

The Northern Territories Question in the Context of the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The conflict over the Northern Territories is a key issue for Japan, with strategic implications for the Asia-Pacific region. These islands, located at the southern end of the Kuril Islands chain and occupied by the Soviet Union/Russia since 1945, are an integral part of Japan's territory. Their importance is strategic, economic, and emblematic in terms of international law. The war in Ukraine leading to the strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Pyongyang has worsened this dispute, putting a halt to peace negotiations with Russia and accelerating the militarization of the archipelago. In response, Japan is strengthening its defense and deepening cooperation with the United States and its allies in a context also marked by China's ambitions and growing regional tensions.

Introduction

The dispute over the Northern Territories remains a central issue for Japan, with strategic consequences that extend across the Asia-Pacific region. Since the Second World War, the issue has centered on the sovereignty of the islands at the southern end of the Kuril chain seized by the Soviet Union in 1945. Japan's position has not changed: the four islands that make up the Northern Territories – Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets – are an inherent part of Japanese territory never administered by another country. The Soviet and then Russian occupation is therefore illegitimate. These islands have strategic, economic and symbolic importance. This historical and territorial issue is a key element of Japan's foreign policy in its relations with Russia, explaining both the tensions and the Japanese government's efforts at rapprochement as opportunities arise. Strategically, the Kuril chain and the Northern Territories provide major access to strategic sea routes between the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, for Moscow, control of this passageway, which closes the Sea of Okhotsk, also potentially responds to China's naval ambitions in the region. While Moscow has authorized Chinese vessels to enter the Sea of Okhotsk, Russia intends to retain control of this area.¹ Economically, these islands are rich in natural resources, including rich fishing grounds and potential energy reserves. Symbolically, they embody historical tensions unresolved since the invasion of the Northern Territories by Soviet forces on August 18, 1945, and the desire of the local populations, relayed by several associations, to retain links with the places they were forced to abandon after the Second World War.

The war in Ukraine has introduced new complexities into this unresolved issue. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 not only intensified tensions on a global level, but also altered the dynamics of its bilateral relations with Japan. Tokyo's proper alignment with the G7 Western powers in imposing sanctions against Moscow has, by its very nature and despite its legitimacy, strained relations between Japan and Russia. The dispute over the Northern Territories, once the

¹ "Russia, China Warships Enter Sea of Okhotsk for Drills," Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russia-china-warships-enter-sea-okhotsk-drills-interax-reports-2024-09-24/>, September 24, 2024.

object of cautious diplomacy on Tokyo's part, has become increasingly intractable. In addition, Russia's increased militarization of the entire Kuril Islands chain and the strengthening of its military activities in the Pacific have heightened the strategic importance of these territories.

The consequences of the conflict in Ukraine for the Northern Territories are manifold. Diplomatic channels have largely closed, interrupting negotiations on a peace treaty between Japan and Russia, while Moscow has adopted an inflexible stance. At the same time, heightened security concerns in the Asia-Pacific region have prompted Japan to strengthen its defense strategy through closer collaboration with the US and other allies, including South Korea. This unstable security context, one of the most dangerous in decades, has heightened the global dimension of the dispute, as the strategic importance of the islands merges with tensions involving Chinese, North Korean and US influence in the region.²

Historical background and economic interests

The territorial argument between Japan and Russia over the Kuril Islands dates back to the first interactions between the two countries in the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, the Russian Empire began to expand in Siberia and the Pacific towards the islands of Sakhalin, Hokkaido, and the Kuril chain with which Japan had long had cultural and economic links. As early as 1644, under the Tokugawa shogunate (Edo period), a first map was published, showing the islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Habomai and Shikotan.³

The 1855 Treaty of Shimoda marked the first formal agreement between Japan and the Russian Empire, establishing diplomatic and commercial relations and demarcating territorial boundaries. Under this treaty, Japan retained control of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets, while Russia controlled the islands to the north from the volcanic island of Urup, whose name comes from the Ainu language. Sakhalin became a non-militarized zone, shared between Russia and Japan with settlers from both countries.⁴

