

A Trifold Analysis of the Southern Kurils Dispute

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ABSTRACT

The territorial dispute over the Southern Kurils has been one of the most contentious issues for modern Russo-Japanese relations. In 1945, the Soviet Union declared sovereignty over the then-Japanese islands following Japan's surrender in the Second World War. However, Japan argues that Russia, the successor state to the Soviet Union, has illegitimate grounds for claiming the Southern Kurils and demands a handover of the islands. The thesis applies three analytical lenses to understand why the dispute has yet to be resolved, despite the Russian and Japanese governments' numerous efforts to establish a formal settlement. The thesis first uses neoclassical realism to examine the material and structural dimensions of the dispute, and then utilizes ontological security to determine how national identity, both internally derived and externally projected, influences Russia and Japan's positions toward the Southern Kurils. Although neoclassical realism and ontological security illuminate certain aspects of the case, the thesis applies two-level games to fill in the gaps that the other theories do not fully account for. The two-level games framework links domestic influences to Russia and Japan's policies at the international level, which helps clarify why Russia and Japan continue to hold bilateral negotiations over the Southern Kurils, even though there are strong domestic disincentives for both countries to resolve the dispute.

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INTRODUCTION

The Southern Kurils, which consist of the four islands of Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands¹, are the basis for one of the longest-standing territorial disputes in modern history. Prior to 1945, the islands were under Japanese jurisdiction. The Soviet Union, however, claimed sovereignty over the islands after Japan's surrender in the Second World War. The islands became part of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the islands remain Russian territory to this day. Nevertheless, Japan contests Russian ownership of the islands. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan states that the Southern Kurils are "inherent territories of Japan that continue to be illegally occupied by Russia,"² and thus demands that the islands be returned to Japan. As a result of this disagreement, Russia and Japan never formally declared a peace treaty, and the two countries technically remain at war with one another. Both Russia and Japan acknowledge the existence of the dispute and have spent decades attempting to settle the issue. However, they have been unable to come to a mutual agreement on the status of the Southern Kurils.

International relations analysts have tried to explain the reasons why Russia and Japan have both laid claim to the Southern Kurils, as well as why this dispute has endured for so many years. Some researchers have focused on the material benefits of the islands. They argue Japan and Russia are preoccupied with the islands because of their economic and geostrategic potential, which aligns

¹ Russia and Japan use different terms to refer to Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands. In Russia, the islands are called "the Kurils" or "the Southern Kurils", whereas in Japan they are known as the "Northern Territories" to distinguish them as separate territory from the Kuril Island chain. This thesis will refer to the islands as the "Southern Kurils," as this name is more widely recognizable in English-language coverage of the dispute. Nevertheless, the term "the Southern Kurils" distinguishes these four islands from the greater Kuril Island archipelago.

² "Northern Territories Issue," Foreign Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 1, 2011, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/overview.html>

with the main tenets of neoclassical realism.³ Other researchers have examined how national and historical identity influences Russia and Japan's pursuit over the Southern Kurils, which relates to the theory of ontological security.⁴ While these approaches clarify certain facets of the puzzle, neither neoclassical realism nor ontological security fully explain both Russia and Japan's motivations for declaring sovereignty over the islands. The thesis proposes that two-level games, a theoretical framework that explores how domestic considerations constrain a state's policies on the international level, fills in the gaps of the other two theories. Although neoclassical realism and ontological security account for domestic factors in their analyses, two-level games provides a clearly defined structure to demonstrate exactly how domestic forces impact a state's international actions. The two-level games framework explicitly shows how domestic preferences influence foreign policy outcomes, which helps explain why the dispute remains unresolved.

