

# Constructing Japan's 'Northern Territories': Domestic Actors, Interests, and the Symbolism of the Disputed Islands

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## Abstract

This article seeks to contribute both to the scholarly debate on Japan's territorial dispute with USSR/Russia and to the broader body of academic literature devoted to the ideational factor in foreign policy. By focusing on the formative years of the dispute and examining the variety of symbolic meanings attached to the Soviet-occupied islands by the domestic actors, this article examines the process of the emergence of the idea of the 'Northern Territories' as a national mission. It argues that the formation and institutionalization of the idea of the 'Northern Territories' in its present form can be traced to a complex web of power relations among the domestic actors, none of which perceived the return of the territory as its ultimate goal.

## 1 Introduction

On 9 August 1945 the Soviet Union joined the Allied war in the Pacific against Japan. Taking advantage of the prior agreements with the Allies as well as the miserable condition of the Japanese army and the state, Soviet Union occupied and later annexed part of the Japanese territory that consisted of the southern part of Sakhalin, the Kurile chain, and a number of small islands off Hokkaido. In the San-Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, Japan renounced its rights to Sakhalin and the Kurile chain. Yet the exact geographical scope of the latter was not defined in the treaty and since mid-1950s, Japan persistently demanded the return of four islands of Kunashiri, Etorofu, Habomai and Shikotan arguing that they do not constitute part of the territory it renounced in the Peace Treaty. The four islands, which from 1960s onwards came to be known in Japan as the 'Northern Territories', have been the main stumbling bloc in the various attempts to fully normalize the relations between Japan and the Soviet Union and despite the end of the Cold War continue to haunt Japan's relations with Russia to the present day.

This consistently non-compromising stance of the Japanese government in the territorial dispute with USSR/Russia is quite intriguing for a variety of reasons. Regardless of the end of the Cold War confrontation, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a number of other important transformations that took place in Northeast Asia and the domestic change in the ruling party, Japan's non-compromising demand for the return of all the islands, continues to dominate its agenda vis-à-vis Russia. While the understanding that the possibility of Russian acceptance of the Japanese demands is virtually nonexistent is occasionally voiced in the domestic debate, a less rigid position that could lead to a breakthrough is yet to be seriously considered by the Japanese policy-makers.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. Through analyzing the process of the formation of the idea of 'Northern Territories' in Japan as well as the various interests and symbolic meanings that were associated with the Soviet-occupied islands, it seeks to contribute to the body of scholarship that deals with Japan's territorial dispute with USSR/Russia. The historical and the political origins of the dispute have long been on the agenda of scholars and thoroughly scrutinized from a variety of angles (e.g. Hellmann, 1969; Stephan, 1974; Berton, 1992; Hara, 1998 and 2008; Wada, 1999; Hasegawa, 1998; Kimura, 2000). Most of the scholarship

devoted to the issue agrees that Japan's refusal to entertain a compromising solution to the dispute can hardly be explained by a pursuit of material interests and the meaning of the islands is symbolic (Williams, 2010). This article concurs with this generally shared understanding regarding the lack of rational maximization behind the persistent quest for the islands and its origins in a nexus of historical and political accidents (Kimura and Welch, 1998). At the same time however, the author feels that while the dispute itself is generally regarded as a product of history, its symbolic meaning is assumed to be homogeneous and static, or, put differently, as having no history. This article challenges this assumption by arguing that the islands have meant different things for different actors. It seeks to historicize the symbolic meaning associated with the 'Northern Territories' by isolating the various domestic actors and examining the complex web of interests that has shaped the irredentist cause prior to its crystallization as a national mission. It argues that the formation and the institutionalization of the 'Northern Territories' narrative in its present form can be traced to a complex web of relations among a number of actors, none of which initially perceived the return of the islands as the main goal in articulating the issue.

Yet, the aims of this article are not limited to the field of Japan–Russia relations. By examining the formation process of the idea of the 'Northern Territories', it seeks to contribute to the broader body of constructivist literature devoted to the role of ideas in foreign policy. Since the emergence of the constructivist school of International Relations, Japan has been one of the most popular case studies in the explorations of the role of the ideational factor in foreign policy. Drawn by Japan's reluctance to use military force in its post-1945 foreign policy, constructivists argued that this reluctance can be traced to the norms or culture of anti-militarism that emerged in Japan in the aftermath of the defeat in the Asia-Pacific War (e.g. Katzenstein and Okawara, 1993; Berger, 1998). Regardless of differences in approaches, these works trace the development of Japan's postwar anti-militarism to the cultural and institutional transformations that occurred in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in WWII.

Other aspects of Japan's foreign policy however have remained largely unnoticed by the constructivist scholarship and this article hopes to contribute to filling this gap. Unlike Japan's security policy which has experienced a number of significant modifications in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the demand for the return of four islands has undergone very

minor modifications since mid-1950s. Thus the idea of the 'Northern Territories' presents a perfect case for the study of the ideational factor in foreign policy. While generally adhering to constructivism, however, it must be noted that the main focus of this article is not the effect of the idea of the 'Northern Territories' on Japan's Russia policy but the origins of this idea. As Robert Jervis aptly noted, the focus on effects rather than on the sources of ideas has been one of the main problems of the constructivist literature. The abundance of ideas in the public discourse, Jervis argues, makes it 'trivially easy' to point out the intellectual antecedents of a certain policy or behavior. A more academically interesting task, Jervis suggests, is to examine the sources of ideas and to explain why certain ideas and not others find their way into policy (1994–95, pp. 908–909).