At the end of the 19th century, tensions over territorial claims resurfaced, as both post-Meiji Restoration Japan and Russia were able to extend their influence and capacity for action. The Treaty of St. Petersburg (1875) attempted to clarify the situation by granting Japan full control of the Kuril Islands chain beyond the Northern Territories, as well as fishing rights in the Sea of Okhotsk for Japanese vessels, in exchange for the cession of Sakhalin, where tensions were on the rise between Russian and Japanese settlers, to Russia. Japan did not have the capacity to control or buy Sakhalin from Russia at that time. However, this agreement did not eliminate the strategic competition between the two powers, with Russia intent on extending its influence and control over the Korean peninsula. This rivalry culminated in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Japan's victory in this conflict and the Treaty of Portsmouth which ended the war established its status as a rising power in Asia and gave it control of southern Sakhalin as far as the 50th parallel, while confirming its possession of the whole chain of the Kuril Islands.⁵

The consequences of the Second World War

The geopolitical landscape was profoundly altered by the Second World War. At the 1945 Yalta Conference, the Allied Powers, including the Soviet Union, agreed that the Kuril Islands and the whole of Sakhalin Island would be transferred to the USSR in exchange for its entry into the Pacific War against Japan, despite the neutrality pact signed between Moscow and Tokyo in 1941. The Soviet Union subsequently denounced the neutrality pact on April 5, 1945 and,

² <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition92/index.html>

³ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition92/period1.html>

⁴ Idem

⁵ Idem

although it should have waited a year before declaring war on Japan, it attacked on August 9, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Soviet forces occupied all the Kuril Islands, including the Northern Territories, on September 2, 1945, the day Japan signed the surrender on the *Missouri*. On February 2, 1946, the USSR created the South Sakhalin and Kuril Oblast, attached to the Khabarovsk region.⁶ President Truman had issued a directive on August 15, 1945 to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in Asia, authorizing the occupation of the Kuril Islands by the Soviet Union, pending a peace treaty.

The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, which officially ended the Second World War in Asia, did not resolve the question of sovereignty over the Northern Territories. Japan renounced its claim to the Kuril Islands without clarifying the territorial definition of the Northern Territories, which had never been administered or occupied by the Russian Empire or the USSR. The Soviet Union, which refused to sign the San Francisco Treaty, retained control of the islands occupied in 1945. This opposition fueled future dispute, as Japan considered the disputed islands – Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets – not to be part of the Kuril chain renounced under the San Francisco Treaty.

On two occasions, however, at least a partial solution to the question of the Northern Territories was envisaged. In 1956, after Stalin's death and just as a period of détente was beginning at the global level, a joint declaration between Russia and Japan on putting an end to the state of war referred to the possible return of Habomai and Shikotan after the signing of a peace treaty. Article 9 of the declaration said: "Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics agree to continue, after the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, negotiations for the conclusion of a peace treaty. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, desiring to meet the wishes of Japan and taking into consideration the interests of Japan, agrees to hand over to Japan the Habomai Islands and the island of Shikotan. However, the actual handing over of these islands to Japan shall take place after the conclusion of a peace treaty between Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."⁷

Progress was also made under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.⁸ In 1993, in the Tokyo Declaration, Boris Yeltsin recalled the terms of the 1956 declaration. In 1998, the "Moscow Declaration for a Creative Partnership between Russia and Japan" raised new hopes for accelerated negotiations on a peace treaty and economic cooperation, including in the Northern Territories. Moscow's five-stage plan included, firstly, official recognition of the problem, then demilitarization of the area; these would be followed by the creation of a special economic zone to promote economic development on the islands; finally, the plan foresaw the signing of a peace treaty and the mobilization of future generations to ensure the successful conclusion of the dispute. Based on the 1956 declaration, the plan also foresaw the return to Japan of the two islands already mentioned. This plan was not implemented.⁹

A series of documents that preceded the 1998 declaration provided for the administrative simplification of visits by former Japanese residents of the Northern Territories to the graves of their forebears, as well as a cooperation agreement on fisheries and maritime resources.¹⁰ In 1999, Vladimir Putin, soon-to-be President of the Russian Federation, declared: "we acknowledge the

⁶ <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v07/d390>

⁷ https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo_eg/taiou/hoppou/hoppou02-01.html

⁸ Yoko Hirose, "Japan-Russia Relations: Can the Northern Territories Issue be Overcome?," <https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/62f9003d-fcf1-4873-a87f-897350177e9b/content>, 2018.

