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Kuril Islands Issue: Regional and Global Geopolitical Implications *Kuril Adaları Sorunu: Bölgesel ve Küresel Jeopolitik Açından Önemi*

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Abstract

The issue of the Kuriles can be seen as a result of World War II and a reflection of the Cold War era. Although 73 years have passed since the end of World War II, no peace treaty between Japan and USSR/Russian Federation has been signed because both parties claim sovereignty on the Northern Territories/South Kuriles. The islands had been controlled by Japan until the World War II. Since then, they have been under Russian Federation control. The Kuril Islands, being resource-rich and strategically important, have evolved from an ordinary territorial issue between the two countries to an instrument of geopolitical settlement and vantage point for great powers. The islands form the Eastern borders of Russian Federation and provide the access of the Pacific Fleet, the second largest fleet of Russian Federation, to the Pacific Ocean. On the other hand, if the Kuril Islands come under Tokyo's rule, it will allow the United States, Japan's biggest ally, to maintain its military superiority over the Russian Federation. This article examines the issue of the Kuril Islands as a point of great power conflict, on which the Russia's New Eurasianism and the western containment theories intersects and its potential to affect the regional and global balance of power. The article examines the issue in terms of international law, current geopolitical objectives of the related actors and the roles of the US and the PRC.

Keywords: Kuril Islands, Northern Territories/South Kuriles, Geopolitics, Russian-Japanese Relations

Öz

Kuril Adaları sorunu 2. Dünya Savaşı'nın bir sonucu ve Soğuk Savaş döneminin bir yansıması olarak görülebilir. 2. Dünya Savaşı'nın ardından 73 yıl geçmesine rağmen Japonya ve Rusya arasında hala bir barış anlaşması imzalanmamıştır. Bunun nedeni ise Rusya'nın Kamchatsk ile Japonya'nın Hokkaido bölgeleri arasında bulunan Kuzeydeki topraklar/Güneydeki Kuriller üzerinde iki tarafın da egemenlik iddiasında bulunmasıdır. Kuril Adaları 2. Dünya Savaşı öncesinde Japonların elindeydi, 2. Dünya Savaşının sonundan itibaren ise Rusya'nın fiili kontrolü altında bulunmaktadır. Hem kaynak bakımından zengin hem de stratejik bakımdan önemli konuma sahip olan Kuril Adaları, iki ülke arasında sıradan bir toprak meselesi olmaktan çıkarak büyük güçlerin jeopolitik hesaplaşma ve avantaj sağlama aracına dönüşmüştür. Kuril Adaları Rusya Federasyonu'nun doğu sınırlarını oluşturmakta ve ikinci büyüklükteki filosu olan Pasifik Filosunun Pasifik okyanusuna çıkışını sağlamaktadır. Kuril Adaları Tokyo'nun kontrolü altına girdiği takdirde ise, Japonya'nın en büyük müttefiki olan ABD'nin Rusya'ya karşı askeri üstünlüğünü devam ettirmesini sağlayacaktır. Makalede Kuril Adaları meselesi, büyük güçlerin çatışma alanı olarak yani Rusya Federasyonu'nun Yeni Avrasyacılık çizgisinin ve ABD'nin kuşatma teorisinin kesiştiği nokta olarak ele alınacaktır. Böylece sorunun tüm mahiyeti yansıtılarak hem bölgesel hem de küresel anlamda güç dengelerini etkileme potansiyeli açıklanmaya çalışılacaktır. Bu doğrultuda Kuril adaları sorununun tarihi, uluslararası hukuk bakımından durumu, bölge ile ilgili güçlerin güncel jeopolitik hedefleri, ABD'nin ve ÇHC'nin rolleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kuril Adaları, Kuzey Topraklar/Güney Kuriller, Jeopolitik, Rusya ve Japonya İlişkileri

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Introduction

The issue of Kuril Islands, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean to the east and the Okhotsk Sea to the west, has been one of the biggest obstacles before the development of Japanese-Russian relations since the 1950s. Russia's Habomai archipelago and Kunishir island are so close to Japan's Hokkaido island that they can be seen with naked eyes (Quillen, 1993:635). These islands, which are very close to the two countries, are an issue that has been going on for 70 years and deeply affecting Russian-Japanese bilateral relations. It is difficult to determine the boundaries of sovereignty because of the parties different interpretations of treaties especially regarding small islands and cliffs. The situation also got more complicated due to repeatedly change of islands owner during the 19. century. The treaties on the transfer of islands signed during this period are also interpreted differently by the parties. "Kuril Islands" or the names of Northern Territories and Southern Kuriles by Japan and Russia, respectively, consist of two large islands (Kunashiri and Etorofu), a group of Habomai islets and a Shikotan Island (Call, 1992:729). The islands, which are rich in petroleum, natural gas, rare metals such as rhenium and seafood, provide to its present owner, Russia, free exit to the Pacific Ocean thanks to its unique location (Jukov, 2016). This feature is crucial for Russia to use its second largest marine fleet.



Map1: Kuril Islands Dispute (DW, 2016).

