

## Russia's Response to the American Indo-Pacific Policy: a study on Russian strategies to sway Japan's role in the 'Quadrilateral' away from Russia

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### Abstract

The promulgation of the United States' rebalancing strategy (also known as 'the Pivot') to East Asia under Barrack Obama in 2012 heralded a change in the country's military doctrine in the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, the doctrine has expanded under Donald Trump to include the Indo-Pacific for the emergence of a loose alliance with Japan, Australia, and India, which has come to be known as the 'Quadrilateral.' Despite Russia's own plans of a 'pivot' to East Asia, the country has been remarkably quiet in diplomatic rhetoric towards increased American military presence in the Far East.

While some analysts assert that this is mainly due to the pivot being a balance of power strategy to contain China, there is no doubt that any increased military presence near Russia's borders warrants a security concern. This research paper asserts that Russia has indeed responded to increased American military presence in the region not through diplomatic or direct military confrontation, but rather through subtle channels of power projection and diplomatic overtures with the United States' major regional ally—Japan. Firstly, Russia has asserted its regional military dominance via minor incursions near Japan's airspace and territorial waters taking advantage of Japan's constitutional limitation which prevents hostile actions. Secondly, Russia has made economic overtures to Japan such as announcing plans to construct natural gas pipelines to supply Honshu. Finally, Russia has announced that it is willing to finally sign a peace treaty with Japan (which has not been signed since the end of the Second World War) and return two of the disputed Kurile Islands. This paper asserts that these three strategies towards Japan decrease the likelihood of Japanese involvement or cooperation with the United States if there are increased military hostilities with Russia.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Russia, Japan, Quadrilateral

## Introduction

The US-Japan alliance has hitherto been a geopolitical threat to Russia's Eastern borders since the cold war. While focus on US-Soviet rivalry was primarily concentrated on Europe, Northeast Asia too was an important strategic battleground, particularly during and after the Korean war. The end of the cold war and the demise of the Soviet Union heralded a new unipolar structure in international politics. However, the key structural elements of the cold war—political and military rivalry, ideological conflicts between capitalism and communism, the division of Europe and East Asia, and the extension of super power competition to the third world—have been replaced with new kinds of strategies as changes in structural elements of the cold war have brought about new issues and new priorities as the world has begun to shift from a unipolar structure to a multipolar one.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to the Asia-Pacific, Russian focus on geopolitical security as minimal during the cold war era and abysmal in the immediate post-cold war era. This was mainly due to the fact that only 5% of Russia's population is concentrated in the Far East. The Area, on the other hand, makes up 36.4% of Russia's entire territory.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the cold war, Russia downgraded its power projection capabilities in the region—including the withdrawal of troops from Mongolia and Vietnam, which left it with less traditional options to exercise direct influence.<sup>3</sup> Russia's Pacific fleet in particular declined considerably, with the decommissioning of its two ageing aircraft carriers. Shortages of fuel and funds left the Vladivostok port in a precarious situation, leading to the overall decline of the port and its facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Another factor impacting the decline of Russian influence in the Far East is that of its lack of strong bilateral relations with key regional allies—apart from its often tenuous relationship with North Korea. In fact, all of the four key players in Northeast Asia—Japan, China, South Korea, and the US—have often been competitive. Russia's relationship with China has been uneasy and complex ever since the Sino-Soviet split in 1967. The relationship with South Korea has been overshadowed by Moscow's continued support to Pyongyang despite the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Crockatt 1997, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Trenin 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Olikier & Paley 2012, 61–81.

cold war. The presence of American bases and power projection capabilities in Japan and South Korea continue to limit Russia's power and scope in the region.

However, the most important issue here, in particular, is Russia's relationship with Japan. After the end of the Second World War, as per the Potsdam treaty, Russia occupied Southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. Japan and the United States began to dispute whether the four major islands—Kunashir, Habomai, Shikotan, and Iturup—are indeed Russian or Japanese sovereign territory. This has prevented Japan and Russia from signing a formal peace agreement.

Despite the historical animosity, economic ties between Russia and Japan have been growing. A major part of Russian trade with Japan comprises of fossil fuels—Russia's largest export, chiefly crude oil and natural gas.