The thesis is organized in the following manner. Section 1 provides a historical timeline of the dispute. Section 2 reviews the literature on the Southern Kurils and presents the theories of neoclassical realism and ontological security. Section 3 evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the neoclassical realist approach in explaining the Southern Kurils case study, whereas Section 4 focuses on ontological security. Section 5 introduces the two-level games framework and demonstrates how it clarifies the points that the other two theories do not sufficiently explain. The thesis will conclude by discussing how the Southern Kurils case study could be compared to other territorial disputes. Furthermore, it also calls for domestic frameworks like two-level games to be

³ Glenn Diesen's "The Geoeconomics of the Russian-Japanese Territorial Dispute." (*ASIAN SURVEY* 58, no.3, 2018) Dmitri Trenin and Yuval Weber's "Russia's Pacific Future: Solving the South Kuril Islands Dispute," (Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012) and Aleksandra Bausheva's "Russia and Japan on Different Wavelengths in the Kuril Islands." (*New Perspectives in Foreign Policy*, 15) all incorporate neoclassical realist themes in their research.

⁴ Paul B. Richardson's "Geopolitical Cultures, Pragmatic Patriotism, and Russia's Disputed Islands" (*EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS* 59, no.1, 2018), Yukiko Kuroiwa's "Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute from the Border Region Perspective" (*Revista UNISCI*, 32, 2013) and Jing Sun's "Why Japan Cannot Break the Stalemate in Its Relations with Russia: Tokyo's Frozen Dilemma." (*ASIAN SURVEY* 58, no.5, 2018) all incorporate themes related to ontological security in their research.

used in tandem with theories such as neoclassical realism and ontological security in order to conduct more analytically nuanced research.

SECTION 1: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTHERN KURILS DISPUTE

Although the Southern Kurils dispute originated in 1945, tensions between Russia and Japan go back much further. The basis for Japan's ownership claim over the Southern Kurils stems from the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda, which established diplomatic and trade ties between Russia and Japan and demarcated territorial boundaries between the two countries.⁵ The treaty granted Russia possession of the Kuril Islands north of Iturup, while Japan claimed Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan, and the Habomai Islands. Japan gained jurisdiction over the additional islands in 1875, and Japanese sovereignty over the Northern and Southern Kurils remained in place until 1945. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Shimoda set the precedent for Japan's argument that the Southern Kurils constitute fundamentally Japanese territory, and therefore the four islands are separate from the remainder of the Kuril Island chain.⁶

The 1945 Yalta Conference signified the critical juncture in which Russia first claimed sovereignty over the Southern Kurils. The Allied powers wanted to end the Japanese threat in the Pacific theater and asked the Soviet Union to participate in the military operation against it. The Soviet Union agreed to declare war against Japan if it could gain ownership of territorial holdings in the Far East.⁷ Part of the bargain included Soviet possession of the Kuril Islands. Since the entire island chain belonged to Japan during this time period, the Allies did not use the Treaty of Shimoda to distinguish between the Northern and Southern Kurils.⁸ After the Allied powers confirmed this

⁵ "The First Diplomatic and Trade Treaty between Japan and Russia signed." On This Day (February 7), Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, accessed April 3, 2020. <http://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619012>

⁶ "Northern Territories Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs

⁷ "The Yalta Conference, 1945." Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, accessed April 17, 2020. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/yalta-conf>.

⁸ Susumu Takai. "Stalin's Definition of the Kurile Islands." Review of Island Studies, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, May 1, 2018. <https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/research/a00020r.html>

arrangement, the Soviet Union swiftly occupied the islands. When Japan surrendered just a few months later, the Soviet Union consolidated its sovereignty over the Kuril Island chain. The Presidium of the USSR's Supreme Soviet announced the addition of the Kuril Islands to the Soviet Union's territory in 1946.⁹ The Soviet government also began to settle Soviet citizens onto the islands while deporting the native Japanese population, and by the end of the decade, all of the Japanese residents had been relocated to mainland Japan.¹⁰

In 1951, the Allied Powers and Japan restored diplomatic relations with the San Francisco Peace Treaty. One of the treaty's conditions stipulated that Japan would renounce control over the Kuril Islands. However, the treaty failed to indicate the exact territorial demarcations of the island chain and also did not specify which country would receive the islands. To further complicate matters, the Soviet Union disagreed with several of the treaty's conditions and ultimately did not sign it.¹¹ Japan would later use these technicalities to argue that the Southern Kurils comprised separate territory from the Kuril Islands north of Iturup, and thus Soviet claims to the four islands were invalid.¹²