Here, all agreements concerning the problem between Russia and Japan will be addressed, but the weight will be given to the agreements made during and after World War II.¹ The main argument of Japan is that the Four islands are not included in the "Kuril Islands" in the agreements, and the USSR does not have any right due to not participating in the San Francisco Conference. Russians argue that the decisions taken at the Yalta and Cairo Conferences have not been lifted with San Francisco Conference. In the fourth part of the study, we will examine the strategic importance of the islands and their direct or remote geopolitical advantages for any of the related powers, namely Russia, Japan, USA and China. Firstly, we will try to show that the problem is not a sole territorial issue between Russia and Japan but also a great power struggle, emphasizing that the islands are important geopolitically for the US in terms of the containment approach and for Russia over the New Eurasian perspective. Secondly, due to the lack of a solution to the Kuriles issue, attempts by the USA, the largest ally of Japan, to isolate Russia will be examined by referring to bilateral relations. In this way, we will try to analyze this conflict in a multidimensional manner and reveal the importance of the islands in terms of global and regional power balances.

¹ According to Yalta Conference 1945 allied power were agreed on accession of the southern part of Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands to the Soviet Union in exchange their participation to war against Japan. In the Potsdam declaration signed in 1945 this agreement was confirmed. However, in San Francisco Peace Treaty the borders were restored according to Treaty of Portsmouth of 1905 without including detailed border demarcation. The text of the treaty was left ambiguous because of "heightening of East-West Cold War tension". (Isaksson, 2014: 14-18)

Nomenclature

The parties to the problem have different opinions about which islands are included in the definition of "Kuril Islands". The Kuril Islands, which separates the Okhotsk Sea from the Pacific Ocean, extend to Hokkaido Island according to Russia, and to Etorofu Island according to Japan. In this study, the controversial area will be treated as "the Kuriles" or "Kuril Islands" as it is generally used in the literature. "Problematic" islands are called differently in each country. Two names are used in Japan: Hoppoo Ryoodo (Northern Terraces) and more commonly Koyuuno (immanent, natural soils) (Pardo, 2012: 158). Russians, on the other hand, call the same islands the Iskonno Ruskiye Territorii (Russian territory since ancient times) and try to underline that they were those who discovered them for the first time (Alekseyev, 1991: 10-33). Japanese, also, counts the first discovery for themselves with the name of Koyuuno. Since it is not known by whom the islands were precisely discovered, this nomenclature can be interpreted as a nationalist discourse in domestic politics, and as a support to the legitimate sovereignty claims on the islands in the international level.

Literature Review

Much of the work on the Kuril Islands has examined the issue of the Kuril Islands as a legacy of the Second World War and the Cold War through the relations between the USSR/Russia and Japan. Besides, in many studies, the economic interests of Russia and Japan and the growing influence of China are seen as catalysts in solving the problem (Gorenberg, 2012: 226; Kapur, 2012: 387). While John S. Stephan (1974) stressed the importance of linguistic and ideological barriers to solve the problem, David Rees (1985: 77) underlies the decisions of the Yalta Conference and argues that the USSR annexed the Kuril Islands. Trenin and Weber argue that progress is not possible about the Kuril Islands issue in case it is not resolved in a similar way to the Kaliningrad problem between Russia and Germany (Trenin, 2012).

Although international law constitutes an important aspect of this issue, the studies about the Kuril Islands with a perspective of international law are insignificant. Keith A. Call (1992: 745) made one of the rare studies on this field. While a significant number of studies have included the role of the US on the issue (Elleman and Ouimet, ^{2000: 9}), interest in the geopolitical dimension, which takes into account the views and interests of Russia among the others has been limited. With this study, it is aimed to make a geopolitical analysis that takes into account the Russian interests, in light of the changing balance of power in Asia with the rise of China and the increasing Russian interest in this part of the continent. Thus, unlike what has been done so far, not only Russian-Japanese bilateral relations but also the interaction between the issue and the regional and global balances will be investigated.

1. Physical Structure of the Kuriles

1.1. Natural Riches

Kuril Islands are very rich in terms of minerals. Among these, the most valuable is rhenium. The price of this rare metal was \$10.000/kg in 2008, and it is used in aerospace and nuclear industries and, above all, jet engine production (Kublik, 2011). The islands are also a valuable source of fish and seafood. This point where cold and warm sea currents meet attracts myriad fish and bird species (Sahkalin Oblasti Gubernator, 2018). At the same time it is thought that oil and gas reserves are on the openings of the islands (Jukov, 2016). However, neither country can use these reserves due to the issue. The sole earnings come from health tourism in the untouched lands, hot mineral springs and balneological sludge. There are more natural riches like many furry animals.

1.2. Population

The absence of a specific national density among the residents is another factor affecting the issue. Currently there are three thousand people (Russians, Ukrainians, Koreans and Tatars) living in the islands. As to the local people of the Kuriles, some of them were expelled by the arrival of the Russians, and some of them accepted Orthodoxy and have been assimilated over time (Koshkin, 2010: 14).

