



## Fishing Wars: Japan-Russia relations continue downward spiral

by Joseph P. Ferguson

On Aug. 16, in disputed territorial waters north of Hokkaido and south of the Habomai group of islets, a Japanese fisherman was killed by a shot fired from a Russian Coast Guard patrol boat. Three other crewmembers of the Japanese fishing vessel *Kisshin Maru No. 31* were arrested on the spot by Russian authorities and taken into custody on Kunashiri, one of the disputed islands in the southern Kuril archipelago known as the “Northern Territories” to the Japanese.

While this incident, however regrettable, may have been swept under the carpet as recently as several weeks ago, the timing could not have been worse. Although there have been a number of incidents in the disputed waters over the past decade or so (30 Japanese fishing boats have been seized by Russian authorities since 1994, and seven Japanese have been wounded by gunfire in those incidents), this is the first fatality since 1956. The Japanese daily *Sankei Shimbun* remarked in an Aug. 17 editorial, “the Russian side has left a stain” on Japanese-Russian relations in the 50<sup>th</sup> year of their bilateral relationship, which was normalized in 1956.

Russian authorities insist that the *Kisshin Maru* resisted calls to stop and be boarded, and tried to escape when warning shots were fired from the Russian boat. The Japanese victim was supposedly struck in the head by random fire. Russian authorities have made it very clear that the boat was in forbidden waters and taking part in illegal fishing for crabs. The Russian press has repeatedly referred to the Japanese fishermen as “poachers.” Some Japanese fishing boats from the Hokkaido port of Nemuro have the right to fish for flatfish, octopus, pollack, and to harvest seaweed, but crabs – which can fetch high dollars on the commercial market – are strictly forbidden. The Russian coast guard reportedly found large numbers of crabs and at least 25 crab traps on board the *Kisshin Maru*. While some Japanese observers concede that it might have been operating illegally, the Japanese public is having a hard time fathoming how the Russian authorities could have delivered such a stern and malicious response to illegal fishing and taken a life.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry has dispatched diplomats to Moscow and to the region to win the release of the three other crewmen. Although they could receive prison sentences and stiff fines, it is unlikely the Russian authorities will detain them for long given the international attention to this incident. Nevertheless, it will add to the longstanding image of Russia among Japanese as a dangerous place where the law is applied arbitrarily. This image exists among Japanese diplomats who feel stonewalled at every meeting with Russian counterparts, Japanese businessmen who have had assets seized by organized crime in Russia, and Japan tourists who have been

randomly attacked in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the Russian Far East.

While there has been hope over the last decade within Japan that the territorial dispute with Russia might be solved to Japan’s satisfaction, the last few years have witnessed fruitless and exasperating bilateral negotiations. President Vladimir Putin may have once been amenable to a settlement (in which Japan would receive two of the smallest disputed islands) but it appears that he is no longer in the mood to cooperate, especially given Russia’s expanding economy and its rising international status. Meanwhile Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has ineptly played the World War II history issue with China and Korea; resolving this historical and territorial issue with Russia has become even more difficult.

Finally, Moscow has moved boldly forward in advancing the economic development of the Kuril Islands, which have been among Russia’s most backward and economically depressed regions. Earlier this month, the Russian government approved a draft program to aid the Kuril Islands over the next nine years by disbursing roughly \$670 million to help develop the islands’ infrastructure and social programs. This in effect eliminates Tokyo’s one trump card: the promise of economic development.

It has been clear since before Putin’s visit to Tokyo last year that Japanese-Russian relations were stalled. But the latest incident threatens to send relations into the deep freeze. As long as the historical issues of World War II remain unresolved in East Asia, and as long as Moscow sees eye-to-eye with Beijing about the overwhelming strategic superiority of the United States, the territorial issue will remain unresolved and Japanese-Russian bilateral relations will continue to tread the familiar path of mistrust and misunderstanding.

*Joseph Ferguson ([jpf@nceeer.org](mailto:jpf@nceeer.org)) is vice president of the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research.*