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## NEWS NETWORK



Issue 9

The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

Est - 2016

# Ghosts of the Battle of Tsushima



The crew of the *Asahi* watch as a captured Russian ship passes.

While much global attention has been given to Asia-Pacific flash-points involving the rise of China and the North Korea's nuclear ambitions - a forgotten territorial dispute from seven decades is now on the brink of erupting into conflict. The Russo-Japanese dispute over the Kuril Islands, claimed by Japan as the 'Northern Territories', has increased in importance recently thanks to Moscow's growing military presence on these four small islands. The dispute over ownership of these islands, which form part of a chain between Japan's northernmost island, Hokkaido and Kamchatka, Russia, stems from ambiguity over the wording in

the Yalta treaty and WW2 peace deals, which saw the islands ceded to the then Soviet Union. The small Japanese population was repatriated to the mainland in 1947.

Since then, the status of the Kuril Islands has like some other territorial claims around the world, been stuck in a frozen limbo pending the lack of a permanent peace treaty between these two former enemies.

### A dispute 70 years in the making

However, in the 21st century, the islands have re-emerged as a new source of friction between

Moscow and Tokyo. In early 2018, the Russian military took over the airport on one of Iturup Islands, and this was followed up in March 2018 by the deployment of a pair of Su-35 fighters. In August 2018, another deployment of Su-35s to the Kurils saw Japan send a strongly worded protest to Moscow about this action.

At stake over these tiny islands, which have a population of only 20,000 Russian settlers are potential natural resources and fishing rights. For Russia, the islands also occupy a key strategic position, helping control Russian Pacific fleets access to the Sea of Okhotsk.

However, Moscow turning the islands into a military garrison on the northeast of Japan so close to its northern island of Hokkaido has raised concerns in Tokyo. It is worth remembering that much as Moscow has been probing the West's defences around the Baltics via feints and aerial incursions, it has also been testing Japan's defences, with bomber and patrol aircraft performing provocative flights around Japan. From Russia's perspective it rejects any Japanese claim over the Southern Kurils - pointing out that these islands were ceded to the USSR at the

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**Kuril Islands Map.**

end of WW2. Moscow has also attempted to link Japan's claim to the Kurils with the Senkaku Islands dispute involving China, Japan and Taiwan.

In Japan despite the country's pacifist outlook, there are some private organisations and individuals that call for a return of the Kurils. For those that might argue that Japan launching aggressive action to reclaim the Kurils would be inconceivable, global geopolitics is now regularly serving up scenarios that were inconceivable a few years earlier, thanks to a rise of populism that has swept around the globe, in places afar as Hungary and The Philippines. Japan's Article 9 of its Constitution, which formally rejects war as method of solving disputes has already been amended in 2014 to allow its armed forces to defend and support allies.

Additionally in Tokyo's case the election of US President

Donald Trump and his ambiguous outlook to long-standing US allies and willingness to tear up international norms and treaties

has focussed minds in Japan about the reliability of support from the global superpower – support that it previously took

for granted. Faced with North Korea's missile ambitions and previous tests that saw ballistic missiles overfly the country, Japan's military planners have also been mulling the theory of limited pre-emptive strikes and acquiring cruise missiles.

Finally, there is also a ticking clock at play here. Should Russia take a leaf out of China's playbook in building up these islands as a heavily fortified military outpost, with airbase, radars and longer-range S-400 SAMs and anti-ship missiles, this would simultaneously make any negotiated agreement on future joint ownership impossible, and would also rule out any swift fait accompli to retake the islands without heavy casualties and wider escalation. In March 1982, for example, it was Argentinean fears that Britain would bolster the tiny defences on the Falklands over a crisis over an unauthorised scrap metal merchant on South Georgia in that fast-tracked the decision by the Junta to invade the islands.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 too is a case in point. Despite much condemnation in the West for this and Russian meddling in Eastern Ukraine, the shutdown of MH17, the international community has effectively left Crimea to its fate – the first border-change in Europe in decades. Inadvertently, then perhaps, Moscow by utilising 'hybrid



**S-400 SAM in position.**

“ Japan has a long tradition of naval power – being heavily influenced by the Royal Navy at the turn of the 20th century. ”

warfare’ to overturn established borders has opened up the possibility of others taking similar gambles with its territory.

## Japan’s powerful navy

Should populism also infect Japan, and hardliners decide that exploiting (or manufacturing) a crisis could provide a window of opportunity to reclaim the islands – with maritime forces to the fore.

Japan has a long tradition of naval power – being heavily influenced by the Royal Navy at the turn of the 20th century. Indeed it was the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 in the Russo-Japanese War that confirmed it had learnt its lessons well – setting the stage for Pearl Harbor some 36 years later.