Generally concurring with Jervis's suggestion, this article takes the continuous importance of Northern Territories in Japan's foreign policy for granted and focuses on exploring the process of the formation of the symbolic value attached to the disputed islands. It argues that the formation of the idea of 'Northern Territories' as a national mission can be traced to a complex web of power relations among various domestic actors. Furthermore, it shows that the final symbolic product cannot be identified with interests of any of the actors. Also, from a policy-oriented perspective, it can be argued that understanding the dynamics involved in a formation of a certain idea is indispensable for developing better policies aimed at tackling the issue (Berger, 2008). In this way, the argument presented below can be seen as a reminder to the policy makers of the initial interests that were associated with the islands before the territorial dispute reified into its present form.

In one of the most seminal works devoted to the history of the dispute, Stephan (1974) noted that in early 1970s, when the domestic construct of the 'Northern Territories' was taking its present shape, the irredentist symbiosis consisted of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-led government, a number of non-governmental organizations and the Hokkaido Prefecture (HP). The following part will examine the various interests and symbolic meanings initially attached to the islands by these actors within the context of power relations that shaped their agenda. It must be noted that the territorial dispute itself and the associated symbolic meanings evolved against the structural background of WWII and the Cold War. Structural signals, however, can

gain different meanings and interpretations when incorporated into the domestic context. Thus the focus of the below analysis is on the domestic power relations that shaped the agenda of the key actors in their pursuit of the irredentist cause.

## 2 Early grassroots movement for the return of the islands

The grassroots movement for the return of the Soviet-occupied territory sprung on Hokkaido almost immediately after the completion of the Soviet occupation. As each group reflected the interests of its members, who, in turn, were deported or escaped from different parts of the Soviet-occupied territory or consisted of members that had certain vested interests related to certain parts of this territory, some demanded the return of all of the Kuriles, others focused on the four islands known today as the 'Northern Territories', some only on Habomai and Shikotan, and some hoped for the return of southern Sakhalin as well (Kuroiwa, 2009). Besides the variety in the geographical scope of the territory, the various groups varied in the material scope of their interests. Some were interested in the islands per se due to property rights. Other groups that included not only former residents but also fishermen from villages on Hokkaido or Northern Honshu had more interest in the waters surrounding the islands as a source of fisheries (Kajiura, 1989). It is far beyond the scope of this article to discuss the demands of all the various groups that formed in the early postwar years with the purpose of facilitating the return of Soviet-occupied territory. Hence, this section, while occasionally referring to other organizations, will focus mainly on the movement formed the city of Nemuro which is considered to be the spiritual origin of the irredentist cause.

The first appeal to reverse the Soviet occupation appeared almost immediately after its completion in the town of Nemuro. Prior to the Soviet occupation, Nemuro was the center of the economic zone that encompassed the islands and the eastern part of Hokkaido. It was also the place where most of the former residents of the disputed islands have settled after the Soviet occupation. The movement was led by Andō Ishisuke, the mayor of Nemuro. Andō and his followers formed an organization called the Commission to Petition for Returning Islands Attached to Hokkaido (*Hokkaidō fuzoku tōsho fukki konsei iinkai*,

hereafter the Commission). Most of initial members of the movement belonged either to the local administrative elite or held senior positions in the local fishing industry. All of them had clear personal stakes in the islands. Andō, for example, owned a farm on Shikotan and was involved in running a crab cannery on Etorofu prior to the Soviet occupation (Kushiro Shimbunsha, 1988). Thus it is not surprising that in its early days some of the local residents perceived the Commission as an organization whose aim was to support the wealthy members of the community (Records of the Board Meeting, 19 July 1946 in Nemuro City 1997, pp. 12–13). Later, however, probably as the result of the Soviet expulsions of the remaining residents from the islands, the movement expanded to include other members of the community. In 1951 the occupation authorities estimated its total membership at 676 individuals (SCAP, 1951).

Similar to the grassroots organizations today, the Commission submitted petitions to the occupation authorities and the Japanese government and organized rallies. There are, however, two important aspects that distinguish the Commission as well as other contemporary organizations from the irredentist movement today. Like many other civil society organizations they campaigned *against* the policy pursued by the authorities, demanding its amendment. Thus it is not surprising that some of the activists were occasionally detained and questioned by the occupation authorities (Kushiro Shimbunsha, 1988) and the activities of the Commission (as well as some of the other irredentist organizations on Hokkaido) were under police surveillance (SCAP, 1951). Another important point is that the rationale for their demands was dominantly economic. From its early days, the Nemuro movement was driven mainly by the desire to reinstate the economic zone interrupted by the Soviet occupation and the so-called ‘MacArthur line’ as well the prospects of trade relations with the United States interrupted by the war, rather than by a sentimental longing for a lost territory.

Andō submitted his first petition addressed to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, General McArthur already in December 1945. After outlining the history of Japan’s possession of the islands that goes back to the ‘feudal era’, the petition argued that the islands have been an important source of salmon, crab, and other marine products that were canned and sold to the United States (Nemuro City, 1997).