Since 1951, Japan and the United States have had a security alliance. The current version of the treaty was signed in 1960. Although the alliance is a collective security treaty, Japan technically could not defend the US in case of an attack due to article nine of Japan's constitution which forbids Japan from having the sovereign right to declare war. This clause has been reinterpreted as of 2014, which allows Japan to defend allies in regional territory.

United States forces in Japan are vast in number, with approximately twenty-three military bases comprising of over 50,000 soldiers. This includes the full offensive capability of the United States armed forces.<sup>5</sup>

As Japan has faced numerous threats in its surrounding waters, chiefly from China and North Korea in the immediate post-Soviet era, there was a need to initiate a security dialogue with partners which saw similar strategic threats. This culminated with the 'Operation Malabar' naval exercises with Japan, India, and the United States in 2002. India became an important security partner with no official alliance commitments as India too views China as a strategic threat. These naval exercises were expanded to include Australia in 2007, which began the birth of the 'Quadrilateral security dialogue.' Australia, however, would soon withdraw from this exercise only to rejoin in 2017 as Donald Trump began his push to the 'Indo-Pacific.'<sup>6</sup>

This paper focuses on Russian responses to the US-Japan security alliance and its expansion. It observes how Russia has been engaging with Japan on the security front (via air incursions

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<sup>5</sup> Military Bases, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Eisentraut & Gaens, 2018.

near Japan's territorial waters), via the economic front (by expanding exports of fossil fuels to make energy-dependent Japan reliant on the flow of Russian energy), and the diplomatic front (by opening up negotiations on resolving the Kuril Islands dispute). The paper examines Russia's approach through the lens of a 'carrots and sticks' diplomatic approach, i.e., when the state has offensive realist as well as liberal overtures. The goal of the paper is to observe whether Russian actions have had an impact on bilateral relations and whether Japan has been discouraged from allowing the scope of the Quadrilateral security dialogue to expand to including Russia as a regional antagonist.

### **Aircraft scrambles and interceptions**

When did Russia's policy towards East Asia change towards a policy of carrots and sticks? The Yeltsin policy is considered to have been non-interventionist and a complete antithesis to the hitherto Soviet balance of power strategy. This was evident especially in East Asia, where Russian military prowess was limited in its scope. This policy became evident after the Yeltsin era, when Russian geopolitical hegemony was at its weakest, forcing the Kremlin to reconsider its soft approach towards regional security.<sup>7</sup> Sestanovich (2014), on the other hand, asserts that current Russian power projection against the West was already in place immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

The current policy can be traced to the speeches of Dmitry Medvedev in the summer and fall of 2008, when he asserted that European security arrangements (in a veiled reference to the US and NATO) are outdated.<sup>9</sup> He began to assert an emergence of a new order, one which was Eurasian in character and evident of the multipolar character that was emerging in the New World Order. This eventually led to the drafting of Russia's current security strategy, which was promulgated on May 2009 via Presidential Decree No. 537. While the document asserts an importance on non-military matters, it does have a strong focus on military matters as well.

The main challenges towards the US-Japan alliance have been via incursions near Japan's territorial waters. While incursions during the Soviet era—and to a limit, the immediate post-Soviet era—were quite common; the current policy manifested in September 2011, when two

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<sup>7</sup> Hyodo 2014, 44–46.

<sup>8</sup> Sestanovich 2014 in McFaul, Michael, Stephen Sestanovich, and John J. Mearshimer 2014, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Ali 2012, 100–101.

nuclear-capable TU-95 bombers entered Japanese airspace.<sup>10</sup> These bombers were part of a large-scale military exercise off the Sea of Okhotsk, particularly the La Pérouse Straits, which Russia considers to be internal waters.<sup>11</sup> Later on, in the Honolulu APEC meeting, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov attempted a détente with the Japanese Foreign Minister, Gemba Koichiro, when he asserted that this military exercise had nothing to do with Russia–Japan bilateral ties and that Russia’s ultimate goal was to foster close relations between the two nations and prevent misunderstandings.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the air incursions have continued and intensified.