The Soviet Union and Japan officially restored diplomatic relations in 1956 through the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration. They also used this opportunity to discuss the status of the Southern Kurils. According to the declaration, once the Soviet Union and Japan concluded a peace treaty for ending the war with each other, the Soviet Union would transfer the smaller Shikotan and Habomai islands to Japan. The fate of the larger Kunashir and Iturup islands would be up for

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Japan's Plan to Resolve a 70-Year-Old Row with Russia Is Failing." *The Economist*, December 14, 2017. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/12/14/japans-plan-to-resolve-a-70-year-old-row-with-russia-is-failing>.

¹¹ Dmitri Trenin and Yuval Weber. "Russia's Pacific Future: Solving the South Kuril Islands Dispute." Carnegie Moscow Center, December 11, 2012. <https://carnegie.ru/2012/12/11/russia-s-pacific-future-solving-south-kuril-islands-dispute-pub-50325>.

¹² "Northern Territories Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs

discussion only after the signing of the peace treaty.¹³ Despite the initial promise of the 1956 Joint Declaration, the Soviet Union and Japan would not make any substantial progress on the issue for the next three decades. The tensions of Cold War era began to rise during this time period, and Japan's alliance with the U.S. hindered its capacity to engage with the Soviet Union in order to broker a peace treaty.¹⁴

In 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union renewed the opportunity for Russia and Japan to discuss the status of the Southern Kurils. At first, the Russian leadership appeared more open to discussing a settlement with Japan. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin recognized Russia's dire economic situation and considered negotiating on the islands issue in exchange for Japanese investment.¹⁵ The Russian public and nationalist political factions overwhelmingly opposed a transfer of the islands, and thus the conflict remained at a standstill for the remainder of the 1990s.¹⁶

Russia and Japan's efforts to resolve the Southern Kurils dispute have continued up until the present day. Throughout the early 2000s, Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed his willingness to resolve the dispute on multiple occasions, most notably in 2001, 2004, and 2012.¹⁷ However, Russia and Japan continued to disagree on the terms of a compromise. Putin wanted to base a settlement on the 1956 Joint Declaration Agreement. Russia stated that it was willing to return Shikotan and Habomai or promote a "two plus alpha" solution (the return of Shikotan and Habomai and a few additional concessions, such as access to fisheries or economic privileges on

¹³ Tina Burrett. "National Interests Versus National Pride: The Russo-Japanese Northern Territories Dispute." *PROBLEMS OF POST-COMMUNISM* 61, 5 (2014): 16, 17. doi: 10.2753/PPC1075-8216610502.

¹⁴ Trenin and Weber, "Russia's Pacific Future"

¹⁵ Burrett, "National Interests", 16, 17

¹⁶ Giwoong Jung, Seok Sang Yoon, and Sung Hoon Jeh. "Why Japan and Russia Have Failed to Solve the Territorial Dispute: The 1956 Joint Declaration and the Mechanism of Political Coherence." *ASIA EUROPE JOURNAL* 14, 3 (2015): 273, 275. doi:10.1007/s10308-015-0439-5

¹⁷ Paul B. Richardson. "Geopolitical Cultures, Pragmatic Patriotism, and Russia's Disputed Islands." *EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS* 59, 1 (2018): 16,18. doi:10.1080/15387216.2017.1421474

the islands), but was less receptive about the transfer of Iturup and Kunashir to Japan.¹⁸ The Japanese leadership over this time period, however, overwhelmingly demanded a guarantee of returning all four islands as a precondition for a peace treaty.¹⁹

When Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo took office in 2012, he began a campaign to deepen bilateral ties to Russia in hopes that it would favorably resolve the conflict.²⁰ After a setback in Russo-Japanese relations following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Abe launched a “new approach” to Russia in 2016. He took this opportunity to revive his strategy of using increased engagement with Russia as a means for Japan to reclaim the islands.²¹ Putin and Abe appeared to make progress on the issue, and in November 2018, they announced their intention to draft a settlement based on the 1956 Joint Declaration.²² However, the plan quickly fell through. Majorities of both Russian and Japanese publics opposed the deal—most Russians disapproved of forfeiting any territory, while many Japanese citizens advocated for a return of all four islands.²³ In addition, Russia and Japan clashed over the deal’s specific conditions. Russia called upon Japan to recognize the legitimacy of Russian claims to the islands based on the aftermath of the Second World War.²⁴ Japan, meanwhile, disagreed with Russia’s demand, as it could have potentially undermined Japan’s case for getting back the islands.²⁵ Negotiations came to a halt in 2019, and the Southern Kurils dispute remains without a solution.