1.3. Strategic Importance of the Four Islands

The main significance of the Kuriles is their strategic position. The islands constitute a natural frontier to defend the far eastern coasts of the Russian Federation (RF), allowing Russian navy to leave the Pacific Ocean free of charge and offering the opportunity to control the entire Okhotsk Sea. The straits between the Kuril Islands claimed by Japan are particularly important in this respect because the winters in the north are freezing, and the other passages in the South (Korean Straits) are controlled by other states. Under these conditions, the exit of Russia's second most powerful marine fleet in Vladivostok to the Pacific Ocean will be subject to the permission of other countries. This plays a critical role in Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy. According to some scholars, the loss of even some parts of

the Kuriles will cause the Russian military infrastructure and the integrity of the defense in the Far East to deteriorate (Alekseyev, 2005: 107). By selling Alaska to Americans in 1867, Russia had already lost an important geopolitical position in the Pacific and has been trying to avoid duplication.² Etorofu, Kunashiri and Shikotan have natural areas for the deployment of armed forces, and especially for the establishment of missile defense systems. For example, the attack on the Pearl Harbor by the Japanese was made from the bay of Kasatka on the island of Etorofu. In addition to this, the issue of islands will result in a military disadvantage against the United States, as will Russia's reputation be discredited.

2. Background of the Crisis

According to the official position of the Japan, the Kuriles are discovered by Japanese first. According to the Governor of Hokkaido (the closest administrative unit to the Kuril Islands), since the 17th century, the North Sea's Matsumae clan had traded otter furs with Ainu clan in Menashi. Otters do not live in Hokkaido in the waters of the mainland, so the government uses this trade between Matsumae and Ainus as an evidence explaining the "first discovery" argument (Hokkaido Prefectural Government, 2018).

The Russians claim that in the Kuriles was discovered by chance in 1649 by the head of the Cossacks union, Mihail Stadukhin, during a hunting trip. They state that, starting from 1654, various exploration trips were made after this discovery, and that Petro was closely interested in Russia's Far East discoveries and that these lands began to be used (Koshkin, 2010: 8).

In the 19th century, it was decided that a border agreement should be made because of the increased disagreements such as the arrests of Japanese fishermen by Russia, and Shimoda agreement was signed in 1855. According to this agreement, the border crosses between the Etorofu and the Urup islands, as it is now demanded by Japan. On May 7, 1875, Sakhalin-Kurile Exchange Treaty signed in St. Petersburg and Sakhalin territories under Japanese control were transferred to Russia, and all of the Kurile Archipelago from Hokkaido to Shumushu Islands had gone under Russian control. So, the entire Sakhalin Island belonged to Russia. In the peace treaty concluded in 1905 and known as the Portsmouth Agreement, which concluded the 1904 Russo-Japanese War, the Sakhalin Island was divided into two through the 50th Parallel, giving the southern part indefinitely to Japan. The events that occurred at the end of World War II produced the Kurile crisis and the current insoluble situation. On September 5, 1945, the Soviets invaded the Kuriles, but did not legalize it with any agreement beyond the Yalta and Cairo conferences. The USSR has not accepted the terms of the San Francisco agreement and has not signed a peace agreement. For this reason, there was no peace agreement between Japan and Russia after World War II. This was an obstacle to Japan's integration into the world system and its membership in the UN. To solve this problem, the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration was signed in Moscow on 19 October 1956. Article 9th says that Soviets will transfer the Shikotan and Habomai Island to Japan in exchange for Japan's abandonment of rights claims on Etorofu and Kunashiri islands, and such a change will take place after the peace agreement (Amanzholov and Akhmetov, 2013: 21). But peace agreements were not signed because the two countries were unable to meet on a common point to share the islands. However, on December 12, 1956, Japan was recognized as a UN member, and the Japan Congress noted that it had reserved its rights over the four islands.

Today, the issue continues to hinder the development of relations between the two countries as it has been for 70 years. The official position of Japan is that the four islands are Japanese territories passed down from generation to generation and that *"In order to solve this issue and to conclude a peace treaty as soon as possible, Japan has energetically continued negotiations with Russia on the basis of the agreements and documents created by the two sides so far, such as the Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration of 1956, the Tokyo Declaration of 1993, the Irkutsk Statement of 2001 and the Japan-Russia Action Plan of 2003"* (MFA of Japan).

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russian Federation was established and Yeltsin became the first president. Yeltsin aimed to develop relations with Japan, which was previously approached with sharp ideological limitations as a capitalist country (Bazin, 2017: 76-83). It is said that, during that time, Russia was very close to giving the Kuril Islands because of the difficult conditions and the personality traits of Yeltsin, but this was precluded by Russia's security units (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2015). From another point of view, the pressure of the local authorities ("Sakhalin factor") played

² Alaska has brought to the USA the possibility to be active in the North Pacific, an exit to Asian markets to reimburse, in a few decades, \$7.2 million paid for the territory, and major oil resources (Beliakov and Biyushkina, 2015: 1-10). In addition, the Alaska border has allowed the USA to become a party to the ongoing struggle today to operate in the North Sea (Pastarkova, 2017: 32).

an important role at this point because of the weakness of the central government (Williams, 2006: 271). In 1991, Gorbachev signed a declaration recognizing the existence of the Kuril Islands issue. In 1960, after Japan and the USA signed a security agreement, the USSR announced that it canceled the 1956 Declaration. During the Cold War, the USSR did not acknowledge any territorial problems (Kurtov, 2009: 169). Later, in a secret meeting in 1992, Moscow said that it was ready to give the Habomai group and the Shikotan Island for the peace settlement, and suggested that the other islands would be left for later talks (Russia Today, 2018). But Tokyo has rejected this offer. Yeltsin's 1991 concession has still been criticized and accused of being "soft" in contemporary Russia (Buckalev, 2018).