The Japan Air Self Defense Force publishes annual data regarding all incursions at or near Japan’s sovereign maritime borders; this section will use data from the fiscal years 2013 to 2016.<sup>13</sup>

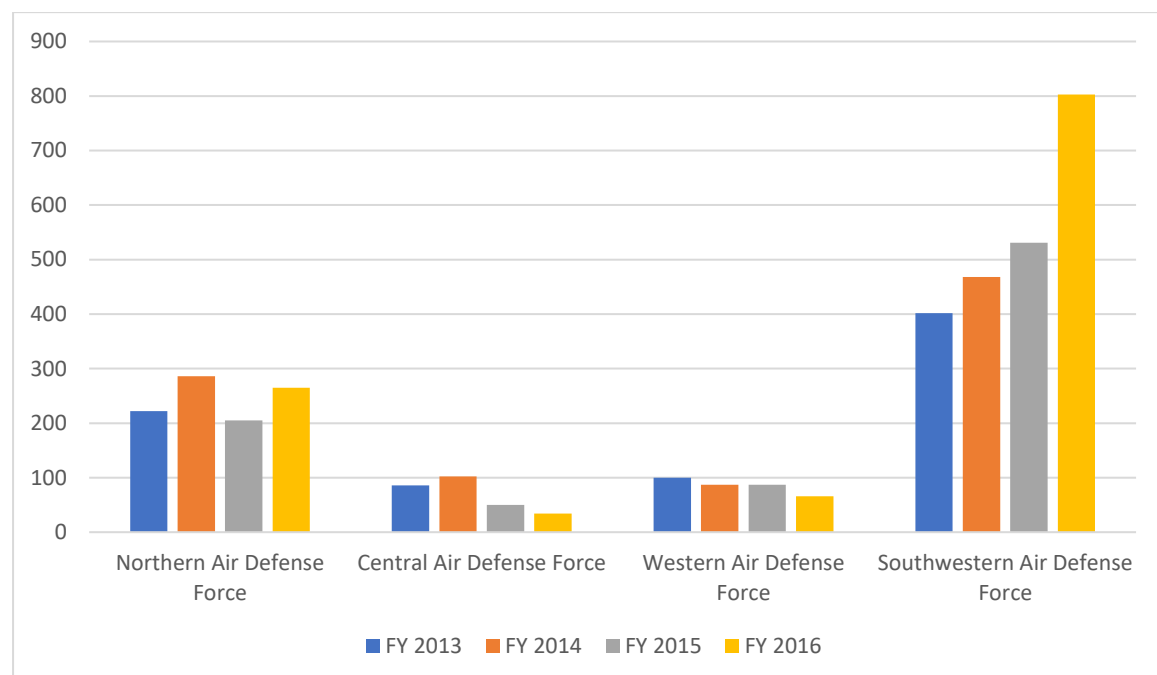


Table 1: Air Scrambles by Japan, 2013–16

<sup>10</sup> Joint Staff of Japan Self Defense Forces 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Hyodo (2014, 47) is of the opinion that this military exercise was mainly a show of power projection against China. However, he asserts that this military exercise had aims towards the US-Japan alliance as well; it was far more successful in raising alarm bells in Tokyo as opposed to Beijing. The exercise had a total participation of 10,000 military personnel as well as 50 vessels and 50 aircraft. The exercise was noted particularly for being the first time in history when such a large number of vessels crossed the La Pérouse Straits.

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> The data can be retrieved from [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2017/press\\_pdf/p20171027\\_01.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2017/press_pdf/p20171027_01.pdf)

Year	Northern Air Defense Force	Central Air Defense Force	Western Air Defense Force	Southwestern Air Defense Force
FY 2013	222	86	100	402
FY 2014	286	102	87	468
FY 2015	205	50	87	531
FY 2016	265	34	66	803

Table 2: Air scrambles by Japan, 2013–16

Table 1 & 2 represent the total number of scrambles by the four commands of the Japan Self-Defense Forces. The number of air scrambles are highest with the Southwestern and Northern Air Defense Forces, which are closest to where China and Russia respectively are located. As can be observed, while there have been an escalation of hostilities near the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands where Japan has a major ongoing territorial dispute with China and Taiwan, the frontier with Russia, specifically where the disputed Kuril islands are located, has remained relatively stable with merely a minor increase in FY 2014 and FY 2016.

