



## **Northern Territories: Searching for a Solution**

by Ralph A. Cossa

**MARIEHAMN** – It was cruel irony that the killing of a Japanese fisherman by Russian security forces in the disputed Northern Territories (or southern Kuril Islands, depending on where you stand in the dispute) took place just as a group of Japanese and Russian scholars and former government officials were meeting with a group of Alanders to discuss creative solutions to this longstanding territorial dispute.

Aland is an autonomous, demilitarized Swedish-speaking island nation incorporated into the broader Finnish state with a set of constitutional guarantees aimed at preserving its unique status. It served as a willing host for the dialogue, not only because it is proud of its history and eager to serve as an example for others, but also because it constantly seeks greater international awareness, and reaffirmation, of its neutral status, which dates back to a post-World War I solution imposed on the Alanders (and Swedes) by the League of Nations.

The Northern Territories issue has a decidedly different history. It was born out of WWII, as Soviet forces occupied these then-Japanese islands in the closing days of the war, deporting the roughly 17,000 Japanese that resided there. The Russians claim that there is no territorial dispute since the Japanese, at the San Francisco peace talks following World War II, renounced their claims to the Kurils. Tokyo claims that the islands are part of Japan, not the Kurils – a position Washington supported throughout the Cold War – and, in 1956, there was an agreement, in principle, between Moscow and Tokyo that the two southernmost of the four islands could be returned to Japan once a formal peace treaty was signed between the two nations. Despite a few false starts, including one early in Russian President Vladimir Putin's term in office, little real progress has been made even in seriously negotiating, much less actually signing, a peace treaty.

In listening to the dialogue in Aland – I was there to discuss U.S. security interests – it appeared that the prospects for a breakthrough were slim. Russians left open the possibility of reviving the 1956 agreement but wondered what was in it for Moscow. What was Japan prepared to give in return? Japanese interlocutors seemed even less prepared to compromise, pushing for “all or nothing” solutions, with the only sign of flexibility being a “two plus alpha” solution where the southernmost territories were returned at the time of a peace agreement, with the details surrounding the eventual return of the remaining territories left vague. To the outside observer, it seemed clear that national pride, as much or even more than national interests, seemed to be driving both sides' positions.

It was hard to come away from the discussion feeling optimistic about the immediate future. If nongovernmental

experts who had spent their lives promoting better Russo-Japanese relations could not reach agreement, what hope is there for the two governments to ever do so? But lack of consensus regarding a solution does not equate to lack of hope. Perhaps affected by the spirit of compromise and cooperation inherent in the “Aland experience,” participants at the “New Initiatives for Solving the Northern Territories Issue” (co-chaired by Stockholm University's Center for Pacific Asia Studies and the Centre for International Governance Innovation at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada) highlighted the importance of small steps that might defuse the sovereignty debate and create a better atmosphere in which to eventually craft a solution.

Aland's status as a neutral, demilitarized territory figured in this discussion. It seemed clear that the only condition under which the territories could possibly be returned would be with a future Japanese pledge not to maintain military forces in the islands. While no one in the room pretended to speak for the Japanese government, most believed that Tokyo would find such a condition acceptable.

Russia's willingness to demilitarize the territories today “as an act of good faith” seemed less likely, although the military significance of the territories decreased significantly with the end of the Cold War and few Russian troops look forward to an assignment there. Perhaps Moscow could make a virtue of necessity by removing an unnecessary and costly base, especially if Tokyo were to agree to assist in the transition (i.e., help pay for the move).

Participants also agreed that joint economic development and cooperation in the Northern Territories would also help create a better atmosphere for eventual return or resolution of the problem. A softening of borders, such as currently exists between Aland and Sweden (or throughout the European Union, for that matter), could reduce sovereignty concerns over the long run and make it possible for former residents to at least visit, if not eventually return to, the islands.

As one rides the ferry between Stockholm and Mariehamn, the number of people crowded into the ship's duty free shops and lined up in front of its slot machines attests to the attractiveness of an open economic zone that permits hassle-free transit not only between Aland and Sweden but with the rest of Finland as well (another characteristic of Aland's unique autonomy).

Finally, to avoid a repeat of tragic incidents like the recent shooting of a Japanese fisherman, joint patrols and joint enforcement of joint fisheries agreements should be considered. Ideally, this could be part of a broader “code of conduct” between the two sides, aimed at defusing tensions and limiting the possibility of future unfortunate incidents.

Regrettably, a near-term solution to the Northern Territories issue appears unlikely. But, there are positive confidence-building steps that both governments can take, in keeping with the Aland example, to increase the prospects for a solution in the long run. Meanwhile, it would be an even greater contribution to regional peace and stability of representatives from Beijing and Tibet's government-in-exile (and perhaps even from Taiwan as well), were to meet in Mariehamn to learn from the Aland experience and see how true autonomy can be made to work for all concerned.

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