The predominance of economic interests can be observed in the explicitly stated wish for the islands to be placed under the US occupation voiced in the petitions as well as Andō's personal communications (Kushiro Shimbunsha, 1988). It is important to remember that at that time the majority of the Japanese people believed that the US-occupied islands of Okinawa and the Bonins had been lost forever (Welfield, 1988). Thus Andō and his fellow activists could hardly predict that the islands, if placed under American occupation, will be returned to Japan after the peace settlement and were driven mainly by the prospect of reestablishing the regional economic zone dismembered by the Soviet occupation.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to the later discourse on the Northern Territories, the petitions did champion the return of four islands and appealed to historical facts and international justice. Furthermore, drawing from the pre-1945 national mobilization discourse with its emphasis on the nation, the petitions also argued for a deep national (*minzokuteki*) connection of the islands to the city of Nemuro. In their attempt to attract attention they also positioned the territorial issue within the broader question of postwar national revival (petitions from 15 February and 25 August 1947 in Nemuro City, 1997). These arguments, however, were perceived as means in mobilizing governmental and public support for the irredentist cause and providing it with broad legitimacy rather than ends in themselves. The territorial scope of the demands can be explained by the fact that these four islands constituted an integral part of Nemuro economic zone. The Northern Kuriles which were also under Japanese control from 1875 were much less developed and the fishing in adjacent waters was conducted mainly by fishermen from other regions of Japan. As the main parts of the petitions as well as the internal debates of the Commission show, the return of the islands was seen as a matter of economic life or death for the city of Nemuro and hence carried a local and pragmatic agenda (e.g. Takamoto Shōchi in Nemuro City, 1997).

The pragmatic nature of the Nemuro-based activism is further underscored by the dynamic changes of their demands. In 1947–48, the Soviet Union had unilaterally annexed the islands and expelled the remaining Japanese residents. An estimated 8,000–9,000 repatriates have reached Japan proper (Miyazaki, 1964) with a majority of them settling in

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1 I am grateful to Akihiro Iwashita for this point.

Nemuro, thus further aggravating the economic situation in the city, heavily dependent on fishery. Around this time the Soviet authorities also embarked on the policy of seizing and arresting Japanese fishermen whose vessels were found in proximity of the occupied islands. Furthermore, the contents of the Yalta Agreement that allocated the Kurile islands to the Soviet Union also became widely known in Japan. Against this background, the petition dated 15 September 1948 carried very few historical references and was devoted mostly to depicting the economic plight of the residents of Nemuro. The wording of the text is quite ambiguous. It reflects the members' desire for the return of the four islands but also their understanding that Kunashiri and Etorofu which were always considered to be part of the Kuriles are probably lost forever. Thus the petition focused on the economic issues, arguing that the sudden increase in fishermen settling down in the Nemuro area combined with the prohibition on fishing in the waters surrounding the occupied islands have made the living conditions unbearable. It contained two key demands; the return of the Habomai islands (including Shikotan) which do not belong to the Kurile chain and the release of the numerous fishermen captured by the Soviets (Nemuro City, 1997).

To summarize, the irredentist movement in Nemuro was propelled by the severe aggravation of the local economy that resulted from the Soviet occupation of a significant part of the economic zone of eastern Hokkaido. The symbolic value of the islands was dominantly economic and appeals to history and references to the nation in the early irredentist discourse were made based on strategic calculations in an attempt to draw a broad public and official support to their cause.

### 3 The irredentist cause and the HP

On 8 September 1951 PM Yoshida signed the Peace Treaty with Japan by this officially ending WWII. Article 2c of the Treaty stipulates that Japan has renounced all right and claim to the Kurile Islands, without, however, specifying the exact scope of the chain. Simultaneously, 'McArthur line' which limited the areas in which Japanese fishermen were allowed to engage in fishing activities was abolished. As the Habomais and Shikotan were never considered to be part of the Kurile (Chishima) chain in the prewar years, Nemuro residents naturally expected the return of these two islands to Japan's jurisdiction. Hence



the subsequent petitions of the Commission, this time addressed to the Japanese government and dated 25 February, 24 March, and 17 November 1952, considered the two islands of Kunashiri and Etorofu as lost and focused on the issues related to the Habomais and Shikotan. Reflecting the widely shared expectation regarding the return of the two islands (*Hoppōryōdo mondai taisaku kyōkai* 1996), the petitions of the Commission continued to be driven by a very pragmatic understanding of the dispute and demanded from the government to facilitate the return of the two islands. Later though, the Commission changed again its position and reverted to the four islands demand.

By that time however other important advocacy agents emerged on Hokkaido. Besides a number of small organizations, from 1950 onwards the Hokkaido prefectural government under the leadership of the Socialist Governor Tanaka Toshifumi fully embraced the irredentist cause. In the same year another major non-governmental organization called the Alliance for Petitioning the Return of the Chishima and the Habomai islands (*Chishima oyobi Habomai henkan konsei dōmei*) (hereafter the Alliance) was established under the patronage of the Governor Tanaka. In an attempt to establish itself as a representative of all of Hokkaido, the board of directors included the mayors of all of the main cities and towns in the prefecture and its funding was coming mainly from the prefectural government (*Chishima oyobi Habomai henkan konsei dōmei* 1954). The formation of the Alliance signified the beginning of a process of a gradual appropriation of the irredentist cause and its institutionalization on the prefectural level.

The main explicit reason that drove Tanaka's administration to engage in the territorial issue was the (justified) fear that despite the heavy investment of resources into the development of the Kuriles since the 19th century, the central government may give up the Soviet-occupied territories during the peace settlement (Tanaka, 1950 and 1955). It is also plausible that Tanaka's prior career as a public servant at the Department of Forest Management of the HP as well as his vision for an overall development of Hokkaido also played an important role in arousing his interest in the islands that included the timber-rich Kunashiri. At the same time however, it is important to remember that in 1950, the year prefectural government embarked on its active participation in the irredentist movement, Tanaka's administration engaged in a fierce conflict with the central government over the establishment of the

Hokkaido Development Agency within the Cabinet Office. The rationale behind the creation of this administrative body, whose responsibilities overlap with those of the prefectural administration, was generally understood as a conservative attempt to wrestle the control over the prefecture from the influence of the Socialists and fiercely contested by Tanaka (Hanno, 2003). Thus, the irredentist cause provided another platform for Tanaka to criticize the central government and to enhance his own legitimacy in the eyes of Hokkaido residents.

