

# Russia, Japan and the USA: The Unfinished Business of War

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*As the USA and North Korea meet in Vietnam to discuss the possibility of a peace treaty between the two after decades of hostility against North Korea from the USA, the governments of Russia and Japan are engaged in talks about concluding a peace treaty to formally end the war between them that began during the Second World War. The two meetings are related since they concern peace and security in Asia and the Pacific and because the stumbling block to peace in both instances is the threat posed by the United States conventional and nuclear forces in the region.*

North Korea has long sought a peace treaty with the USA along with a firm guarantee that the USA will not attack. North Korea's requests for peace have been met, up until now, with nothing but false promises, unjust sanctions, attempts to isolate it from the world and threats of annihilation. The USA, on the other hand, has only one objective, the nuclear disarmament of North Korea, making it vulnerable to American attack while claiming the right to retain and develop its triad of nuclear forces and the right to use them whenever it sees fit. Since the word of the US leadership is not worth much, as the world has seen time and again as the US reneges on one international agreement after another, hopes of something positive coming out of the Korean-American meeting in Vietnam are slim. But we can hope.

The situation between Japan and Russia is also at an impasse and once again the basic cause for this is the USA. The key sticking point between them since the 1950's has been, and remains, control over the Kuril Islands that lie north of the Japanese Island of Hokkaido and south of the Russian territories on the Kamchatka Peninsula. The islands have changed hands between them several times in history but with the defeat of Japan in 1945 the islands were given to the USSR by international agreement with Japan protesting that it should have ownership and control of the four southern islands in the chain. The islands have been in Russian hands ever since.

In 1956 the USSR and Japan entered into negotiations to try to conclude a peace treaty that resulted in a Joint Declaration paragraph 9 of which stated,

"9. 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 these islands to Japan shall take place after the conclusion of a

peace treaty between Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”

**A peace treaty has never been concluded and the main reason is the signing in 1960 of a military treaty between Japan and the USA,** the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, first signed in San Francisco in 1954, but amended in January 1960, which the USSR regarded as a hostile act. One of the key elements of the amended agreement, and which highlights Japan’s status as an occupied nation, provides for the continued presence of US military bases in Japan. The provisions of the treaty stipulate that it was to remain in force permanently unless one party gives a year’s notice that it wishes to terminate it. Since Japan is still, in reality, an occupied nation it is unlikely that any Japanese government will give such a notice unless it wants to draw down on itself the full measures of retaliation for which the USA is notorious.

The implications of the treaty were recognized by many in Japan at the time and the leftist opposition tried to prevent its ratification by the Japanese Diet. There were physical confrontations between members of the Japanese Socialist Party that opposed it and the Liberal Democratic Party deputies supporting it and this was followed by massive demonstrations and rioting by students and trade unions. A Peoples Council to stop the treaty was formed representing a cross section of Japanese society including labour unions, farmers, teachers, poetry circles theater groups, student and women’s organisations and groups affiliated with the Socialist and Communist Parties but they were unsuccessful.

They took issue with the treaty primarily because of Article 6 that contains a Status of Forces Agreement on the stationing of US forces in Japan that permits the US to make major changes in the placement and location of bases and the use of those bases for US combat operations other than in defence of Japan, that is for offensive operations against other nations, with Japan thrown the bone of being “consulted” on these issues. It was a confirmation to many at the time that Japan remained an occupied country even though the formal military occupation had been declared at an end.

The consequences of the treaty are still important today as the US bases on the Japanese island of Okinawa continue to meet resistance from the people while successive Japanese governments, controlled by reactionary forces, act in lock step with the US in enforcing the agreement against the peoples’ wishes. Just this week Prime Minister Abe ignored a referendum that opposed the presence of the largest Okinawa base and instead approved the US plans for its relocation on the island.

As a result of the amendment of the Japan-US treaty, the USSR in January 1960, issued a Memorandum which needs to be read in full:

“The Soviet Union certainly cannot ignore such a step as Japan’s conclusion of a new military treaty which undermines the basis for peace in the Far East and creates obstacles to the development of Soviet-Japanese relations. A new situation has formed in relation to the fact that this treaty actually deprives Japan of independence and that foreign troops stationed in Japan as a result of Japan’s surrender remain on Japanese territory. This situation makes it impossible for the Soviet Government to fulfill its promises to return the islands of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan.

It is because the Soviet Government met Japan’s wishes and took into consideration the interests of Japan and the peace-loving intentions expressed

by the Japanese Government during the Soviet-Japanese negotiations that it agreed to hand over such islands to Japan after the signing of a peace treaty. But since the new military treaty signed by the Japanese Government is directed against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Government cannot contribute to extending the territory available to foreign troops by handing over such islands to Japan.

Thus, the Soviet Government finds it necessary to declare that the islands of Habomai and Shikotan will be handed over to Japan, as was stated in the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of October 19, 1956, only if all foreign troops are withdrawn from Japan and a Soviet-Japanese peace treaty is signed."

So, the USSR saw the Japan US treaty as a hostile act against both it and China, as a statement that Japan remained an occupied nation and was willing to conclude a peace treaty if, and only if, US forces were withdrawn from Japan.

The present Russian government states that this memorandum does not clarify conditions for handing over the islands and so further clarification is needed. What this language means is not clear but it is not a repudiation of the demand by the USSR that US forces be removed from Japan before a peace deal can be concluded. The dilemma for Russia is that the US forces in Japan are a threat to peace in the region and to Russia and China. Further, they fear that if they ignore the Soviet memorandum and go ahead with a peace treaty and hand over the designed islands to Japan the islands will be quickly occupied by US forces which will install their AEGIS missile systems there that can deploy nuclear armed missiles close to Russia in the Pacific and will allow them to threaten the large Russian naval base at Vladivostok. Yet the Japanese government, backed by the US, is pushing for the return of the islands as a precondition of a peace treaty. The Russians refuse to allow this.

In return the Russians can use the Memorandum as a lever to force the Japanese to kick the US forces out of Japan. So the impasse remains.

That these issues were discussed at a meeting on February 16 between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and the Japanese Foreign Minister Kono at the Munich Conference is indicated by the statement of the Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshida Suga at a press conference in Tokyo that "there was a frank, though sometimes heated, exchange of views' between the two," diplomatic language for a blazing row.

The Japanese have been in the process of signing military accommodation agreements with a number of Pacific Rim countries, including Canada, the past year, allowing for exchanges of military assistance, training, transfers of equipment and cooperation at the same time as it tries to wiggle out from the Japanese constitution imposed by the Americans that limits its military forces to defensive purposes. Japan wants to be a major power once again, not only economically, but also politically and militarily. It continues to rely on the American military umbrella as it does this and this also suits American immediate objectives since Japan can then become a powerful ally in the region. Japan seems to want to become more than an ally of the US. It wants to become again a power in the world in its own right. Until it has achieved its objective of again being a world power it can be expected to be a loyal ally to the USA and therefore a threat to Russia. It will not ask the US to withdraw its forces until it is ready; and the Russian government would face serious problems on the domestic front if it surrendered the islands to Japan under these conditions so it is unlikely that a peace treaty can be concluded between Russia and Japan in the near future.

So as North Korea, having suffered decades of Japanese military occupation, tries to deal with US militarism in the region, Russia has to contend with both US existing militarism and a rising Japanese militarism both of which constitute threats to its peace and security, a result of unfinished business from a world war that threatens a new world war.

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