In 1992, visa procedures between the Kuriles and Japan was removed (RIA News, 2012). In 2017, 1000 people benefited from the visa-free pass (TASS, 2018). In September 1999, it was agreed on the facilitating procedure to visit the islands for Japanese citizens who were former residents of the islands. In addition, an agreement about the Russian-Japanese Aquaculture Co-operation in the Kuril Islands was signed on February 21, 1998, and co-operation in the fisheries sector is still in progress (Kurmazov, 2006: 352).

The next president, Vladimir Putin, supports cooperation and resolution of the problem, but he is following a stricter policy. The RF states that the situation in the region is a very consequence of the World War II, and the Russian sovereignty on the four islands is unquestionable. However, as Lavrov noted in 2004, Russia recognizes the 1956 Declaration and is ready to give the Habomai group of islands and the Shikotan for a peace treaty (Regnum Information Agency, 2018). It is also worth noting that these two islands constitute 7% of the total land demanded (Trenin and Weber, 2012). The Japanese side has recently shown signs of detente. But the government is hesitant to explain to the Japanese people how the two other great "homeland" islands have forever been left while having taken these two small ones (BBC News, 2016). The same problem is also present in Russia for Putin, who is empowered by the nationalist group. The emphasis placed on the nationalist discourses by Japanese governments, which have many border issues with so many neighbors, drag the problem out of solution track and create anxiety (Dudden, 2018).

In 2009, Japan adopted a law defining the Kuril Islands as the territories annexed by Russia, (Gorenburg, 2012: 2) and then in 2010 Medvedev visited Kunashir and this attracted the Japanese reaction (NTV, 2018). The incident resulted in the Japan's withdrawing its ambassador for an indefinite period of time. Between 2016-2017, Putin and Abe met five times. In these talks, although the sovereignty problem in the islands could not be resolved, progress was made especially in the area of economic cooperation. During the Abe's visit to Moscow in 2018, it is stated that both sides will strive to sign a peace treaty to realize their mutual strategic interests, and agreements which embody cooperation in various fields were stipulated (Vesti, 2018). In addition, the leaders of the two countries talked about the implementation of agreements on common economic activities in the Kuril Islands (Gazeta.Ru, 2018).

3. The Kuriles Crisis in Terms of International Law

The border between Japan and Russia was determined by the 1855 Shimoda Agreement. "According to the agreement, the border between Russia and Japan passes between the Etorofu and Urup islands. All Etorofu islands were given to Japan, while all of Urup in the north and other Kuril Islands became the property of Russia (Ervin, 2005). As for Sakhalin, it would continue to remain divided between Russia and Japan." In 1875, the Russians left the Kuril Islands to Japan, from Uruppu to Shumush (South of the Kamchatka Peninsula) in exchange for the Russian Sakhalin Island. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, which concluded the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Russia left part of the Sakhalin Island (South of the 50th parallel) to Japan.

The newly established USSR stated that the contracts made during the Tsarist period were valid. This situation lasted until 1945. At the Yalta Conference, the Kuril Islands were left to the USSR. Although this agreement supports Moscow's view at first sight, it is not binding Japan and the other parties as long as they do not accept it (Call, 1992: 5).

On August 8, 1945, the USSR joined the Potsdam Declaration, which states that "the conditions of the Cairo Declaration will be fulfilled and the Japanese sovereignty will be limited to Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and the designated small islands." (Yale Law School). The same day the Soviets declared war on Japan, and the latter unconditionally recognized the Cairo and Potsdam declarations. It is argued that the RF, lost the right to claim to occupy these islands because Japan accepted the Cairo and Potsdam conferences (Kurtov, 2009: 177) but while the Cairo conference has no

legal consequences, the Potsdam Conference supports the USSR's legitimacy to take Etorofu and Iturup (Call, 1992: 753).

Another problem here is that, according to Japan, all of the four islands named in the conventions are not included in the "Kuril Islands", that is, according to the Japanese side, the islands in the south of Etorofu Island are not included in the Kuril Islands. Although Tokyo is trying to base its statements on 1855 Shimoda and 1875 St Petersburg agreements, there is no such evidence in the French version, which is the original and signed language of the agreements (Elleman and Ouimet, 2000: 11). On the contrary, there are statements supporting that Etorofu and Kunashiri are part of the Kuril Islands: Prime Minister Yoshido's demand for the return of only Habomai and Shikotan at the 1951 San Francisco Conference,

explanations by the US Secretary of State Dulles, during the dialogs with the Japanese Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru, that it will be difficult to claim that Etorofu and Kunashir are not part of Kuril Islands. Thus, since the general view is that Etorofu and Kunashir are Kuril Islands.

The USSR has not signed San Francisco peace treaty, which was drafted by the US and Britain, because it did not take into consideration the USSR's interests and proposals. Here, among the objections of the USSR, there were such issues as the lack of representation from the PRC (at that time the US recognized Kuomintang), demilitarization of Japan and the existence US troops in its territory (Kurtov, 2009: 179). According to Washington, the USSR continued this discord at the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference and following Soviet-Japanese peace negotiations (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 495). Japan, on the other hand, signed the agreement and declared its renunciation from the Kuriles. The expressions used here bring back the question of what the Kuriles are. At that time, the US State Department considered Habomai and Shikotan as part of Hokkaido and the other two islands as part of the Kuriles (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 496). According to Moscow, on the other hand, compromise on the Kuriles based on the San Francisco agreement would only be possible if all parties to the agreement accepted.

According to international law, Habomai and Shikotan are outside the definition of the Kuril Islands while Etorofu and Kunashir are part of the Kuril Islands. Therefore, Russia's sovereignty seems to be justified as a result of Japan's transfer of its rights over the Kuril Islands with the Potsdam and San Francisco agreements. But the fact that it is not explicitly mentioned to whom the sovereignty over the Kuril Islands has been handed over remains a major obstacle. Nevertheless, it is understood that the USSR was meant in the treaty, given the geographical and historical factors.

The European Parliament's decision published in 2005 is striking. In the 15th article of the European Parliament's decision on relations with China, Taiwan and the Far East, a call was made to return the Kuriles occupied by Russia to Japan.

As a result, although the agreements remain ambiguous in many respects, the issue seems resolvable in terms of international law. However, looking at the Cold War conditions and the ongoing US-Russian competition, geopolitical calculations seem rooted in the origin of the issue. As long as this prevails, resolving the issue through international law is a tough possibility.

4. Geopolitical Role of the Kuriles

Along with others, geopolitical importance of the islands is the most important factor that leads negotiations to stalemate. In this context, it is necessary to address the issue in terms of global power struggle and geopolitical considerations.

After the collapse of the USSR, the world has shifted to a unipolar system and the US hegemony has prevailed all over the world. However, despite West's expectations on West orientated Russia since Putin's second presidential term cold war winds have begun to blow again (Yılmaz, 2020: 57). With Putin's speech in 2007 in Munich Security Conference it has become clear that Russia is determined to preserve and increase its influence in post-Soviet territories and resist to NATO and EU enlargement. In this vein, increasing conflicts and problems in Russia's periphery (Ukraine, Georgia, Syria) are not coincidental and not limited only to the domestic political life of these countries. Likewise, the issue of the Kuril Islands constitutes one of the major struggles, though not a hot battle, between the two great powers.

4.1. The Role of the Kuriles For Russia

Since the beginning of 2000s Russia has adopted a strategy aimed to reversing the current geopolitical situation. Under Putin presidency Russia has started to pursue the strategy which aims to limit Western influence especially in Post-Soviet territories, rebuilt "polycentral" world system and restore Russia as a great power (Russian National Security Strategy, 2015). Western containment policy

and NATO enlargement toward East was accepted as one of the biggest threats (Yılmaz, 2020: 60). According to this, retention of influence in near abroad which comprise Post-Soviet countries and restoration of army are among primary objectives. Russia strives to strengthen its position as a great power and an integrational center of Post-Soviet countries.

Although it would be wrong to claim that Putin pursues Eurasianism neglect this geopolitical concept would be wrong as well. It has a significant influence on Russian foreign policy especially when it comes to geopolitics and helps to revile clue element of Russian geopolitical strategy of Putin era. (Yılmaz, 2015: 115). The new Eurasianism emerged in reaction to the global system formed after the collapse of the USSR. It advocates geopolitical and traditional centrism based on Eurasianist principles and opposes universalist and monocultural claims like the "new world order" and have critical approach to "universal (Western and liberal) values" such as democracy, human rights and freedom (Lushnikov, 2006: 1). This, in fact, sets the stage for the formation of a multi-polar world. New poles will emerge with the clustering of states around a country with a rich history of civilization (Dugin, 2016: 263-264). Especially with the Putin era, Russia's efforts to deepen and expand its cooperation and intra-continental integration with the former Soviet republics through various organizations such as the CIS, SCO, were made with a Eurasianist spirit (İmanov, 2008: 276-277; Yılmaz, 2015: 115).

In time, anti-Western rhetoric of Eurasianism has transformed into anti-Americanism (Bassin, 2011: 127) and most of the policies have been developed to end the superiority of the US in Eurasia, at least. In the eyes of Dugin, most of the Eurasia's coastal sections (Rimland) are under the US influence: "*The Atlantic bloc's grip is extending from Eastern Europe, Greece and Turkey to the Far East, and from here to San Diego, and to the Indian and Pacific oceans through major military bases in Haiti, the Philippines, Guam, the Caribbean.*" (Dugin, 1997: 63).