In line with the general focus on economic development espoused by Tanaka, his rationale for championing the return of the islands was similar to that of the Commission. Namely, the islands were argued to be the main source of protein for Japan and constituting an integral part of Hokkaido economic zone (Tanaka, 1950). Contrastingly to the Commission, however, the struggle with the central government played an important role in shaping prefectural and the Alliance's agenda. Thus, in opposition to Yoshida's government which, however reluctantly, renounced Japan's rights to the Kuriles, Tanaka and the Alliance followed the position of Japan's Socialist Party and advocated the return of all of the Kurile chain as well as the Shikotan and the Habomais. It is also possible that the regional-level competition between the socialists and the United Farmer's Party played a certain role in Tanaka's decision to advocate the return of all of the Kuriles. After the April 1951 elections, the United Farmers Party had one seat more than the Socialists and was the second largest party in the Hokkaido Assembly after the conservative Liberal Party (Hokkaido Prefectural Assembly, 1961). The United Farmers' position on the Kuriles was similar to the one espoused by the Commission and thus the argument for the return of all of the Kurile chain can be seen as motivated also by the local-level intra-progressive rivalry. The United Farmers Party however was dissolved in 1952 and it seems that it was the rivalry with the conservatives that continuously motivated Tanaka to take an active part in the irredentist movement.

Thus, in early 1950s the Alliance and the Hokkaido prefectural government advocated the return of all of the Kuriles, Habomais and the Shikotan, invoking the Potsdam Declaration and issuing statements which argued for Japan's historical right to Kuriles. They admitted the renouncement of Japan's rights to all of the Kuriles in the Peace Treaty and at the same time argued that this action did not reflect the wish of

the people of Japan (Kuwabara, 1965). By following this line of argument the Alliance and Tanaka's administration engaged in implicit critique of Yoshida's government for its lack of adherence to the democratic principles. Just like the conservative government brought the struggle with the left to Hokkaido by establishing the Development Agency, Tanaka and his affiliates utilized the territorial dispute in their attempt to bring their struggle with the central government to Tokyo. Thus, a mass rally sponsored by the Hokkaido Governor, Hokkaido Assembly and the Alliance was held in Tokyo on 19 July 1953. The declaration issued by the rally contested the secession of the Kuriles in San Francisco. Appealing to the 'instinctive desire' shared by all humans to protect a territory which was developed by shedding 'sweat and blood', it called for the correction of this injustice and demanded the return of all of the Kuriles as well as the Habomais and Shikotan (*Chishima oyobi Habomai shotō henkan konsei kokumin taikai*, 1953). Bearing in mind the importance of the broader rivalry with the conservatives-dominated center, it can be argued that despite the nationalistic rhetoric, the symbolic value of the islands for Tanaka's Hokkaido administration was mainly in their delegitimizing effect on Yoshida-led central government.

The ultimate importance of the islands in the struggle with the conservatives made the prefectural government apparently oblivious to the local dissatisfaction with its position. In August, 1954 Governor Tanaka was booed by the public when making a passionate speech about the need to continue the movement for the return of the Kurile and the Habomai islands. The booing came after the Governor ignored a question from the public regarding the meaning of championing the irredentist cause under a state of nonexistent diplomatic relations between Japan and the Soviet Union (*Hokkai nichi nichi shimbun*, 1954). Nemuro city position also differed from that of the prefectural government. Local fishermen suffered greatly from vessel seizures and related fines imposed by the Soviet authorities. The economic plight combined with continuous vessel seizures by the Soviet border guards and related fines, resulted in Nemuro adopting a flexible stance towards the territory which contradicted the prefectural position. In March 1956, during the second round of Soviet-Japanese negotiations, Nemuro City Assembly adopted a resolution that called for the Japanese government to resolve swiftly the disagreements with the Soviet Union and to conclude a fisheries treaty (*Nemuro City Assembly*, 1956). Two months later, a resolution adopted

by a mass rally in the town expressed its ‘understanding of the difficult international situation’ and their satisfaction with the return of two islands and safe fishing (Kuroiwa, 2009, p. 8).

In the context of this clash of various interests on Hokkaido, a testimony made by Matsuura Yoshinobu, Vice Chairman of one of the largest grassroots organizations at that time, called ‘Nemuro Area Peace Preservation Economic Revival Alliance’ (*Nemuro chihō heiwa iji keizai fukkō dōmei*) is particularly worthy of attention. Established in 1953 in Nemuro, this group’s members were mainly local fishermen and common residents. According to Matsuura’s statement, as of 1954 it had 2,200 members, almost four times more than the Commission, with which they had non-univocal relations. The organization was headed by Togashi Mamoru, one of the most prominent activists in the Nemuro area and a proponent of the two islands solution.

Matsuura’s testimony at the Diet reflected the division within the Nemuro-based movement but also the frustration with the prefectural government appropriating the movement for its political aims. In the testimony, Matsuura argued that the formation of the group was a response of the local people (meaning Nemuro area) to the fact that the irredentist movement no longer reflected their interests. He stated that the main aim of the residents of Nemuro, who have become disillusioned with the possibility for the return of the islands, is the possibility to engage safely in fishing activities in the waters surrounding the islands. Matsuura noted that the current situation keeps the locals in poverty and danger, and also undermines their quality of life because of continuous operation of military aircrafts in the area. He continued to argue that peace, safe fishing and trade with the Soviet Union and China are the main wishes of the local residents (Fisheries’ Committee, House of Councilors, 1 April 1954 at NDL).

It seems that resulting from the domestic reporting of the first round of Soviet–Japanese talks in 1955 which revealed the Soviet proposal to return the Habomais and the Shikotan, the idea that the resolution of fisheries-related issues should take priority over the scope of territory to be returned gained popularity on Hokkaido. For example, an editorial in the main local daily newspaper published in September 1955 stated that the people of Hokkaido are not pursuing ‘territorial satisfaction’ but seek to establish their ‘right to life’, which is dependent on fisheries (cited in *Sekai*, 1956, p. 207). An All-Hokkaido Citizens rally was held

in Sapporo in March 1956. The resolution issued by the rally focused on the safe operation of fisheries and the release of the detainees but did not mention at all the desire to get back the islands (Kuwabara, 1965). Around this time, City Assembly of Hakodate, one of the largest cities on Hokkaido, also voiced its resistance to the prefectural position. It sent an opinion statement to Governor Tanaka arguing the urgency of re-establishing the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in order to secure 'safe fishing' in the waters surrounding the islands (Hakodate City Assembly, 1956). Similar statements, emphasizing the importance of the fishery issues and arguing the need to settle on the return of the Habomais and Shikotan, were issued also by a number of local irredentist organizations (Kuwabara, 1965). Notwithstanding the mounting resistance, the official position of the HP remained unchanged (Hokkaido Prefecture, 1956).

During the 1955–56 peace treaty negotiations between Japan and the Soviet Union, many on Hokkaido believed that they will result in a return of at least parts of the occupied territories. In February 1956, taking advantage of this widely spread belief the prefectural administration established a new department named Headquarters for Countermeasures Related to Reversion of Territory and Fisheries within its General Affairs Division. The official purpose of this department was to collect data and to plan the reconstruction and development of the territories that will be returned by the Soviets but also to engage in 'nurturing'- and 'guiding'-related grassroots organizations (HP). Thus this further institutionalization of the territorial cause on the prefectural level can be seen as an attempt to capitalize on the possible return of the two islands and to consolidate the local public opinion under the banner of 'return of all of the Kuriles'. Three years later, however, Socialist candidate lost the gubernatorial elections and a former LDP Diet member Machimura Kingo became the new Governor of Hokkaido. This meant that from now onwards, the prefectural policy on the territories will be in line with that of the state and that the various institutions established under Tanaka will now serve the policy of the central government.

## 4 From Hokkaido-based irredentism to a national mission

In the early postwar period the governmental policy regarding the territories seized by the Soviet Union was limited to the international arena and determined by domestic politics and the international politics of the Cold War. In 1955, during the first round of Japan–USSR peace treaty negotiations, the ‘four islands at once’ thesis became the guiding principle of the newly formed LDP and the government. The domestic political process that led to the emergence of this position is thoroughly examined in Hellmann’s (1969, also see Matsumoto, 1966) seminal work. For the purposes of the present paper it suffices to note that while fishery interests did play a certain role in the process, it was mainly the intra-conservative fractional rivalry that shaped the process and the outcome. Hellmann and others trace the demand for the four islands to the anti-communist and anti-Soviet sentiments of the right leaning faction of the conservatives who were not enthusiastic about the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Thus the demand for the four islands was utilized by the prudent faction and their supporters in MoFA in their attempt to torpedo the negotiations (Hasegawa, 1998). The negotiations eventually culminated in the 1956 Joint Declaration, in which Japan and the Soviet Union agreed to restore diplomatic relations and to continue negotiations towards a peace treaty, including territorial issues. In the following decade, the domestic importance of the territorial dispute sharply demised. In 1955 and 1956, during the negotiations, the territorial issue was often highlighted in the media and the Socialists used the increased importance of the dispute in domestic politics to attack particular moves of the government (Hellmann, 1969). Contrastingly, after the Joint Declaration, the dispute did not feature high on the LDP agenda or any of the other parties and the ruling elites had little interest in the Hokkaido-based grassroots organizations. In 1959, Japan’s Communist Party (JCP) reached an agreement with the Soviet Communist Party that when Japan is ruled by a ‘truly democratic government’, the return of South Kuriles can become part of the bilateral agenda. Yet, it was only in 1969 that the JCP announced its official position on the territorial dispute, supporting the return of all the Kuriles, contingent upon the abolition of the United States–Japan alliance. Overall well into the 1960s, even among the residents of Hokkaido

there was very little interest in the territorial dispute (*Hoppōryōdo fukki kisei dōmei*, 1966). Regardless of the support extended by certain influential politicians like Ashida Hitoshi to the irredentist cause (Takagi, 1970), the grassroots organizations received neither substantial financial nor moral support from the central government. Occasionally, the government even tried to restrain the activities of the grassroots organizations. One such example is MoFA's demand from the representatives of the Commission to refrain from sending petitions to foreign embassies and representatives (Nemuro City, 1997).

In 1957, an attempt to pass a bill aimed at establishing a semi-governmental body that will be devoted to coordinating relief measures for the former residents of the four islands and support for the grassroots organizations, failed for lack of general support in the LDP (Takagi, 1970). In the following year, however, possibly partially in an effort to boost the chances of Machimura Kingo in the gubernatorial elections on Hokkaido, Kishi government established the Report Bureau for Specific Areas (*tokubetsu chiiki renrakukyoku*). The purpose of this organization was to coordinate the governmental efforts related to the 'Northern Areas'. Also, in the following year, the law regulating the establishment of the government-sponsored Relief Committee for Southern Territories Compatriots was amended to include the 'Northern Areas' as well. The funds allocated to the irredentist movement through this organization, however, were miniscule (Takagi, 1970) and the Committee's activities and publications mainly focused on Okinawa. In 1961, the government further deepened its engagement with the territorial dispute by establishing a semi-governmental agency called Northern Areas Association (*hoppō kyōkai*). The activities of this body were purely administrative and focused mainly on compensating for the loss of fishing rights by former residents. Put differently, it did not participate in the production of the discourse on the islands but engaged solely in activities related to the economic needs of those whose livelihood was affected by the dispute.

In 1969, the activities of the Association have undergone a fundamental transformation. As a result of a governmental decree, it was absorbed by the newly established Association for Countermeasures related to the Northern Territories (*hoppōryōdo mondai taisaku kyōkai*, hereafter the Association), a new quasi-governmental agency in charge of the domestic activities related to the 'Northern Territories'. The term 'Northern

Territories' was first used in March 1956 by MoFA's Director of Treaties Division Shimoda Takesō at the Diet's Foreign Relations Committee while arguing the consistency of the Japanese demand for the return of the four islands with the San-Francisco Peace Treaty (House of Representatives, 10 March 1956 at NDL). It was only in 1963 though that the term was officially adopted by MoFA and from that point onwards became the official term of reference to the disputed territories (Iwashita, 2005). The political underpinning of this term is quite obvious as the 'northern' implies the importance of the islands' location vis-à-vis Tokyo as opposed to their eastward location from Hokkaido, the official administrative center. Thus the appropriateness of this terminology was occasionally questioned by Hokkaido politicians (e.g. Marutani Kaneyasu MP at House of Councilors, Special Diet Committee for Okinawa and Northern Territories 18 August 1982 at NDL). Its rise to dominance as a sole signifier of the disputed islands, along with the establishment of the Association and the subsequent appearance of 'facilitating the return' organizations in a number of prefectures across Japan, symbolized the formal institutionalization of the idea of the 'Northern Territories' and the final appropriation of the irredentist cause by the central government.

Domestic political calculations played an important if not decisive role in the establishment of the Association and the consequent emphasis on domestic enlightenment activities that led to the emergence and entrenchment of the irredentist symbiosis described by Stephan. Based on private conversations with MoFA officials and other governmental bodies an American diplomat reported that the creation of the Association had very little to do with facilitating the return of the islands, in realization of which, nobody among his informants, seriously believed. The actual reason, he argued, was related to domestic politics and to the Japan–United States negotiations regarding the reversion of Okinawa. Namely, through activities of the Association, the ruling LDP was hoping to sway the public support away from the Socialist Party which opposed the reversion of Okinawa with American bases (David L. Osborn cited in Ikeda, 2003, pp. 42–43). This argument is quite plausible as already in early 1960s, in publications by government-affiliated organization, supporters of a territorial compromise were portrayed as playing into the hands of the Soviet Union and as betraying the national mission (e.g. Machimura, 1962). Furthermore, judging from the



parliamentary interpolations related to the rationale behind the establishment of the Association, the need to 'enlighten' the public regarding the Northern Territories prevailed over the need to assist the affected residents (e.g. House of Councilors, Special Committee for Okinawa and Northern Territories, 12 February 1969 at NDL). Related public opinion polls administered by the government also reveal the ultimate importance of the domestic spread of 'knowledge' related to the territorial dispute (e.g. December 1969 Poll on 'current affairs' at Government Public Relations HP).

Thus, the territorial dispute which already served as a tool in a number of domestic political rivalries, gained further importance in the LDP's rivalry with its opponents. The economic rationale of the various groups affected by the territorial dispute was again replaced by political calculations, this time on the national level. The symbolic meaning of the 'Northern Territories' resided mainly in their association with the Soviet Union and by default with the domestic progressive forces that included the socialists and the communists. In pursuing its goal of consolidating the nation, the government embraced the terminology and the techniques deployed by the grassroots organizations. Government-sponsored publications on the issue adopted such strongly nationalistic terms as 'our inherent territory' and 'land inherited from our ancestors' initially introduced by the Hokkaido-based movement. Furthermore, the enlightenment strategies such as distributing pamphlets, organizing 'people's rallies' and public events became an integral part of the government-led campaign. The drive to 'enlighten' the public quickly spread in the society. Newspapers, magazines, and even department stores quickly became mouthpieces of the irredentist cause, featuring and depicting the miseries of the former residents and Hokkaido fishermen (Stephan, 1974).

The economic symbolism of the initial irredentist movement, however, disappeared from the narrative. In the case of the original grassroots organizations, spreading the knowledge about the territorial issue was perceived as means to achieve economic ends. In the governmental discourse, nationwide awareness of the dispute became an end in itself. For example, the above-mentioned 1969 public opinion poll contained one question regarding the polled knowledge of the 'return movement'. By not specifying the demands of the movement and omitting its economic rationale, it actually engaged in the diffusion of the narrative on the

primacy of the territory and the conflation of the irredentist movement with the government. This estrangement of the irredentist discourse from its economic origins can also be witnessed in the various government-sponsored publications designed to ‘enlighten’ the Japanese public about the issue. For example, the natural resources of the islands, which were initially perceived in purely economic terms, came to be transformed into pastoral depictions of the flora and fauna of the lost homeland, and the term ‘resources’ (*shigen*) replaced by the idyllic ‘nature’ (*shizen*) (*Hoppōryōdomondai taisaku kyōkai* 2003, pp. 4–5).