⁹ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition92/index/html>

¹⁰ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition01/moscow.html>

problem but transfer of the Kuril Islands is out of the question.”¹¹ Nevertheless, in a declaration signed by the same Vladimir Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori in 2001, both parties pledged to continue negotiations on the basis of the 1993 Tokyo Declaration.¹²

The economic interest factor

The disputed islands, located in the north-western Pacific Ocean, are also a resource-rich region, due to the large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to which they give right.

The region's economic resources are potentially considerable. The surrounding waters are among the world's richest fishing grounds, supporting Japan's vital seafood industry. They could also offer new resources in energy (gas and oil) and rare metals through seabed mining. Beyond the economic aspect, the islands' strategic location in the Pacific increases their importance, as it enables Russia to control essential naval routes in an increasingly tense international context.

An essential sovereignty issue for Tokyo

The debate over the sovereignty of the Northern Territories in terms of international law lies at the heart of the dispute; the rule of law is an essential point for Japan, whereas the strategic and military importance of the Kuril chain and the nationalist dimension are more decisive factors for Russia. Japan's position is based on historical and legal arguments, asserting that the four disputed islands – Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets – have been an integral part of its territory since the 19th century. Japan relies on principles of international law and international agreements to back its territorial claims. The Shimoda Treaty signed with Russia in 1855 is an essential element, clearly delimiting the borders and assigning the islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islets to Japan; no one could argue that these islands were seized by force, as their assignment in 1855 resulted from a bilaterally accepted agreement between two powers. This agreement, the first of its kind between the two nations, explicitly recognized Japanese sovereignty over these territories and was confirmed by the absence of any disputes at the time. The occupation of the islands by the Soviet Union in 1945 following Japan's surrender therefore constitutes a violation of international law. This action, which took place after the end of hostilities, contravenes the rules prohibiting the annexation of territory after the cessation of hostilities. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had unilaterally denounced the Russo-Japanese neutrality pact in April 1945 without respecting the one-year period required before taking military action.

The Atlantic Charter of 1941, which proscribes any territorial change without the consent of the populations concerned, constitutes another legal basis for Japan. Prior to their annexation by the Soviet Union, the islands had been predominantly inhabited by Japanese from the 19th century, making their seizure by force contrary to the principles of self-determination. Moreover, Russia's invocation of the Yalta agreements is legally fragile, as these agreements, never ratified nor recognized as formal treaties, cannot serve as a legal basis to justify Russian sovereignty. The 1951 San Francisco Treaty, in which Japan renounced the “Kuril Islands,” does not explicitly mention the group of four disputed islands that make up the Northern Territories. Japan maintains that these territories are historically part of its national territory and, as the Soviet Union did not sign this treaty, it cannot invoke its provisions to its benefit.

The role of international law therefore remains essential in the sovereignty debate. Japan has argued for arbitration or mediation through international legal bodies, but Russia has consistently

¹¹ Vlad M. Kaczynski, “The Kuril Islands Dispute Between Russia and Japan: Perspectives of Three Ocean Powers,” *Russia Analytical Digest*, no. 20, 2007, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-20-6-8.pdf>

¹² Yoko Hirose, *op.cit.*

rejected these approaches. This impasse reflects broader geopolitical tensions that have continued despite the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, with Russia desiring to reassert its power, particularly since Vladimir Putin's second election to the presidency.

A complex geopolitical context and the militarization of territories

The dispute over the Northern Territories remains a central issue in relations between Japan and Russia, influenced by regional and global strategic stakes. Russia has steadily increased its military presence on the islands since the 2010s, reinforcing its claims to sovereignty. In recent years, Moscow has developed military infrastructure, deployed advanced missile systems and conducted numerous military exercises in the region close to the Kuril Archipelago and the Northern Territories. Of particular note is an exercise carried out by Russian forces involving more than 3,000 men on one of the islands of the Kuril Islands chain in March 2022, after Moscow suspended bilateral talks on a peace treaty. Such measures underline the strategic importance of the Kuril Islands for Russia, which uses them as a buffer zone to secure its access routes to the Pacific and a tool to put pressure on Japan. The proximity of the islands to vital shipping lanes between the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, and their role in the projection of Russian power in the Asia-Pacific, reinforce their importance and complicate the prospect of a solution at a time when Russia, since the mid-2010s and the invasion of Crimea (2014), has chosen a strategy of military confrontation and assertion of power.

