

Escalation of Russian-Japanese tensions over Southern Kurils

Marcin Kaczmarek

The visit by the Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara to Moscow on 11 February has not helped to alleviate the tensions in Russian-Japanese relations, which have been ongoing since President Dmitri Medvedev's visit to the disputed Southern Kurils at the end of October 2010. Russia has declared that at the present stage, further dialogue on the territorial issue is pointless. The observed escalation of tensions in bilateral relations has been promoted by the domestic situation in both countries. The 'great-power' gestures are intended to strengthen Medvedev's image as a strong leader. Likewise, Japan's leaders are using the dispute with Russia in their own interior manoeuvrings.

At the same time, Russia's provocation of Japan has revealed elements of a long-term strategy. Over the last decade, Moscow has tried several times to persuade Tokyo to push the territorial dispute into the background and concentrate on economic relations, primarily on increasing the involvement of Japanese investment and technology in the Russian Far East. As Japan has rejected this offer, so Russia has resorted to negative methods, antagonising Tokyo and demonstrating persistent inflexibility in the Kuril affair. The current tensions in Russian-Japanese relations show that the Kremlin is not treating Japan as a potential ally in the face of China's growth, but at the same time these tensions serve as a pretext to increase Russia's military presence in the East Asian region.

Escalation of tensions

The current phase of tensions in Russian-Japanese relations was caused by President Medvedev's visit to the disputed Southern Kuril Islands (which Japan refers to as the Northern Territories). This was announced in September 2010, and took place at the end of October; it was the first ever visit by a Soviet or Russian leader to the disputed territory. In December 2010, the deputy prime minister for economic affairs, Igor Shuvalov, paid a visit to the Kurils, and in February 2011 the defence minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, did likewise. In response to the Russian actions, Japanese rhetoric became much harsher. During the celebrations of the Northern Territories Day on 7 February, the Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan called Medvedev's visit to the Kurils "unacceptable rudeness". In response, the Russian representatives emphasised that Russian sovereignty over the Kuril Islands is irreversible, and on 9 February President Medvedev called for the Kurils' security to be guaranteed by modernising the armed forces stationed there, and ordered action to be taken to raise the local residents' standard of living. Against this background, the visit to

Moscow on 11 February by the Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara (who was formerly the minister responsible for the disputed territory) has not improved the strained relationship. Commenting on its results, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and the head of the President's Administration Sergei Naryshkin stated that further discussions with Japan on the Kurils are pointless in the face of Tokyo's hard-line attitude.

The domestic context in Russia and Japan

The current escalation of tensions, to which both parties have contributed, is largely the result of domestic circumstances in both countries. For President Medvedev, the 'defence' of the Kuril Islands is an opportunity to demonstrate both to Russia's ruling elite and its general public a tough, 'great-power' style attitude in its foreign policy. The demand for such gestures is rising in Russia in the context of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, and the choice of Japan as an object for attack will not undermine the policy of rapprochement with the West.

In turn, the politicians of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan have been escalating their anti-Russian rhetoric, both to gain support among some of the electorate, and also as part of their internal party rivalries (for example, Minister Maehara became involved in a clash with former Prime Minister Hatoyama on how to approach the Kuril issue). At the same time, opinion polls show that the Japanese government is increasingly poorly regarded by the general public, due to Japan's territorial disputes with Russia and China among other things.

Russia's East Asian strategy?

Although it cannot be excluded that Russia did not intend to cause such a far-reaching escalation of the conflict, and that the current level of tensions has resulted from a loss of control over events, it appears that Russia's actions are indeed deliberate in nature. Moscow has long tried to convince Japan (in 2004 and 2006) to push the Kuril issue into the background and concentrate on developing economic relations (particularly in the Russian Far East), while in return offering an ever more foggy prospect of resolving the territorial dispute at some time in the future. This offer was also made in May 2009 by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. An attempt to put flesh on its bones was made in April 2010, with Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Khristienko's proposals for joint ventures in the Russian Far East to the tune of US\$7 billion. In November and December 2010, President Medvedev reiterated the Russian conditions for cooperation, calling for the development of economic relations and suggesting the creation of a free trade area on the Kuril Islands.

All of these proposals have been more or less explicitly rejected by Japan, which remains convinced that Russia should 'reset' relations with it, given China's rise in the region, as well as Russian demand for Japanese technologies connected with the processes of modernisation. Tokyo takes the view that the development of economic relations should proceed in parallel with resolving the political issues, demanding the return of all four disputed islands to its control. It seems that Japan's rigid position has led Moscow into demonstrating that any future compromise on the issue of the islands is only possible on

Russian conditions, and a precondition for any dialogue is an increase in Japanese economic involvement in Russia.

The Russian attitude towards Japan also seems to be an element of a wider policy towards the East Asian region. On the one hand, the Kremlin's actions have demonstrated that Moscow does not see China's strengthening position as a threat at this stage, and so it is not treating Tokyo as a potential ally. On the contrary, its provocation of Japan has gained pace together with the escalating Chinese-Japanese dispute of mid-2010, and gestures such as the establishment of a national holiday in Russia (on 2 September) on the occasion of Japan's surrender in World War II have served as support for Beijing's policy. On the other hand, the tensions in relations with Japan have been used by Russia as an excuse to accelerate the modernisation of its units stationed in the Far East, and to strengthen Russia's military potential in an increasingly unstable region (because of the crisis on the Korean peninsula, and the fast pace of the military build-ups). The General Staff of the Russian Federation reported plans to direct its Mistral ships ordered in France to the Pacific Ocean, and the Chief of Staff, General Nikolai Makarov, has announced the creation of a new type of garrison on the Kuril Islands (it is possible that this unit may receive modern rocket and heavy artillery systems as well as combat helicopters; the airport on the island of Iturup may also be upgraded to a standard which allows it to receive Il-76 transport aircraft).

Marcin Kaczmarek, with assistance from Piotr Żochowski

Appendix

Dispute over Southern Kuril Islands

The Southern Kurils, which Japan refers to as the Northern Territories, include the islands of Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and the Habomai group. Japan justifies its claims to the islands referring to a treaty signed with Russia in 1855 which awarded it to the Japanese. In 1875, Russia handed the remainder of the Kuril Islands over to Japan. Moscow in turn justifies its rule over the Southern Kurils by the decision at the Yalta Conference in 1945 to award the islands to the Soviet Union, as well as Tokyo's renouncing its rights to the Kurils in the peace treaty it signed in San Francisco in 1951. In that treaty – which the Soviet Union did not in the end sign – it is not specified which specific islands were included in the Kuril chain. In 1956 the Soviet Union and Japan signed a declaration ending the state of war between them, in accordance with which the former agreed to award the two smaller islands (Shikotan and Habomai) to Japan upon the signature of a peace treaty. Since that time, the position of both parties and their attitude to the commitments contained in the declaration have evolved depending on the state of the political relationship between them at any given time.

The dispute about the Southern Kurils is the issue of prestige for both Russia and Japan. Besides, these islands are strategically located (as they control access to the Sea of Okhotsk) and have economic importance (due to their biological resources and raw materials; the islands are sources of metal ores, and are surrounded by deposits of oil and natural gas).