¹⁸ Anna Kireeva. “A New Stage in Russia-Japan Relations: Rapprochement and Its Limitations.” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, 2 (2019):80.

¹⁹ Jung, Yoon, and Jeh. “Why Japan and Russia Have Failed”, 267.

²⁰ Shinji Hyodo and Dmitri Trenin. “RESOLVED: Japan Could Play the Russia Card Against China.” *Debating Japan* 2, 3 (2019): 1. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resolved-japan-could-play-russia-card-against-china>.

²¹ Kireeva. “A New Stage”, 80.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, 89, 90.

²⁴ Yoko Hirose. “Japan’s Northern Territories versus Russia’s Kuril Islands.” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Society: Policy Forum*, February 12, 2019. <https://www.policyforum.net/japans-northern-territories-v-russias-kuril-islands/>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

SECTION 2: A PRESENTATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

An extensive body of research exists about the South Kurils due to the enduring nature of the conflict and its significance to Russo-Japanese relations as a whole. Much of this literature seeks to describe, rather than theoretically analyze, the issue, and especially lacking are analyses from the perspective of international relations theory. Nonetheless, the literature features core themes that relate to the foundational concepts of international relations theories. Most notably, many of the most frequently occurring ideas in the texts align with neoclassical realism and ontological security. The following section will identify these themes and emphasize how they adhere to the tenets of neoclassical realism and ontological security, and in turn will justify why these theories are suitable tools for the Southern Kurils case study.

A major section of the Southern Kurils literature emphasizes the material factors that drive the dispute, which in turn make neoclassical realism an effective lens of analysis for this branch. For example, analysts such as Bausheva note how natural resource endowments attract Russia and Japan's interests in the islands.²⁶ From a geostrategic standpoint, the islands hold important implications for the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Trenin claims that Russia and Japan face incentives to resolve their differences over the islands and bolster cooperation with each other. The two countries have complementary economic needs: Russia is a naturally resource-rich country that seeks greater investment and high technology, while Japan possesses abundant capital and technology but lacks natural resource reserves. Thus, both countries could accumulate greater power and wealth if they increased their level of collaboration.²⁷ However, Diesen argues that the

²⁶ Aleksandra Bausheva. "Russia and Japan on Different Wavelengths in the Kuril Islands." *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy* 15, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 22, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/npfp/russia-and-japan-different-wavelengths-kuril-islands>.

²⁷ Trenin and Weber, "Russia's Pacific Future"

presence of other influential countries, most notably China, complicates Russia and Japan's opportunities for engagement and affects the overall power dynamics in the region.²⁸

This materialist emphasis on the Southern Kurils overlaps with the core assumptions of neoclassical realism, which claims that states center their foreign policies around their perceived levels of relative material power and their position in the international system.²⁹ Although neoclassical realism accounts for domestic factors that may influence the development of a state's foreign policy, the structural forces of the international system have the most significant impact in pressuring states to compete with one another for more power.³⁰ Given the fact that neoclassical realism corresponds with the literature's focus on the Southern Kurils' resources and geopolitical dimensions, this theory serves as a suitable tool of analysis for the dispute.