Year	Russia	China	Taiwan	North Korea	Others
FY 2013	359	415	1	9	26
FY 2014	473	464	1	0	5
FY 2015	288	571	2	0	12
FY 2016	301	407	8	0	8

Table 3: Air incursions by country, 2013–16

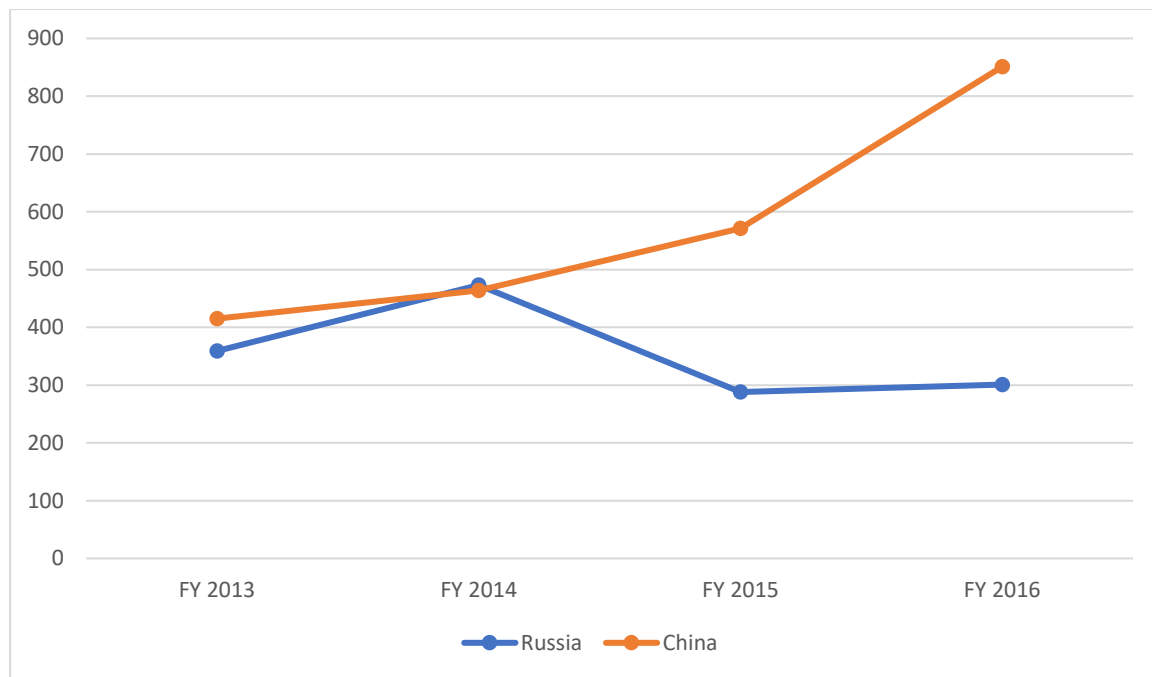
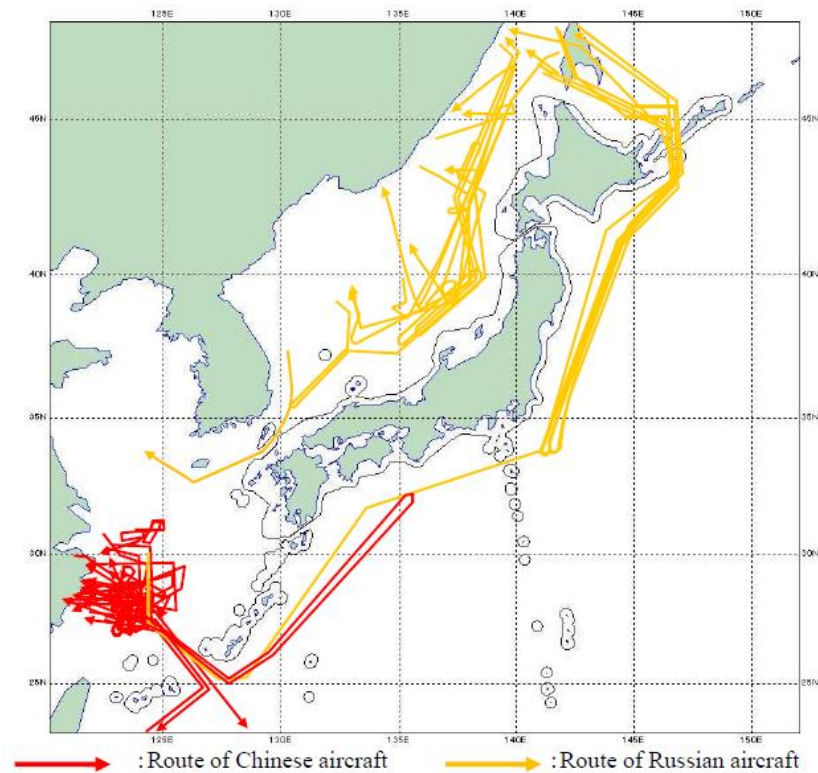


