dispute with China is a result of a long history of relationships, whereas that with Japan is a direct consequence of Japan’s defeat in World War II. Second, China was a long-term Communist ally of the USSR, whereas Japan allied with the U.S. after the war. Third, some of the disputed islands have a considerable Russian population, unlike those disputed with China. Fourth, Russia has consistently claimed those islands in dispute with Japan.

Puzanova, Lecturer at the Department of International Relations and Researcher at the International Laboratory of World Order Studies and the New Regionalism at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, explained that the four southernmost Kuril Islands under dispute—Etorofu (Iturup) Island, Kunashir Island, Shikotan Island, and Habomai Islands—had been under Japan’s control prior to 1945, as a legacy of the Shimoda Treaty of 1855 and the Treaty of St. Petersburg of 1875. The USSR annexed the Kuril Islands at the end of World War II. In the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, Japan agreed to give up “all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands,” but insists that these four islands are not a part of the Kuril Islands; therefore, they are not covered by the Treaty. In 1956, Japan and the USSR ended their formal state of war with a Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration, but they did not sign it, because by that time Japan had become an ally of the U.S.

Although President Putin and Prime Minister Abe declared in their 2017 meeting to strengthen the strategic relationship between their countries and foster more dialogues, a majority of Japanese people surveyed do not expect any settlement to be achieved. At present, Moscow stands ready to negotiate, but Japan shows little interest to compromise. Puzanova believed that this bilateral relationship has not reached a level warm enough for a settlement to take place, like that between Russia and China in 2004. Furthermore, Japan’s potential leadership change in 2021 adds more uncertainty to this fraught prospect.