Japan for its part has maintained a consistent but cautious approach to the dispute. Despite an ever-present willingness to negotiate, the situation has not improved, particularly since 2022 in the context of the war in Ukraine. Successive administrations, notably that of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have pursued active diplomacy, emphasizing economic cooperation as a means of building a trusting, win-win relationship with Russia. In particular, the Abe government sought a potential solution based on the return of Shikotan and the Habomai islets, the smallest of the disputed territories, which account for just 7% of the Northern Territories' surface area, but these efforts ultimately came to nothing, contrary to the hopes raised in public opinion and the media by Vladimir Putin's visit to Japan in 2016. The challenge remains to strike a balance between the expectations of Japanese public opinion, relayed by political representation, regarding the return of the islands – even if, according to a poll published in 2016, 57% declared themselves in favor of easy access to the islands for humanitarian reasons but flexible regarding the return of the four islands – and the geopolitical realities of an increasingly aggressive and isolated Russia.¹³ The other objective, which remained unresolved, was to develop a relationship of trust with Vladimir Putin's Russia in order to limit the negative strategic consequences for Japan of too close a rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has thus heightened tensions between Japan and Russia. Japan, aligning itself with its Western allies, first and foremost the United States, imposed sanctions on Russia, including the freezing of assets and the restriction of trade. These measures drew sharp criticism from Moscow, which in turn suspended peace treaty negotiations with Tokyo in 2022. In a strategic continuum between Europe and Asia, the invasion of Ukraine has reinforced Russia's interest in its military bases on the Asian side of its territory, including the Kuril Islands and the Northern Territories. The aim is to counter the side of US allies, both in Europe and Asia.

Since 2015, Moscow has strengthened its permanent military presence in the Kuril Islands and Northern Territories it occupies with the construction of barracks, airstrips, ASM (Anti-Ship Missile) bases and S 300 anti-missile systems. In 2017, two battalions in charge of ASM missiles were based in Etorofu and Kunashiri. In 2020, S 300 anti-missile missile batteries were also

¹³ *Mainichi Shimbun* poll, in Yoko Hirose, op.cit.

deployed in Etorofu, and militarization of the Northern Territories continued in 2022.¹⁴

Russia's new maritime doctrine, published in 2022, reinforces the importance of the Arctic and Pacific maritime territories. The Sea of Okhotsk and the straits of the Kuril Islands are designated as "zones of national interest," to be defended by force if necessary.¹⁵ In this context, for Japan, the war in Ukraine has heightened the risks of regional instability, including around the Northern Territories, and the importance of strengthening alliances, particularly with the United States, unwillingly feeding the hostile stance of Russia's leaders.

In Russia's nuclear strategy, the bastion of the Sea of Okhotsk, where Russian nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are based, has seen its strategic importance further reinforced since the war in Ukraine. The fleet of 16 SSBNs operating in the Arctic and the Pacific is an essential element of Russia's strategy of deterrence and intimidation, all the more important at a time when Putin has made repeated declarations about Russia's nuclear capabilities and approved a new version of its nuclear doctrine on November 19, 2024.¹⁶ In line with this, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declared in November 2024 that Japan "should read Russia's updated nuclear doctrine."¹⁷ According to the new document: Russia "reserves the right" to use nuclear weapons not only in response to a nuclear attack, but also to respond to a conventional weapons attack that constitutes a "critical threat" to its "sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁸ Russia has accelerated the modernization of its fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and has been strengthening its Pacific fleet since 2021 by deploying its most modern Borei-A-class submarines, each equipped with 16 Bulova mirved missiles with a range of 8,000 km.¹⁹ Russia carried out major nuclear exercises in October 2024, firing missiles from a submarine in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kamchatka peninsula. The Kuril archipelago, beyond the passageways to the Pacific, closes the bastion of the Sea of Okhotsk and establishes a bridge between the Russian SSBNs base at Petropavlovsk and the Pacific Fleet headquarters in Vladivostok.²⁰

The geopolitical context of the Northern Territories dispute also reflects broader shifts in global power dynamics. Russia's actions on the islands are part of its strategy to increase its influence in the Pacific and put pressure on the US system of alliances in the region through its ally Japan. At the same time, Japan's approach underlines its commitment to international norms and alliances. Russia's occupation of the Northern Territories also strengthens its military pressure on Japan. On November 28, 2024, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated that Russia might consider deploying intermediate-range missiles on its territory in Asia should the US deploy such missiles on Japanese territory. The Kuril Islands and the Russian-occupied Northern Territories are indeed located in Asia and could be chosen as deployment

¹⁴ Ike Barrash, "Russia's Militarization of the Kuril Islands," CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/russias-militarization-kuril-islands>, 27-09-2022.