Today the JMSDF (Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force) is perhaps, after the US Navy, the most high-tech and well-trained navy in the Pacific, lacking only nuclear attack submarines and large aircraft carriers. In particular it has an extremely effective ASW capability, a relic of its experiences defending against unrestricted US submarine warfare in WW2, and in countering Russia’s Pacific fleet in the Cold War as a key ally of Washington. For example it has operated around 100 P-3 Orion Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA), now being replaced by 60+ indigenously developed Kawasaki P-1 MPAs. In comparison, the UK, another island nation with a maritime outlook and, (unlike Japan) global interests is acquiring just nine P-8A Poseidons. It is also the only nation other than the US to invest in aerial minesweeping helicopters – again a key indicator of the importance Japan places on keeping its sea lanes open.

The JMSDF also operates some of the most capable diesel-electric attack (SSK) submarines in the world, with the latest class,

the Sōryū being commissioned in 2009. The Sōryū class is Japan’s first SSK equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP) allowing these extremely quiet platforms to stay underwater longer and closing the gap in capabilities between these and nuclear attack submarines.

While Japan’s armed forces still have ‘defense’ in their official names, the country has been quietly moving to develop more offensive combat capabilities. In 2015 the JMSDF took delivery of the 27,000t Izumo ‘helicopter destroyer’ – the country’s largest warship since WW2, the first of a class of two ships. Though ostensibly configured for ASW warfare with an air wing of nine helicopters, in late 2007 there was controversy when it was revealed that the ship had also been designed to operate STOVL fixed-wing aircraft such as the F-35B – and that Tokyo is reportedly mulling buying between 20-40 F-35Bs to operate from these two pocket-sized aircraft carriers. Japan is already acquiring



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F-35As for the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) and is set to operate 42 of these stealth fighters. It has also been developing a supersonic antiship missile, the XASM-3, which is set to equip JASDF Mitsubishi F-2 fighters in 2019.

Meanwhile, in 2015 Japan became the first export customer for the V-22 Osprey tiltrotor, 17 of which will equip the JGSDF (Japan Ground Self-Defense Force). The acquisition of V-22 Osprey tiltrotors (and potentially F-35Bs) in the future show a clear direction in Japanese defence strategy towards a USMC-like expeditionary outlook – with forces able to conduct amphibious warfare and project strike power.

## Russian modernisation

Meanwhile Russia has also been modernising its military forces, with Syria a testing ground for new aircraft and drones, precision weapons and electronic warfare (EW). It has also announced a range of future weapon projects such as air-launched hypersonic missiles, underwater nuclear torpedoes and nuclear-powered cruise missiles. However, it is unclear to Western analysts how many these high-profile projects will even enter service, given increasing development costs. A case in point is Russia’s T-14 Armata tank and the Su-57 PAK-FA stealth fighter – both of which, after vast publicity and sending



**Kawasaki P-1 MPAs.**



### Russian T-14 Armata Main Battle Tank.

shockwaves through some quarters in the West, are now only to be acquired in mere handfuls. The Russian Army, for instance, is now only expected to field 100 Armata tanks, while only 12 Su-57s have been ordered and mass production put on hold. The original ambition was for 2,300 T-14s and 150 Su-57s in service by 2020. Plans for a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and destroyers have also been shelved. The cause? Escalating costs for these high-technology weapon systems and Russia's sluggish economy which has been hit by sanctions and low energy prices.

Instead, Russia is turning to upgrading and modernising its existing platforms, seeking to leverage its asymmetric advantages areas like EW and build on already successful, reliable platforms such as the Su-27/30/35 series of fighters and T-72 tanks. In naval forces, Russia has embarked on a programme of developing smaller but heavily armed corvettes, such as the Kalibr-M cruise-missile armed *Buyan*-class and the upcoming *Karakurt*-class – with the *Buyan*-class corvettes participating in strikes on Syrian rebels. The *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigates, the lead ship commissioned in July 2018, with 20-30 planned to be built, are another example of smaller, yet powerfully armed,

multi-mission surface combatants that Russia is now focusing on.

In submarines, Moscow is proceeding with a revitalisation of its long-neglected submarine arm, with the goal of six *Yasen*-class SSNs – the successor to the *Akula*-class. Entering service in 2013, this class has already worried Western naval analysts as the quietest ever Russian nuclear submarine. In addition, Russia is also to modernise older Oscar and *Akula*-class attack submarines, as well as updating the *Kilo*-class SSK – another platform that launched cruise missiles at

anti-regime forces in Syria.

Finally in air platforms, any conflict over the Kurils would undoubtedly involve Russia's Eastern Military District, including Su-27SMs, Su-24s and Su-34s as well as Su-30 and Su-35S.

### Summary

In 1905, a Russian fleet sailed halfway around the world to meet its doom at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Tsushima Straits, a harbinger of the future for Japan's naval power and one in which a future architect of Japan's WW2

strategy, Admiral Yamamoto, was wounded as a young officer. The battle dealt a humiliating defeat to Imperial Russia – then a major European power, by Japan, which had only recently emerged from isolation on the global stage.

Perhaps ironically too, it is also Tsushima veteran, Admiral Yamamoto who is associated with the phrase: 'I fear all we have done today is to awaken a great, sleeping giant' when talking about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Could a conflict in the Kurils today also awaken a sleeping bear in Moscow?



*Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigate