

The Kremlin's Dance in Japan's Ring of Fire

By [Richard Lourie](#)

February 13, 2011

The  Moscow Times

It turns out that World War II isn't quite over. The dispute between Russia and Japan over the four southernmost Kuril Islands has kept them from signing a final peace accord. Not only that, those islands remain a source of hostility between the two nations, recently resulting in a little war of words.

President Dmitry Medvedev visited one of the islands in November — something that Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan called an "unforgivable outrage." Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov termed Kan's comments "clearly undiplomatic," saying any talks about the islands' status must be based on Tokyo's "unconditional recognition of the outcome of World War II" — in other words, that Japan lost and its islands were ceded to Russia during the Yalta Conference. Kan does not see it that way and has vowed to seek the islands' return "even if it costs me my political career."

Why is the Russian leadership taking such a strong and sudden interest in the Kurils, which

had never been visited by any high-ranking officials in the past? And why are the Japanese so intent on regaining the four southernmost Kuril Islands while laying no claim to any of the 52 others? Finally, why is the squabble occurring in a context of generally improving economic relations, with trade rising to about \$30 billion in 2009?

The Kurils are part of the Ring of Fire, the Pacific Rim volcano chain. Forty of the Kurils' 100 volcanoes are active. It is an area of violent seismic activity. Its winters are long and severe.

The real treasures, though, are underground and underwater. The area is rich in sea life. If the Russians surrendered the disputed islands, then the Sea of

Okhotsk, which they enclose like a protective wall, would become an international sea and open to any nation's fishing boats. The waters off the islands are believed to have significant deposits of oil and gas while the land itself has large quantities of gold and rhenium, an exceedingly rare and costly metal used in jet engines.

Both Russia and Japan are, each in its own way, diminished societies and for that reason unlikely to surrender any territory, especially if it's economically valuable and symbolically charged. The Japanese are now making such a big row over the islands because they lost face in their recent clash with China, also in connection with small disputed islands. In a bit of semantic legerdemain, the Japanese agree that the Kurils belong to Russia, but Tokyo insists — in defiance of obvious geography — that the four islands nearest to Japan are not part of that chain. The Japanese refer to them as the Northern Territories and even have a national holiday called Northern Territories Day on Feb. 7, which always revives the issue. Both sides have sabotaged reasonable offers at a settlement in the past and will no doubt continue to do so.

Now the Russians are threatening to send the high-tech Mistral helicopter-carrier assault ships they are buying from France to protect the Kurils, claiming that Japan has been engaging in a military buildup.

There is something fateful about the disputed islands. The fleet that attacked Pearl Harbor was assembled on one of them, and the last major combat of World War II took place on another. The chances of a war starting there are close to zero, but the chances of World War II finally being settled there are even slimmer.

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