¹⁵ Daniel Rakov, "Russia's New Naval Doctrine: A 'Pivot to Asia'?", *The Diplomat*, 19-08-2022.

¹⁶ Simon Saradzhyan, "New Principles of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Liberalize Conditions for Use, Unsurprisingly," *Russia Matters*, <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/new-principles-russias-nuclear-deterrence-liberalize-conditions-use>, 19-11-2024.

¹⁷ "Russia to Take Proportionate Steps, If US Missiles Appear in Japan-MFA," TASS, <https://tass.com/politics/1878535>, 27-11-2024.

¹⁸ Daryl G. Kimball, "Russia Revises Nuclear Doctrine," <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-12/news/russia-revises-nuclear-use-doctrine>, December 2024.

¹⁹ Eliana Johns, "Upgrades to Russia's Nuclear-Capable Submarine Fleet," <https://fas.org/publication/submarine-upgrades-russia/>, 02-07-2024.

²⁰ Yu Koizumi, "Russian Pacific Fleet Redux: Japan's North as a New Center of Gravity," *War on the Rocks*, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/russian-pacific-fleet-redux-japans-north-as-a-new-center-of-gravity/>, 22-10-2024.

sites.²¹

The influence of other powers adds to the complexity of the dispute. The United States, as Japan's main ally, has always supported Tokyo's claims to the islands, framing the issue in the context of a rules-based international order as part of the US-Japan security alliance. The strategic importance of the islands is also linked to broader concerns about maintaining freedom of navigation and strategic balances in the Pacific. At the same time, the growing assertiveness of China, which has carried out several joint maritime exercises with Russia in Japan's immediate environment, indirectly affects Japan's position on the Northern Territories. Beijing's growing military presence and territorial claims in the East and South China Seas have made Japan more sensitive to issues of sovereignty and China's growing assertiveness on all fronts. The Kuril Islands occupy a critical position in the security environment of the Pacific. Japan sees this dispute as part of a wider effort to ensure regional stability.

Last but not least, the election of Donald Trump could change the course of the conflict in Ukraine as well as the relationship between Russia and the United States, imposing a new factor that Japan must take into account.

Economic sanctions and retaliation from Russia, a diplomatic dilemma

Beyond this overall strategic context, Japan's reaction to the invasion of Ukraine has considerably reshaped its relations with Russia, particularly in regard to the dispute over the Northern Territories. Following the February 2022 invasion, Japan aligned itself with its Western allies by imposing sanctions on Russia. These measures included freezing Russian assets, restricting exports of high-tech products and suspending major financial transactions. While these sanctions underlined Japan's commitment to international norms, they also exacerbated tensions with Russia, leading to a breakdown in diplomatic engagement.

In March 2022, Russia announced the suspension of peace treaty negotiations with Japan, citing Tokyo's hostile actions. At the same time, talks on economic cooperation were suspended, the fisheries agreement was also put on hold and, most importantly, on September 3, 2022, Russia reneged on the agreement allowing visa-free visits to the islands by former residents to visit the graves of their ancestors.²² This development marked a major setback in bilateral relations, as these negotiations had been optimistically perceived on the Japanese side as a means of settling the territorial dispute over the Northern Territories. In December 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov declared that Russia had no territorial dispute with Japan, reversing Russia's acknowledgement of the existence of a dispute.²³ For Japan, this development has highlighted the complexity of balancing its geopolitical alliances with its long-standing efforts to resolve the issue of sovereignty. Despite these difficulties, Japan remains firm in its stance, stressing that economic sanctions are necessary to uphold the rules-based international order.