Table 4: Air incursions by Russia and China compared, 2013–16.

Table 3 represents the number of air incursions by country. Table 4 compares incursions by Russia and China. As the data shows, the vast majority of air incursions have been undertaken by Russia and China. During FY 2013, Russian air incursions against Japan accounted for 49.2% of total air interceptions. In FY 2014, it increased to 50.1% of total incursions. In 2015, the number of air incursions dipped rapidly to 32% as China began a more aggressive strategy due to the Japanese white papers hinting a deployment of troops to Ishigaki island,<sup>14</sup> which became evident in 2019.<sup>15</sup> In FY 2016, while Russian air incursions increased yet again, the total share dipped to a low of 25.7% as Chinese incursions escalated in the East China Sea.

<sup>14</sup> Panda, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Bosack, 2019.



Routes of Chinese and Russian aircrafts compared

The image above shows the routes that Chinese and Russian aircraft ply when engaging in incursions near Japan's sovereign waters. The route of Chinese aircraft suggests an interest only towards the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. However, as Russia already controls the disputed Kuril Islands, Russian air incursions suggest an offensive realist approach towards geopolitical security, as Russian aircraft fly past most of Japan's four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku.

Thus, in conclusion to this section, Russia has been using a stable offensive approach against Japan to dissuade using the US-Japan alliance as an offensive tool against Russian territory. While Russia has been engaging in a constant number of air incursions near Japan's sovereign territory, the Russian Air Force and Navy has been careful not to escalate the number of incursions in order to maintain a balance of power in the region.



## Russia's energy deals with Japan

Japan has historically had problems with acquiring energy. Japan's an island with virtually no fossil fuels of its own and imports most of its fossil fuels for its energy needs. Oil shocks and an international embargo in the 1970's forced Japan to diversify its energy sources, leading to a program of nuclear energy and diversification of sources of crude oil and natural gas. However, issues surfaced in the former with the Tohoku triple disaster in 2011 which led to the meltdown of the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power plant. This disaster forced Japan to move away from nuclear energy temporarily and to purchase more natural gas for its electricity needs.

In FY 2014, natural gas accounted for 46.2% of Japan's total energy needs. Coal accounted for 31%, Oil and other hydrocarbons at 10.6%, Hydroelectric power accounted for 9%, and renewable energy sources were at 3.2%. In FY 2015, Japan imported 1.23 billion barrels of crude oil, of which Russia exported 9%. LNG imports were at 85.05 million tons, of which Russian exports were at 9%. With regard to coal, Japan imported 190.48 million tons of which 8.7% were from Russia.<sup>16</sup>

However, Japan already had plans to acquire fossil fuels from Russia prior to the nuclear meltdown. Russia promulgated a series of energy deals with China, Japan, and North Korea, in 2009, which was concomitant with Russia's security strategy as per Presidential Decree No. 537. Tokyo was in favor of these deals as it was concomitant with Japan's longstanding energy diversification policy, in addition to cheaper costs of acquiring Russian crude oil and natural gas.