Another section of the literature highlights the role of ideational factors in propelling the dispute. Both Russia and Japan attach symbolic value to the islands as a means of defining their respective national identities. Richardson notes that in the case of Russia, the Southern Kurils hold a unique place in Russia's 'geopolitical culture,' or the vision of its ideal national identity.³¹ Most notably, the islands epitomize Russia's victory in the Second World War and thus Russia holds onto them as a marker of its great power status. As for Japan, Kuroiwa explains how the Southern Kurils have been framed into a 'territorial myth' in which the unjust seizure of the islands from Japan has spurred a national mission to reclaim the territories.³² Sun expands upon this notion by

²⁸ Glenn Diesen. "The Geoeconomics of the Russian-Japanese Territorial Dispute." *ASIAN SURVEY* 58, 3 (2018): 600, 601. doi:10.1525/AS.2018.58.3.582.

²⁹ Gideon Rose. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51, 1 (1998): 146, 147. www.jstor.org/stable/25054068.

³⁰ Nicholas Ross Smith. "Can Neoclassical Realism Become a Genuine Theory of International Relations?" *JOURNAL OF POLITICS* 80, 2 (2018): 742, 747. doi:10.1086/696882.

³¹ Richardson, "Geopolitical Cultures," 8.

³² Yukiko Kuroiwa. "Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute from the Border Region Perspective." *Revista UNISCI*, 32 (2013): 201, 202. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsdoj.220e7975a07d42edbcecee35fc6ffcce&site=eds-live>.

emphasizing how this narrative corresponds with the idea of Japanese national victimhood, as well as how the dispute influences Japan's perception of Russia.³³

The emphasis on how the Southern Kurils ties into conceptions of national and historical identities connect with the constructivist theory of ontological security. From an international relations perspective, ontological security claims that states pursue "security of self" and therefore develop identities by routinizing relationships with other states.³⁴ A state is ontologically secure when it has a "biographical continuity" that is validated by itself and other states.³⁵ In times of crisis, a state can lose its sense of identity, and will thus attempt to reestablish routines to recover its ontological security. The role of national identity comprises an integral component of discussions on the Southern Kurils, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of ontological security: therefore, ontological security is an appropriate lens for examining the dispute.

The next two sections will apply neoclassical realism and ontological security to evaluate each approach's effectiveness in explaining the nuances of the dispute. That is not to say that other theoretical approaches would not be worthy of analysis. However, due to the limits of the thesis's scope, as well as the fact that neoclassical realism and ontological security reflect the most prominent themes in the Southern Kurils literature, these two theories were selected as the most appropriate lenses of analysis for this particular project.

³³ Jing Sun. "Why Japan Cannot Break the Stalemate in Its Relations with Russia: Tokyo's Frozen Dilemma." *ASIAN SURVEY* 58, 5 (2018): 796. doi:10.1525/AS.2018.58.5.771.

³⁴ Jelena Subotic. "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change." *FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS* 12, 4 (2016): 614. doi:10.1111/fpa.12089.

³⁵ Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen. "An Introduction to the Special Issue: Ontological Securities in World Politics." *COOPERATION AND CONFLICT* 52, 1 (2017) 4. doi: 10.1177/0010836716653162.

SECTION 3: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

3.1 A Theoretical Overview of Neoclassical Realism

According to Taliaferro's interpretation of neoclassical realism, states under anarchy must accumulate power via material resources and security to ensure their survival.³⁶ The primary units of international politics, states, compare themselves to other states that appear to threaten them and seek to maximize their power by minimizing the risks posed by rival states.³⁷ Thus, a country's foreign policy is shaped predominately by its need to defend and expand its power capabilities relative to other states.³⁸ Rose expands upon the main principles of neoclassical realism by analyzing how systemic pressures are transmitted to state institutions. Rose identifies the political elite as the leading actors in formulating foreign policy, and claims they give precedence to a state's place in the international system and its relative power in determining their decision-making.³⁹ The international system "provides states with information about the costs and benefits of particular courses of action,"⁴⁰ while relative power measures a state's material strength, including its economic and strategic capacities, to determine the limits of its foreign policy ambitions.⁴¹

Given these factors, a state's foreign policy is designed to maintain or increase its relative material power in the international system, though the scope of its actions is constrained by its relative power positioning.⁴² Neoclassical realism does not solely focus on top-down processes, as

³⁶ Jeffery W. Taliaferro, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Steven E. Lobell. *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19, 20.