Along with the process of nationalization of the irredentist cause the domestic discourse on the lost territories and related events gradually became homogenized. As already mentioned, since 1955, LDP’s main rival, Japan’s Socialist Party (JSP) maintained its demand for the return of all the Kuriles. From 1969, the communists adopted a similar stance. Thus while the progressive opposition could possibly check other revisionist tendencies of the conservatives (Williams and Moberg, 2010), in case of the territorial dispute with the USSR, their position was even more revisionist than the conservative one. Furthermore, the appeal to the national resonated with their own strongly nationalist platforms and thus the officially endorsed discourse has had no visible contenders.

In a somewhat ironic fashion, the institutionalization of the irredentist cause on Hokkaido initiated by the Governor Tanaka in the early 1950s as a tool of struggle with the central government came to serve the interests of his foes after the conservative victory in the 1959 gubernatorial elections. Under the Governor Machimura Kingo, the prefectural position regarding the Northern Territories was re-conceptualized in line with the governmental position. In 1963, the Alliance was re-named as the Alliance for Achieving the Return of the Northern Territories (*Hoppōryōdo fukki kisei dōmei*) established with the purpose of consolidating all the various grassroots organizations and consolidating the movement (*Hoppōryōdo fukki kisei dōmei*, 1993, p. 66) under the banner of the four islands.

The homogenization of the discourse was also pursued by the central government by applying the century long practice of subordinating associations and turning them into vehicles of its own policy through subsidies (Pekkanen, 2006). Along with the general demise in public activism in Japan, the above-mentioned ‘Nemuro Area Peace Preservation Economic Revival Alliance’ which belonged to the progressive grassroots

activism and received no support from the government, faded into oblivion. Those organizations that survived till the present day are fully dependent on governmental assistance. The institutionalization of the irredentist cause on the grassroots and Hokkaido prefectural levels contributes to the continuous reproduction of the illusion of a synergetic relationship among the central government, the prefectural administration, and the people. This creates a certain illusion of the governmental position on the islands as being dependent on public opinion or of a certain interest group. However, today the noncompromising stance can hardly be traced to any particular interests.

The 'return of the islands' movement consists mainly of three organizations with overlapping membership. The Association for Countermeasures related to the Northern Territories was established by the central government and despite the nominal independence is fully financed and controlled by it. The other two are the above-mentioned The Alliance for Achieving the Return of the Northern Territories and The League of the Residents of Chishima Archipelago. Both are also financially and structurally dependent on the government and the HP (Williams, 2010). The petitioning activities that occur during annual meetings between Diet members, HP- and Hokkaido-based activists have been ritualized and resemble a theatrical performance in which each party performs its role.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of the prefectural government and the activists voice their demands among which only the pledge to extend further financial support to former residents and local fishermen can be seen as a drive towards the change in policy. Otherwise, the demands of the prefecture and the irredentist organizations are fully in line with the dominant discourse, demanding government to work towards the return of the four islands, facilitate unity of the public opinion and deepen its education activities (Hokkaido Prefecture, 2010; Chishima renmei, 2010). It seems rather obvious that these organizations have little leverage on the governmental policy.

With their current numbers standing at around 7,000, the general population of former islanders can hardly be seen as a formidable

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2 This argument is based on author's observation of an annually conducted informal talk between Members of the Special Committee for Okinawa and Northern Territories, House of Councilors and representatives of administrative bodies and activist groups that took place in Nemuro on 21 September 2010.

constituency. Furthermore, despite being often portrayed in the domestic media as longing to return to their lost homeland, the intensity of this sentiment is rather questionable. Already in mid-1970s less than half of the former residents and their direct descendants polled by HP have expressed a desire to relocate back and did not express any particular demands to the government (Hokkaido, 1977, p. 16).

In Nemuro, the pragmatic approach driven by economic rationale continued to exist throughout the Cold War years (Natsubori, 1963). During the Cold War tensions during the 1970s and 1980s, the voice of Nemuro residents received little attention. In recent years, however, their frustration with the rigidity of the governmental position became more visible (Iwashita, 2006, Williams, 2010). In 2006, this dissatisfaction and a call to reconsider the 'four island at once' stance was explicitly voiced by at that time the mayor of Nemuro in a statement made at the local municipal assembly and later published in *Asahi Shimbun* (Fujiwara 2006).

National public opinion polls show that a pragmatic and less rigid position over the territorial issue is favored by a significant part of the population. For example, a poll conducted by the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* in October 2006 in the midst of tensions with Russia over shooting of a Japanese fishermen in waters surrounding the disputed islands reveals that while the 'four islands at once' solution was supported by 39.5% of the polled, other, less rigid options combined accounted for 45.2% of the respondents (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 8 October 2006: 12). As one of the Japanese experts on the issue has argued, public support for a territorial compromise is not unachievable (Iwashita, 2005). Arguably, a less rigid stance carefully formulated in terms of pursuit of national interest and as contributing to the peace and stability in the region would not be opposed by the public.

Notwithstanding the changes in the public opinion and even more importantly, in domestic and regional politics which make the national mobilization role of the dispute redundant, the domestic discourse on the 'Northern Territories' did not change significantly. No doubt that the policy-making structure contributes greatly to the continuity in Japan's 'Northern Territories' policy (Hara, 2008). The focus on the decision-making process, however, does not explain the virtual nonexistence of a public debate on the compatibility of the persistent demand for the islands with the national interest.