The first of these projects commissioned was the East Siberia Pacific Ocean Oil Pipeline (EPSO) which was commissioned in 2009. The pipeline connects the town of Tayshet to the city of Daqing in China, from where the crude oil is transported to Japan via the sea. The pipeline is owned and operated by Russia's Transneft JSC. Originally, the pipeline was supposed to have been extended to Kozmino bay which is closer to Japan, but was extended only to Daqing in its first phase. Blank asserts that the issues with this project wasn't Tokyo's approval, but rather the conflict and contestation between Russia's oligarchs and the three main fossil fuel companies in Russia: Transneft, Rosneft, and Gazprom.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Agency for Natural Resources and Energy 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Blank 2010, 6.

The energy deals with Japan haven't been one-sided on their own. Japanese companies have heavily invested in the island of Sakhalin for oil and natural gas over the years.

In Sakhalin-I, the consortium is 30% owned by Sakhalin Oil and Gas Development Co, a Tokyo-based company.<sup>18</sup>

In Sakhalin-II, Mitsui's local subsidiary owns 12.5% of the consortium while Mitsubishi owns 10%. Royal Dutch Shell's subsidiary owns 27.5% while Gazprom owns 50% plus 1 share.<sup>19</sup>

A major proposal in the works in Japan-Russia bilateral relations is the Sakhalin–Honshu natural gas pipeline proposal. The project has been seen as an essential project to strengthen bilateral ties. A joint study was conducted by lawmakers of the ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party as well as Gazprom and the Japan Oil, Gas, and Metals National Corp. to build a 1,500 km long natural gas pipeline. The entire cost of the project has been estimated to cost \$6 billion. However, there is an opinion that the pipeline is not feasible and that the project is mainly a political PR stunt by Russia and Japan to expand bilateral ties.<sup>20</sup> Others disagree.<sup>21</sup>

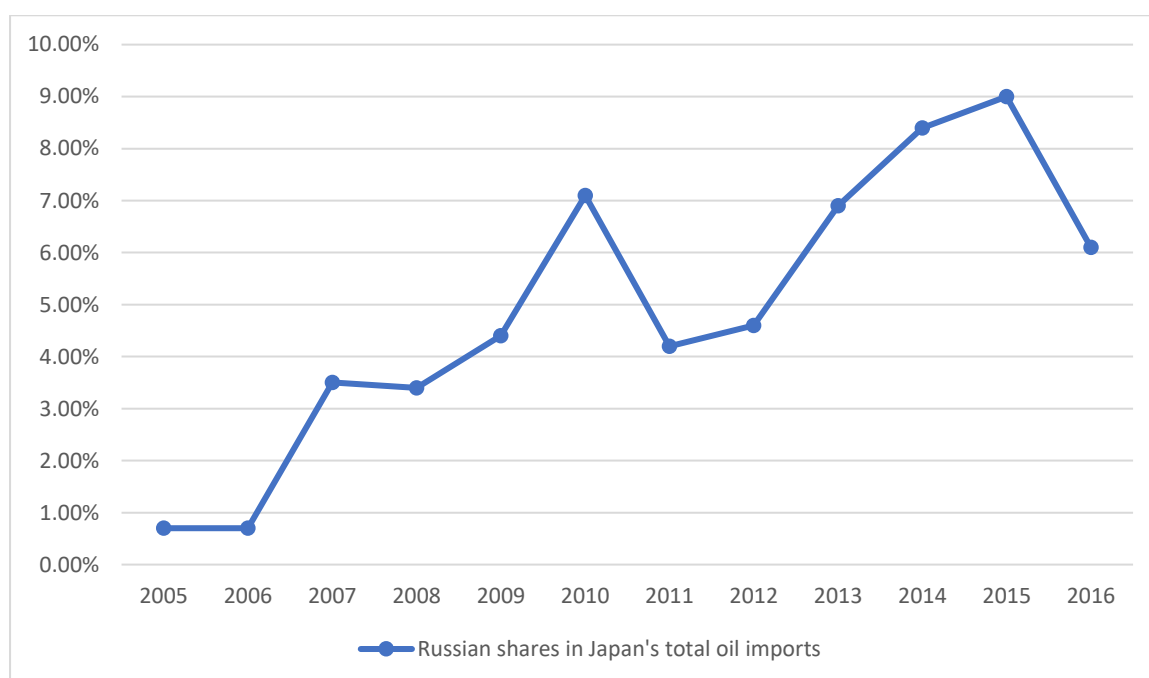


Table 5: Russian shares in Japan's total oil imports<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Exxon Neftegas Limited 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Mitsubishi Corp 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Tanaka 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Kistanov 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Sources: Minami (2014, 6), Petroleum Energy Association of Japan (2015, 10), and the Association of Natural Energy Resources (2016 and 2017).