³⁹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories," 146.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Kitchen. "Systemic Pressures and Domestic Ideas: A Neoclassical Realist Model of Grand Strategy Formation." *Review of International Studies* 36, 1 (2010): 143.

⁴¹ Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell. *Neoclassical Realism*, 28.

⁴² Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories," 146, 147.

“unit-level variables”—namely, domestic factors—can intervene in foreign policy formulation as well.⁴³ Nevertheless, the systemic incentives of the global order, as well as the state’s position in the system based on its relative power, are ultimately the main drivers of a state’s foreign policy decisions.⁴⁴

3.2 The Economic and Strategic Benefits of the Islands

According to neoclassical realism, material factors such as economic and strategic resources determine a state’s relative power. Therefore, the thesis will analyze the economic and strategic dimensions of the islands to determine how they could strengthen Russia and Japan’s relative power potential. In terms of the economic assets of the Southern Kurils, the islands contain abundant fisheries, as well as purported oil and mineral reserves.⁴⁵ While commercial fishing offers lucrative benefits for both Russia and Japan, the potential for other industries is less immediately apparent. Surveyors find it difficult to estimate the actual amount of natural resource reserves on the Southern Kurils—let alone extract these deposits—due to the islands’ rough topography.⁴⁶ Although the Southern Kurils have economic appeal, the lack of confirmed resource deposits, coupled with the challenge of extracting them, hinders their value to Russia and Japan. The economic potential of the Southern Kurils is thus not a main explanatory factor behind Russia and Japan’s inability to resolve the dispute.

The strategic aspects of the Southern Kurils play a more substantial role in explaining the value of the islands. The strategic element is especially true in the case of Russia, as the islands

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁵ Dmitry Gorenburg “The Southern Kuril Islands Dispute: PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 226.” (Washington DC: PONARS Eurasia): http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_226_Gorenburg_Sept2012.pdf

⁴⁶ Tina Burrett. “Great Expectations: Domestic Politics and the Russo- Japanese Northern Territories Dispute,” in *Critical Issues in Contemporary Japan, Second Edition*, ed. Jeff Kingston (New York: Routledge, 2019), 160, 161.

grant it domain over the Sea of Okhotsk and provide an outpost for military and commercial activities in the region.⁴⁷ The Southern Kurils gained elevated strategic importance in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent pivot to Asia. The United States, European Union, and other Western-aligned countries—including Japan—responded to Russia's actions in Crimea by imposing sanctions against it.⁴⁸ As a result, Russia shifted its attention eastwards and began to pay greater attention to its economic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific.⁴⁹ The Russian government increased its investment and infrastructure development projects in the Southern Kurils and the Russian Far East to better integrate the regions into the economically dynamic Asia-Pacific.⁵⁰ The year 2014 marked a turning point in Russia's Asian-Pacific ambitions, and given how the Southern Kurils grant Russia a greater foothold in the region, the country has grown more resistant towards transferring the islands over to Japan.

3.3 The Role of Japan's Bargaining Power

While the prospects of Russia handing over the Southern Kurils have become increasingly less probable, that does not imply that Japan could not bargain for their transfer. According to the assumptions of neoclassical realism, Russia would be more inclined to hand over the islands if Japan could either force the issue or offer Russia something in return. In other words, if a Russian handover of the islands would increase its relative power capabilities, then Russia would be more willing to negotiate a deal. However, Japan's weak leverage has prevented it from achieving this objective. Article Nine of Japan's postwar constitution severely restricts its military capabilities,

⁴⁷C. Morrin, "Russia and Japan at Odds: The Kuril Islands Dispute." The JASON Institute for Peace and Security Studies, February 9, 2019. <https://jasoninstitute.com/2018/08/19/russia-and-japan-at-odds-the-kuril-islands-dispute/>.

⁴⁸Sun, "Why Japan Cannot Break", 792.

⁴⁹Diesen. "The Geoeconomics," 599.