Fear of possible retributions from the hardcore right wingers is one way to explain the general reluctance to question the soundness of the noncompromising stance on the territorial issue. At the same time, the tautological structure of the 'Northern Territories' discourse that resulted from the identification of the islands with the nation should also be noted. A product of domestic and international politics of the Cold War, the idea of the 'Northern Territories' became an end in itself, a 'national mission' that paradoxically prevents the government from pursuing Japan's national interest (Iwashita, 2005). Arguments that suggested the need to compromise on the scope of the territory sought from the USSR \Russia have occasionally appeared in the public discourse starting from mid-1980s. In late 1980s and early 1990s, when it seemed that the domestic changes in the Soviet Union will lead to a resolution of the dispute, the possibility of two islands resolution and other scenarios were often mentioned in the domestic press. Over the next decade, the need for a compromise was voiced by a number of politicians. Importantly, however, neither in the 1990s nor in a decade late, the debate evolved into discussions of national interest associated with the islands. Any suggestion of a territorial compromise has been immediately dismissed by MoFA officials and hard line conservatives as undermining Japan's 'sovereignty' (*Asahi Shimbun*, 1990) or its 'basic principles' (e.g. Tamba, 2007, p. 240).

According to the Japanese constitution, sovereignty resides with the people but the refutations of the territorial compromise are based on a vision of an abstract nation whose body has been dismembered. Thus the question of national interest which implies certain tangible benefits and by default a tangible nation is prevented from entering the debate. The intentional narration of the 'Northern Territories' in terms of a national mission, initiated by the conservatives in the late 1960s, logically evolved into a construct in which the islands are construed as the embodiment of the 'nation'. In other words, the islands became the national interest in their own right. According to this logic, any attempt to question the rationality behind the adherence to the 'four islands' thesis undermines the nation and hence it is swiftly eliminated from the debate.

## 5 Conclusions

Focusing mainly on the formative years of the territorial dispute between Japan and the Soviet Union, this article examined the dynamics of the symbolic meanings attached to the Soviet-occupied islands. It argued that the perceptions and the sentiments attached to the territory varied greatly among different actors in accordance with their immediate interests. These in turn were shaped by the structure of power relations which defined the actors' identities. Needless to say that on one level all of the actors aspired for the return of all or certain parts of the Soviet-occupied territories. Their symbolic value however differed greatly. In the early postwar years, the identity of the grassroots organizations was defined by their economic needs and their struggle with the central government in the pursuit of better economic conditions. Thus territory *per se* did not constitute an integral part of their identity and emotional evocations of the nation and history were mainly strategic. Accordingly, the possibility of a territorial compromise was occasionally engaged in the irredentist discourse, when perceived as leading to an improvement in their economic conditions. For Hokkaido prefectural administration under Tanaka Toshifumi, the struggle with the conservative central government was the dominant set of power relations that defined its identity. The territorial dispute provided another platform to play out this identity and the symbolic meaning of the islands was defined by the socialist/conservative divide. Thus, in 1950s, the HP and organizations under its patronage advocated the return of all of the Kuriles, in opposition to both central government supported 'four islands' thesis and the more compromising solution sought by certain actors on Hokkaido. For LDP-led central government, their struggle with the Socialist opposition was the key set of power relations that defined their identity. Thus the territorial dispute became another weapon utilized by the LDP in this struggle and from late 1960s onwards it embarked on a national mobilization campaign under the 'four islands' banner.

Needless to say that, the enormous administrative and financial resources available to the LDP contributed greatly to the entrenchment of the idea of the 'Northern Territories' in the domestic discourse. The role of the discursive strategies deployed by the government, however, should not be ignored. Similar to the prefectural authorities, the central government has seized the authority over defining the meaning of

'territory' from the grassroots organizations and perverted its meaning, transforming it from a source of livelihood to a national mission. In the process, the central government transformed itself from the opponent of the local people to their ally, yet without yielding to their demands. Prior institutionalization of the irredentist cause on Hokkaido enabled this transformation to proceed smoothly. While initially functioning as agents of opposition to the government, HP and the grassroots organizations were also transformed into another tool of the dominant discourse. The inversion of the meaning of 'Northern Territories' achieved by the government served its immediate interests but in the long-term turned the government into a captive of its own creation. Namely, the construction of the territorial dispute in such a way that the islands came to be identified with the nation has been so powerful that over five decades it successfully prevented any possible contenders.

This case study provides a number of important insights into the process in which certain ideas emerge and come to dominate state's policy. It shows that dominant ideas do not necessarily constitute a univocal response to a certain historical event but can emerge gradually from a complex web of power relations of different actors. Furthermore, it shows that the symbolic meaning of the final product is not necessarily shared by the actors who participated in its formation. These arguments highlight the importance of exploring not only the final product but also the process and the related power relations that facilitate the emergence and persistence of a certain ideational construct.

Finally, by examining the initial motives of the direct stake holders in the Northern Territories dispute and the process of its transformation into a national mission, this article seeks to highlight the fact that those whose lives are directly affected by the dispute do not necessarily share the sentiment which continues to shape Japan's foreign policy towards Russia. Policy is about pursuit of national interests and, it seems, those directly related to livelihood of the nation as a whole or its parts should be of utmost priority. It remains to be seen however whether this understanding will find its way into the public and policy debates in Japan on the territorial dispute with Russia.

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