Table 5 shows the percentage of Russian shares in Japan's oil imports. Prior to the imports from Sakhalin-1 in 2007, Russian shares held a steady 0.7%. In 2007, it increased to 3.5%. After Sakhalin-2 began full production in 2009, Russian shares increased to 7.1% by 2010. While shares declined in 2011 and 2012, this was mainly due to the increased import of crude oil from the Middle East due to the shutting down of all of Japan's nuclear reactors following the Fukushima disaster. By 2013, Russia's shares in oil imports were at 6.9%. By 2015, the shares went up to 9%, but then declined to 6.10% due to US-imposed sanctions following the Ukraine crisis.

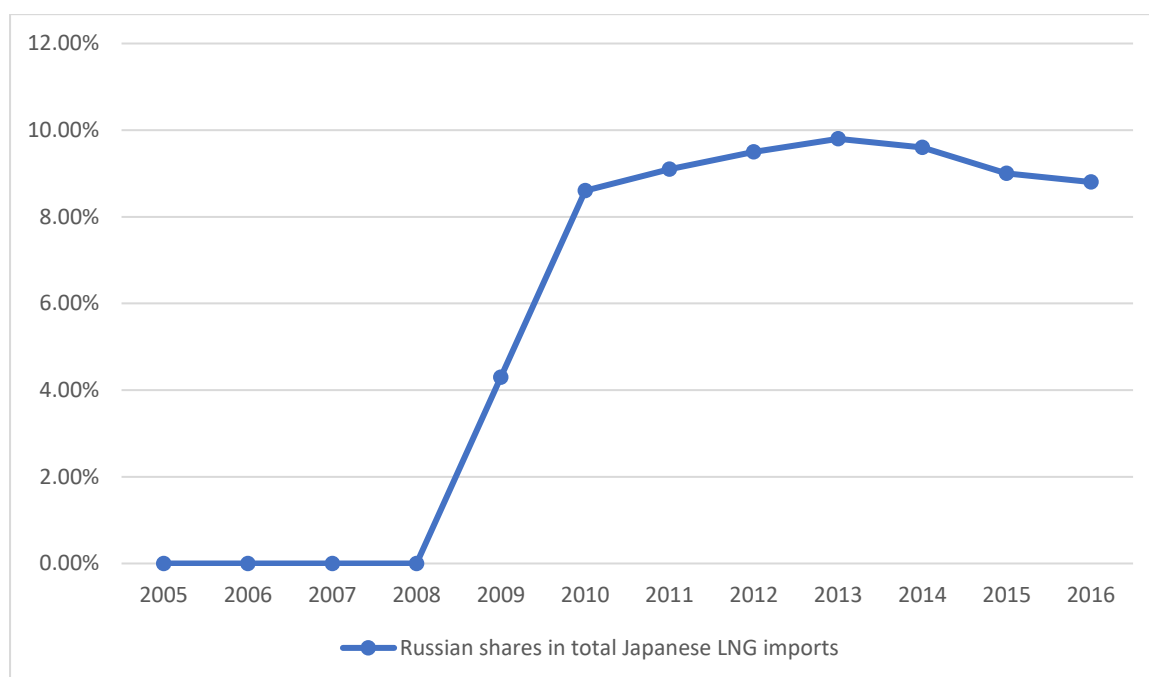


Table 6: Russian shares in total Japanese LNG imports<sup>23</sup>

Table 6 shows that Japan didn't import any natural gas from Russia until 2009, as Sakhalin-2 began production of natural gas for exports to Japan. Ever since 2010, the share of Russian natural gas exported to Japan has been stable at 8-10% of total shares. The Marginal dip in 2015–16 is the result of US-imposed sanctions on Russia.