Out of NATO, the USA assembled all other strategic allies under Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). While MNNA does not include mutual defense and security guarantees provided by NATO, it shows the US's commitment to its relations with these countries. MNNA also facilitates military equipment purchases, joint military operations, the execution of joint R&D projects and many others. MNNA "*is linked with the concept of "new world order" proposed by G. Bush at the beginning of the 1990s and later to the intimation of "American invasion of geopolitical vacuum" proposed by Brzezinski after the collapse of the USSR.*" (Dmitreshchenko^{2013: 2}). That is why Japan has an important position in the containment policy. It should also be seen as a country with close military relations with the United States, taking place among MNNA countries. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that Kurils have strategically important location: a force settled there could prevent the Russian navy from entering the sea of Okhotsk (Yılmaz 2020: 193). In this context, unlike other territorial issues, there is a serious potential of the Kuril Islands to influence the global power balance. Thus, the main reason for the stalemate is not the disagreements between Japan and Russia but the global power struggle: the role of the US as global hegemony and Russia. That Japan does not guarantee, if it has the islands, that there will not be US bases (Pravda, Sept. 25, 2019), proves that the worries of the Russians are not unfounded.

As the USSR began to weaken, the US has made considerable progress by returning to the containment policy. Since 2000, RF has tried to respond to this policy. Events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the occupation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, military exercises (ZAPAD 2009, ZAPAD 2013, ZAPAD 2017) clearly show that Russia will no longer compromise. The same is true for the Kuriles. However, since the territory under question is under the sovereignty of the RF itself, it is possible that any prospective clash will proceed to further dimensions beyond the hybrid warfare that uses non-traditional force methods.

As stated earlier, Russia is very eager to sign a peace treaty with Japan and to promote cooperation. The underlying reason for this is hidden in the "inner geopolitics" concept of Dugin. In his book "Foundations of Geopolitics", four areas inhabited by the Russian population are highlighted by "geopolitical rays method". These are the Northern, the Southern, the Western and the Eastern regions. The "inner East" extends from Kazan and Urals in the Eastern part of Moscow to the Pacific Ocean (Dugin, 2016: 188-189). The book states that the republics which have high separatist tendencies in the "Inner East" such as Tatarstan and Bashkiria should be separated from the neighbors of Russia (e.g., Kazakhstan) by "rays" with the majority of Russian population, and that Moscow can emerge to the Pacific Ocean through these "rays".

One example of the intensity of the Russian population is Chelyabinsk-Omsk-Novosibirsk-Tomsk-Kemerevo-Krasnoyarsk-Irkutsk ray. But this line is breaking with Buratiya. Here, Lama members

who have tried to establish a theocratic administration lives. In the north, Yakuts are members of the Turkish ethnic group. Although they are Christianized, Shamanist traditions continue, while some others are members of the Lama. This region is separated from China by Amur oblast, which is a very thin line. According to Dugin, "Meridional" integration poses a threat to Russia. Rather, it is necessary to integrate the East to each other and finally to Moscow via parallels through the "rays of Russian population (Dugin, 2016: 189)." Thus, the central government will be strengthened "in the Inner East". In this respect, Siberia, which has a large amount of natural resources, also plays an important role. Dugin, who said that the role of Siberia will increase in the future, underlines that China will be a threat to this region. To cope with this threat, he says, two interrelated things must be done in Siberia: increasing the Russian population and developing the region economically, while adhering to Moscow. So, how does "the Eastern Inner Geopolitics" have to do with Japan?

The normalization and development of political and economic relations with Japan will both balance China's power in Asia and help Siberia develop through the investments by Japan in Eastern Russia. Thus, while Japan is benefiting from the vast natural resources of Russia, Russia will be strengthening its "internal geopolitical" position by benefiting from the investments of technologically and financially developed Japan. Thus, separatist movements and strong neighbors such as China will be prevented from penetrating and interfering in the RF where various ethnic and religious groups live. On the other hand, Russia, which attracts a considerable amount of investment from Japan, will be effective in Japanese politics.

Russia wants to establish bilateral relations with Japan through an economy-based partnership with the classical liberal international approach. But it is the New Eurasianism that triggers this liberal approach. In other words, the liberal approach is not a goal, but a mean. Even though Russia has shifted to capitalist production after the collapse of the USSR, international liberal approaches and values have not rooted in its foreign policy. We can easily observe this reflection in the theory of New Eurasianism, questioning the universality of "liberal values". Thus, the economy-based development of bilateral relations with Japan is emerging as a means of combating hegemony through securing internal geopolitical situation for Russia, balancing China's power in Asia and reducing the US influence in Japan.

In addition to internal geopolitical calculations, Tokyo has an important place for Russia in the universal geopolitical table. "Having a rigid system of traditional values," Tokyo is seen as a natural ally (Dugin, 2016: 66-67). Japan-based *"Pan-Asia project will be lifeblood of the eastern wing of the New Empire. Alliance with Japan is vital. Despite the Moscow-Beijing axis, the Moscow-Tokyo axis, with priority and future promises, will make Eurasia geopolitically competent, weaken and ultimately destroy the Western Atlantic empire, and open the horizon for founding of the continental empire."* (Dugin, 2016: 68). With this axis Russia and Japan will be able to solve the problem of technological and resource deficiencies, respectively. In this vein, Dugin said in 1998 that it was possible to grant the Kuril Islands to Japan for the purpose of establishing this alliance (İşyar, 2018: 118). But, as it is clear from the essence of this theory, this could only be possible if Japan leave the Western camp.