⁵⁰Ibid.

so Russia can ignore the threat of a coercive or military takeover of the islands.⁵¹ Put differently, Japan cannot make credible commitments to retake the islands by force.⁵²

In addition, Japan's alliance with the U.S. impedes its ability to negotiate with Russia. Russia accuses Japan of being too heavily controlled by American interests, and Japan's decision to join the U.S. in sanctioning Russia in 2014 only heightened those suspicions.⁵³ Russia has also expressed concern that if Japan receives the Southern Kurils, it will allow the U.S. to build military bases on the islands, thus challenging Russia's claims to power in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁴ Therefore, Japan's lack of military power, as well as its close relationship with the U.S., restricts its capacity to negotiate a transfer of the islands.

Given these hindrances, Japan has leveraged its economic strength against Russia by using enticements of economic cooperation to coax Russia into handing over the islands.⁵⁵ Japan wields significant clout in this area, as it could serve as a major investor and high-tech supplier to build up the Southern Kurils and the Russian Far East.⁵⁶ This strategy, however, had more traction several decades ago, when Japan was the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁷ Since the early 2000s, other Asian-Pacific countries have gained increasing prominence on the world stage, which in turn has caused Japan's economic bargaining power with Russia to decline. Most notably, China and Russia have strengthened their geoeconomic engagement, especially after the 2014

⁵¹ Lee Hudson Teslik, "Japan and Its Military," Council on Foreign Relations, April 13, 2006.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/japan-and-its-military>

⁵² Chungshik Moon and Mark Souva. "Audience Costs, Information, and Credible Commitment Problems." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, 3 (2016): 434. doi:10.1177/0022002714545222.

⁵³ Diesen, "The Geoeconomics," 599, 600.

⁵⁴ Bausheva, "Russia and Japan on Different Wavelengths", 21.

⁵⁵ Sun, "Why Japan Cannot Break", 792.

⁵⁶ Trenin and Weber, "Russia's Pacific Future"

⁵⁷ Kelly Olsen. "Investors Have for Decades Taken an 'Asia Ex-Japan' Approach. Some Say That's 'Obsolete'," CNBC, January 17, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/16/the-old-model-for-analyzing-asia-no-longer-makes-sense-experts-say.html>.

crisis in Ukraine.⁵⁸ China, like Japan, can provide Russia with a robust economic relationship in the Asia-Pacific. Unlike Japan, however, China can help Russia balance against U.S. regional influence, which makes it a more attractive partner from Russia's perspective.⁵⁹ The disparity between Russia's trade relationship with China and Japan are clearly evident in the statistics: China accounts for 13.4% of Russia's total export sales, which designates it as Russia's top trading partner. Japan, on the other hand, comprises only 2.7% of Russia's export sales, which makes it Russia's twelfth largest trading partner.⁶⁰ China has essentially taken away Japan's economic leverage, which leaves Japan with even less negotiating power for reclaiming the Southern Kurils.

The rise of China has undoubtedly altered the Asian-Pacific balance of power, which in turn has created structural incentives for Russia and Japan to increase their level of cooperation. The primary motivation behind expanded Russo-Japanese engagement is to counterbalance China, as both Russia and Japan could face detrimental consequences if China accumulates too much relative power in the international system. Lukin and Rozman note how "Russia is uncomfortable with becoming overly dependent on China and shows interest in promoting ties with its other Northeast Asian neighbors," while Japan, as "the Asia-Pacific country that shows the most alarm concerning the rise of China", is motivated to take steps to "countervail the growth of Chinese influence."⁶¹ Therefore, Russia and Japan face systemic pressures to "geopolitically hedge" against China.⁶² Russia enjoys a more favorable position in this relationship. It can turn to China

⁵⁸ Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris. "The Lost Art of Economic Statecraft." *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-02-16/lost-art-economic-statecraft>

⁵⁹ Alexander Korolev and Vladimir Portyakov. "China-Russia Relations in Times of Crisis: A Neoclassical Realist Explanation." *Asian Perspective* 42, 3 (2018): 429. doi:10.1353/apr.2018.0018.