Thus, it is imperative to analyze the impact of these deals on bilateral ties with Russia. Motomura (2014) predicts that Russian fossil fuel exports to Japan will see an increase of over 10% over the next few years. Yennie-Lindgren (2018) is of the opinion that Russia's pivot to Asia has increased bilateral. She agrees that Japanese/American sanctions on Russian fossil fuel exports have had a minimal impact. However, she asserts that political disputes,

<sup>23</sup> Sources: Minami (2014, 6), BP (2015, 28), and the Association of Natural Gas and Energy (2016 and 2017).

particularly over the Kuril Islands, will have a major impact on future energy cooperation with the two states.

From the data collected and statistics on fossil fuels, it can thus be concluded that Russian fossil fuel exports have not been impacted by Japanese/American sanctions or the restarting of Japanese nuclear reactors. However, it does seem unlikely that a natural gas pipeline from Sakhalin to Hokkaido can become a reality in the near future due to multiple issues, such as the ongoing Kuril Islands dispute and the fact that Japanese companies have invested heavily in LNG reprocessing plants—it seems highly likely that they would lobby against a pipeline.

### **The Kuril Islands dispute: solution or temporary political win?**

The dispute on the Kuril Islands dates back to the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, by which formal diplomatic relations between Japan and Russia were normalized. The treaty vaguely recognized Japanese sovereignty over the four islands, which Japan came to call the 'Northern Territories'. Following the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese war, the Southern half of Sakhalin island and all of the Kuril Islands were annexed by Japan. However, after the end of the second world war, as per the Yalta agreement of February 1945, the Potsdam declaration of July 1945, and Treaty of San Francisco of 1951, the Kuril Islands were annexed by the Soviet Union. The United States and Japan, however, began to dispute whether the four islands, i.e., Kunashir, Iturup, Habomai, and Shikotan, are considered part of the Kuril Islands.



Map of the disputed Kuril islands<sup>24</sup>

In the 1956 Soviet-Japanese joint declaration, it was agreed upon that the dispute would be settled by returning Shikotan and Habomai to Japan. These are the smallest of the islands and make up less than 6% of the total area. The United States was against this agreement however, and a peace treaty was never signed.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were virtually no developments in the dispute. In 2006, however, the dispute renegotiation started after Putin offered returning Shikotan and Habomai once again. Agreements were made under which Japanese fishermen were allowed to fish in Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone in the disputed area and visa-free access to the islands was granted to Japanese citizens.

Soon after the promulgation of Executive Order #537, Russia made a U-turn on the policy by provoking Japan. President Medvedev made a trip to the islands on September 29, 2010, which caused Tokyo to condemn the visit. This led to further Russian realpolitik policies.

A détente started in 2013 when Abe visited Moscow leading to cooperation. This further continued in 2017 and 2018, when Abe visited Vladivostok. However, the biggest break came in 2018, during the East Asia Summit in Singapore, when it was agreed that the 1956 treaty terms would be followed.

<sup>24</sup> Source: Portable Atlas, [https://ian.macky.net/pat/map/jp/jp\\_blu.gif](https://ian.macky.net/pat/map/jp/jp_blu.gif)

This led to a declaration by Japan that the islands would soon be under Japanese control. The January 2019 talks in Moscow didn't go well, and negotiations have temporarily stalled.

Johnathan Berkshire Miller, a senior fellow at the Asia Forum Japan, is of the opinion that demands raised by Russia include a complete demilitarization of the islands and that the islands are left out of the ambit of the US-Japan security alliance, hence the talks have stalled.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Russian strategy has assured that while negotiations are going on between Japan and Russia, Japan doesn't see Russia as a threat or ally. Japan has thus refrained from making any key assertions that the US-Japan security alliance or the Quadrilateral will be used as a tool against Russia.

Russia has succeeded thus on three fronts:

- 1) Russian military actions near Japan's territorial waters have displayed Russian offensive capabilities and have shown that Russia's security needs go far beyond territorial disputes—Russia is willing to engage in military maneuvers across Japan to protect her security interests.
- 2) Russia's oil and natural gas trade with Japan has created a short level of dependency on Russia. This has ensured that Mitsui and Mitsubishi, two of Japan's largest conglomerates, have energy and lobby interests in Sakhalin.
- 3) The possibility of gaining some of the lost territory has led to Japanese willingness to concede many demands.

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