4.2. The USA's Role

Since the presidency of Truman and Eisenhower, US foreign policy has been shaped by the geopolitician Spykman's "Inner Crescent" theory. In accordance with the proposition "who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world", the theory was founded on supervising the countries of the Inner Crescent, namely Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, China and South Korea. *"75% of the world's population lives in Eurasia, and most of the world's physical wealth for both investments and underground abundance is here. Eurasia has 60% of the world's GNP and three quarters of the world's known energy sources. After the United States, the six largest economies and the six largest arms buyers are in Eurasia."* (Brzezinski^{2010: 52-53}). As defined by Brzezinski, Eurasia, is always a focus of interest to the United States.

With the collapse of the USSR, the US tried to strengthen its position in Eurasia. This was triggered by many factors like development of the "Intersate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe/INGATE" project, the US-based oil companies' growing interests in the region, large natural gas and oil deposits in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea (Brzezinski^{2010: 177}). China and Russia are the most important obstacles for the US to achieve its goals. Therefore, the crisis of the Kuril Islands has great importance for the US as a continuation of the containment policy against Russia. Besides, the stalemate prevents the relative loss of US power that could arise from the progress in the Japanese-Russian bilateral relations. By implication, the role of the US in keeping the problem unresolved is quite important.

Since the beginning, the official position of the US has been that the Kuriles were occupied by the USSR and it misinterpreted international agreements that ended the World War II (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 504). Postwar territorial problems were first addressed in 1943 at the Cairo conference, attended by the USSR.

During the Tehran Conference, Roosevelt believed that the Kuril Islands were given to Japan at the conclusion of the 1905 Russian-Japanese War and, therefore, he was sensitive to the Stalin's thesis that Kuriles and South Sakhalin are indispensable for the national security of the USSR (Rees, 1985: 61:62). This misunderstanding continued at the Yalta Conference. On February 11, 1945, the fate of the Kuriles was determined by Roosevelt and Stalin's bilateral talks. According to the agreement signed by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, it seems that the US and the United Kingdom supported the request of the USSR on all island chains. The agreement says "The USSR will enter the war against Japan along with the Allies ... provided that the Kuril Islands are left to the USSR." (Yale Law School³). Some sources emphasize that Roosevelt does not specify which islands are included in the definition of the Kuril Islands (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 491). Another contradiction is that, on Stalin's request, Truman adds the word "all" to the agreement to discourage Stalin from invading Hokkaido island (Rees, 1985: 76-77). However, both sides have different opinions about which islands are included in the expression "all Kuril Islands". Here, the lack of clear statements is explained by Roosevelt's thought that the USSR and Japan would later conclude bilateral agreements on these territories. In the absence of such an agreement, the US recognizes that the Kuril Islands belong to Japan. On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry states that, with the Yalta Conference, the US accepted the USSR to occupy the Kunashiri and Etorofu islands for a limited time and take these four islands if they agreed with Japan (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 492).

That US officials are unconditionally supporting the "Japanese version" of the Kuril Islands even though they previously have different opinions shows that they are approaching the subject as a power struggle with Russia. This requires that the issue of the Kuril Islands be evaluated within the context of power struggle and geopolitical considerations, in a way to support the method and the theoretical/conceptual framework used in our article.

At the National Security Council meeting on April 7, 1955, J.F. Dulles suggested that a possible deal as a result of the Soviet-Japanese negotiations, which began in 1955, would weaken the US rights over Okinawa and that links to communist countries may obstruct the aid to Japan. Then the US government gave the following warning to the Japanese government:

- a) We hope Japan will do nothing implying recognition of Soviet sovereignty over the Kuriles and South Sakhalin, disposition of which should be left for future international decision;
- b) The Soviet proposal restricting entry to the Japan Sea violates international law and would nullify naval aspects of the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty; and;
- c) The Soviet proposal for demilitarization of the Habomais and Shikotan appears to be an unjust derogation of Japanese sovereignty over the islands (Elleman and Oimet, 1999: 496-97).

The Soviet-Japanese negotiations ceased because of Japan's efforts to pursue negotiations in line with US demands (Elleman and Ouimet, 1999: 497). In the following days, the US, in order to strengthen its relations with Japan, declared that it supports Tokyo on the Kuril Islands issue, that it considers the Yalta Declaration not as an agreement but as a mere declaration of common purpose (Elleman, 2000: 13) and that the four islands "have always belonged to Japan and that "they should fairly be seen under Japanese sovereignty." As it is clearly understood, the solution is not only about a Japanese-Russian agreement. For Japan, which is militarily dependent on and has close economic ties with the US, making agreements without approval of its ally could bring bad consequences. Utilizing this, the US, has tried to prevent a Japanese-Russian rapprochement.

When the Japanese-Russian negotiations renewed in 1956, the US retained its similar attitude to isolate Japan. In August 1956, the US warned Japan that if it gave up its claim on the Southern Kuriles, the US would have to "protect" Okinawa and Ryukyu forever. While Russia and Japan perceived this as an open threat, the US claimed that Dulles aims to help the Japanese by giving an argument against the USSR when a difficult challenge is encountered in the negotiations (Elleman and Oimet, 1999: 498).