The influence of strategic cooperation between North Korea and Russia on the Northern Territories issue

The strengthening of strategic cooperation between North Korea and Russia since 2022, particularly with the signing of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in June 2024 and the

²¹ "Russia Says It Will Respond If US Places Missiles in Japan," *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-will-respond-if-us-places-missiles-japan-2024-11-27/>, 27-11-2024.

²² "Russia Scraps Visa-Free Visits to Islands Disputed with Japan," <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/09/0e65c3011bf2-urgent-russia-scraps-visa-free-visits-to-islands-in-dispute-with-japan.html>, 06-09-2022.

²³ "Russian Foreign Minister Says No Territorial Dispute with Japan," *Japan News*, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/world/russia/20231219-156538/>, 19-12-2023.

dispatch of a 10,000 to 12,000-strong North Korean contingent to Russia in November 2024, have considerably heightened geopolitical concerns from the perspective of Japan and its allies in Asia. This partnership, with arms contracts, economic collaboration and ideological and strategic rapprochement against the West, has repercussions on the balance of power in North-East Asia. For Japan, these developments are changing regional dynamics, affecting its security and weighing on territorial disputes.

The resurgence of cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, particularly in the context of international sanctions and geopolitical isolation in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, bears witness to a mutual interest in opposing the values of respect for international law upheld by Western-style democracies. North Korea seeks economic and military aid to strengthen its regime, while Russia sees Pyongyang as a potential ally in its wider conflict with the West, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, as well as a purveyor of arms and potential reinforcements on the ground. This renewed partnership includes agreements on arms sales, technological exchanges and diplomatic support in international forums like the UN as well vis-à-vis China, on which both partners are highly dependent.

The partnership between Russia and North Korea could prompt both states to act more aggressively in the region, increasing the risk of provocations in Japan's close maritime environment, missile tests by North Korea and Russian military exercises near Japanese waters. Furthermore, the growing complexity of threats emanating from a Russia–North Korea axis could strain allied resources and coordination, with the risk of multiplying fronts of tension.

Hence, Russia's growing cooperation with North Korea complicates the Northern Territories issue in several ways. Russia has already fortified the Kuril Islands with military installations, seeing them as a strategic asset. Closer collaboration with North Korea could lead to further militarization, making the region a more important flashpoint.

Conclusion

The dispute over the Northern Territories is much more than a simple territorial dispute between Japan and Russia. It represents a major strategic challenge for regional stability in Northeast Asia, and for Japan's geopolitical position in a rapidly changing international context. Resolving this issue is crucial not only for strengthening Japan's national security but also for contributing to a more stable regional dynamic in the long term. Indeed, beyond Russia, North-East Asia remains a region marked by complex tensions, fueled by North Korea's unpredictable nuclear ambitions and China's growing military assertiveness, which is redefining regional balances of power.

The role of Russia, which has intensified its pivot towards Asia after its invasion of Ukraine in the face of its growing isolation, adds a further dimension to the problem. By strengthening its strategic ties with Beijing, Moscow aims to counterbalance the influence of Western powers and reinforce its presence in the Asia-Pacific, including through increased military activities in disputed territories. These actions signal a clear desire to consolidate its strategic position in a region that has become central to its geopolitical and economic interests. This repositioning makes the question of the Northern Territories all the more sensitive in Japan's regional security calculations.

However, beyond the bilateral aspect, this dispute illustrates broader issues that touch on complex international dynamics. The evolutions of the strategic binomes Russia and the United States, the United States and China, and China and Russia are also important factors. Since 1945, the strategic priorities of the Soviet Union, then Russia, and those of Japan have rarely converged, making any lasting solution difficult. For Russia, the islands represent a strategic maritime space whose importance has been reaffirmed in the context of the war in Ukraine and its global repercussions. For Japan, the return of the Northern Territories is not only a question of national sovereignty, but also an important element in its positioning in a world order marked by growing

tensions between great powers.

However, as with other territorial or historical disputes, whether in Asia or Europe, the resolution of this conflict largely depends on the evolution of the political regimes involved. In Russia, a real breakthrough would require an authority that opts for negotiation and long-term cooperation rather than nationalism or populism, which are often used to justify aggressive diplomatic postures. A transition, currently unnoticeable, towards relations based on harmonious cohabitation and constructive dialogue would be essential to avoid escalating tensions.