

Russia- Japan: The Kuril Islands conflict and Russia's defense arsenal in the Far East

By [Alexandr Grashenkov](#)

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Russia to boost Kuril defense to ward off war Russia's unresolved conflict with Japan over the Kuril Islands, which has been simmering since WWII, may reach a boiling point now that Russian authorities are set to go ahead with their plan to build up the disputed territory's defense potential.

The plan, unveiled by President Dmitry Medvedev and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov as part of a comprehensive development program for Russia's Pacific Coast, envisages, among other things, the deployment of modern armaments to defend the country's eastern borders against a hypothetical military attack.

Historical parallels

The Kuril dispute is, in a sense, similar to the one Britain had with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. This latter conflict ended in a brief war, preceded by years of diplomacy and numerous attempts to implement joint economic projects....

It would be wrong to draw any direct parallels between today's Japan and the Argentina of the 1950-1980s. But in the rapidly changing world, the South Kuril Islands, referred to by the Japanese as the Northern Territories, may well be chosen one day as a soft target by Russia's eastern neighbor, seeking to vent out aggression.

The archipelago's attractiveness as a politicking tool will become more apparent to Tokyo if Moscow continues to drag its feet on the upgrading and expansion of the Russian Pacific Coast's economic and military infrastructure. The defense capabilities of that area could be enhanced by sending in new warships and aircraft, building airfields and launching grounds, and, most importantly, by deploying competent personnel who could remain on the ground on a permanent basis rather than working under seasonal, back-to-back schemes.

Analyzing the developments that led to the Falkland war, one can say in retrospect that the Argentine government's decision to launch a military operation was prompted by a dramatic weakening of Britain's armed forces, notably the Royal Navy, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The British had by then written off most of their ageing big-sized warships without replacing them with new vessels, and this weakened the country's aircraft carrier fleet. As a result, the Navy found itself without modern aircraft carriers, and had to make do with ships designed to carry aircraft with vertical takeoff only.

Russia's defense arsenal in the Far East

Similarly, Russia's defense arsenal is not at its strongest these days. In conventional armaments, Japan now enjoys numerical supremacy over the Russian Far Eastern forces, and it also boasts a higher percentage of modern hardware in the navy, the air force, and the army.

In the Kuril Islands, homeland defense relies on a single machine gun artillery division (incidentally, this is the only division remaining in the country's ground forces, with all the others already reconfigured into brigades). But this unit can hardly provide efficient defense on its own, without any support from AF, ABM, and Navy forces.

Clearly, the deployment of additional service personnel in the Kuril Islands will not make the Russian Pacific Coast better protected against a potential military attack. It is a qualitative change that needs to be brought about.

It is vitally important to improve the archipelago's infrastructure, which would enable the Air Force and the Navy to act more effectively in the Pacific area.

Russia's ageing Pacific Fleet, where most of the ships currently in service will have to be scrapped in the next 15 years, needs urgent refitting. The fleet has already been pledged two French-made Mistral ships, but that is not enough. It also needs new corvettes and frigates to perform tasks ranging from escorting bigger vessels to combating submarines and providing support for paratroopers.

Another key priority is to enhance the Air Force presence off Russia's Pacific Coast and to restore the permanent deployment of a combat jet fleet on the Sakhalin Island. This will make Russia better equipped for a prompt response.

The construction of a forward-based airfield in the Kuril Islands would let us have a squadron of jet fighters on standby. But there is no point in creating a permanent air base here, since such a base will be too vulnerable to potential enemy attacks.

The deployment of multifunctional and combat helicopters is one more possibility to consider.

Si vis pacem, para bellum (If you want peace, prepare for war)

All these plans to reinforce the Kuril Islands' defense potential should be translated into reality so as to discourage the most radical of Japanese politicians from contemplating regaining the possession of the South Kuril Islands through the use of military force.

Luckily for Russia, there is no imminent threat. At the moment, Japan seems to be more concerned about the intra-Korean conflict, which puts its national security in jeopardy, as well as by the growing military might of its old arch rival, China.

A dramatic buildup of Russia's defense capabilities in the Kuril Islands could make Japanese politicians put this long-running territorial dispute on the backburner and concentrate on more urgent challenges to its homeland security.

It should be kept in mind that no military arsenal, however strong, can provide adequate national defense unless there is a political will. Yet, even relatively modest armed forces can make a difference if political and military leaders are really determined to uphold the interests and the dignity of their country. Russian authorities are facing a different

challenge today, one that is simpler and trickier at the same time. They need to demonstrate - without resorting to military force - their determination to uphold Russia's interests and its territorial integrity. And doing so in such a way that no ill-wisher would want to put that resolve to test.

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