After the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, the USSR unilaterally annulled the 1956 declaration. Thus, at the heyday of the Cold War, the US won the "Japan battle" by preventing any

prospective Japan-Soviet agreement. Tokyo and Moscow would be able to open the Kuril Islands question again only in 1991.

4.3. China's Position on the Kuriles Issue

China's official position on the Kuril Islands has changed in line with its regional interests and its relations with Russia. From the 1949 to the mid-1960s, when China had had close relations with the USSR, it officially refused Japan's claims to the Kuriles. However, due to the violent Soviet-Chinese conflict in the second half of the 60's up to the beginning of the 80s, Beijing officially supported Japan's claims to resist the common threat and ensuring Japan's support for the Taiwan issue. However, with the end of the Cold War, the situation has changed, and Russia and China have become natural allies and China has abandoned its clear support for Japan, but it has not accepted Russia's claims and preferred to use neutral expressions (Wong, 2011).

There are other reasons that triggered the Russia-China rapprochement after the Cold War. China-Japan relations have been affected badly by the issue of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, 170 km north of Taiwan. From 2012 on, the tension had increased and, as a result. The strategic locations and resources of the islands have led the two states to struggle. So, it is necessary to deal with the issue of the Kuriles in respect with the ongoing China-Japan struggle as well.

Secondly, one of the main objectives of China is to assure its energy security (Andrews-Speed, Liao and Dannreuther, 2002). Until the end of 2010, China has met a considerable part of its oil need from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya. This situation is changing nowadays and in 2016 Russia became the number one exporter of oil to China (Enerji Enstitüsü, 2016). This change has been triggered by many reasons. That China wanted to diversify its suppliers, and Russia's turn to China to get rid of isolation, by the US and the EU, aroused after the events in Crimea in 2014, is the two most important reasons.

Thirdly, the cooperation between Russia and China on economic, energy and security issues through SCO and the ability to develop their maneuvering power against the US on this issue are irritating the West and Japan. After the events of Crimea in 2014, Japan began to apply sanctions against Russia, but it is aware that it will inevitably strengthen the Chinese-Russian rapprochement. Even though Japan wants to punish the Crimean events, it sees Russia as a less threat than North Korea and China and wants to take measures to prevent its major fear, the Sino-Russian alliance. As a matter of fact, according to some researchers, "normalization of relations with Russia is Abe's personal foreign policy priority" and "Abe takes this into consideration not only for the Kuriles issue but also for regional geopolitical reasons." (Buckley and Akita, 2016).

Thus, while Japan faces many threats, the Sino-Russian alliance in the first instance, it is suffering from the policies of its largest ally, the US, to isolate Russia, which may push the latter closer to China. In other words, the US disservice Japan's regional interests to achieve its global goals. Japan's competitive power in terms of providing raw materials from Russia is decreasing vis a vi China. In the case of the Kuril Islands, as Zhaozhong puts it "*The use of the Kurils in cooperation with Russia promises great opportunities for China and South Korea*" (Voytenko, 2012) while Japan stays ineffective.

Conclusion

The issue of the Kuriles can be seen as a result of World War II and a reflection of the Cold War era. The Kuriles can be regarded as a battle for Eurasianist Russia, which is trying to obtain its previous power in response to the US' global containment policy. The main factor in this is their strategic positions, which renders the solution of the issue difficult and makes the intervention of Russia and Japan, as well as of its military guarantor, the USA, inevitable.

The settlement of the dispute in the near future seems extremely unlikely as Japan insists on returning of all islands and Russia becoming less compliant on finding a compromise. Keeping in mind Russia's determined position in protecting its strategic interests - as in Crimea issue - it seems unlikely that Russia will give Kuriles especially considering close military ties between the US and Japan. Russia won't accept less than lion's share of the territory. The absence of a peace treaty will continue to hamper complete normalization and development of the bilateral relations.

US interventions like the prevention of Russia's agreement with Japan impair Japan's regional interests, and push China closer to Russia and makes it difficult to realize the economic potential and improve relations with Russian-influenced states. Nationalist discourses, which is constantly fueled in domestic politics restricts the government's ability to act in foreign policy. It is also important for Russia to develop relations with Japan to reduce its dependence on China in terms of foreign trade and strategic partnership, to minimize the threats to its eastern borders and to develop its Far East. Thus, current

situation seems advantageous just for the US which strengthen its position in Asia-Pacific and in Japan as a necessary military ally as well as averts normalization of Russian-Japanese relations which would decrease its influence in the region and bring Russia significant oil and natural gas exporter. Furthermore, such a long-term dispute amid increasing regional conflicts in Asia-Pacific could escalate into a military conflict.

As a result, in order for Japan to turn the regional balance into its own favor, it is inevitable to solve the Kuril Islands issue and to normalize relations with Russia. In this sense, Russia must continue to develop the initiatives it undertook before Japan in 1956, 1991, 1993 and 2005 to overcome the stalemate. In turn, Japan has to change the terms of its relations with the US from the "Cold War" approach into a new understanding and concentrate on its regional interests. Therefore, it is important for Japan to abandon strict nationalist approach and find compromise with Russia. This will speed up the development in the rising Asia-Pacific region, and stabilize it.

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