⁶⁰ Daniel Workman, "Russia's Top Trading Partners." *World's Top Exports*, last modified March 16, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

⁶¹ Artyom Lukin and Gilbert Rozman. "The Russian Far East: Positive Scenarios and Negative Scenarios," in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier*, ed. Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Palgrave, Singapore: Asan-Palgrave Macmillan Series, 2018): 197, 198.

⁶² *Ibid*, 197.

if it does not want to comply with Japan's preferences, especially if Japan tries to push the Southern Kurils in bilateral negotiations.⁶³ Japan, for its part, does not want to risk alienating Russia, as expanded Sino-Russian cooperation could substantially weaken Japan's relative power in the region. Therefore, Japan will be compelled to downsize or even give up its claims over the Southern Kurils to secure a partnership with it.⁶⁴ In short, competition from China has weakened Japan's negotiating power over the Southern Kurils. In turn, Japan will likely have to sacrifice its claims over the islands to help Russia contain the risk posed by a powerful China.

3.4. Evaluation of Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism comprehensively explains why Russia would prefer to maintain the status quo of keeping the Southern Kurils. Based on the assumptions of neoclassical realism, a state's policy is chiefly motivated by its desire to sustain or improve its relative power standing in the international system. The Southern Kurils aid Russia in achieving this objective, as their geostrategic benefits and, to a lesser extent, economic benefits strengthen Russia's aim to build itself up as an Asian-Pacific power. Neoclassical realism also accounts for domestic factors that influence foreign policy, and in the case of Russia, Putin and Russia's foreign policy elite also support a pivot to the Asia-Pacific. For example, an analysis of Russia's major political parties indicates that the vast majority supports stronger ties with Asia as a way to subvert Western, and particularly American dominance.⁶⁵ As for Japan, it lacks a strong bargaining position in terms of convincing or coercing Russia to give the islands back. Domestic forces within Japan are trying to counteract against their country's perceived weakness: most notably, the Abe administration

⁶³ Sun, "Why Japan Cannot Break", 793, 794.

⁶⁴ Diesen, "The Geoeconomics," 602.

⁶⁵ Alexander Korolev. "Russia's Reorientation to Asia: Causes and Strategic Implications." *PACIFIC AFFAIRS* 89,1 (2016.): 70-72. Accessed June 15, 2020. doi: 10.5509/201689153.

has attempted to enhance its security capabilities by calling for relaxed restrictions on Article 9.⁶⁶ Since Japan's power capabilities continue to be compromised, however, competition from China will also push it to cooperate further with Russia—regardless of whether it gets the islands back or not. In terms of a cost-benefit analysis, Russia has nothing to lose and everything to gain by keeping the Southern Kurils.

However, the neoclassical realist response to why Japan demands the islands back is more ambiguous. In terms of strengthening its relative power, Japan would gain more from giving up its claims on the Southern Kurils. If it did so, it would secure stronger relations with Russia while counteracting China's influence in the region, which would substantially increase its own power capabilities. However, Japan is pursuing the opposite course of action by continuing to campaign for sovereignty over the islands. Japan's motivations for reclaiming the islands are thus more ideational than material. While neoclassical realism accounts for the role of ideas in international relations, its greater focus on explaining the material dimensions behind state conduct limits its ability to explain ideational factors in depth. The thesis will therefore turn to the theoretical framework of ontological security in order to better comprehend the Japanese perspective of the Southern Kurils dispute.

⁶⁶ Iai Z. Saltzman. "Growing Pains: Neoclassical Realism and Japan's Security Policy Emancipation," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 36, 3 (2015): 498. doi: [10.1080/13523260.2015.1091574](https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2015.1091574)

SECTION 4: ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

4.1 A Theoretical Overview of Ontological Security

According to Mitzen, an actor pursues both physical security and ontological security, or “security of the self.”⁶⁷ It develops a sense of self by routinizing its relations with others, as this process defines who an actor is and how it relates to its social environment.⁶⁸ Routinization allows an actor to imagine itself as “a whole, continuous person in time—as being rather than constantly changing,” which imbues the actor with a “sense of agency.”⁶⁹ Like neoclassical realism, ontological security in international relations defines the state as the main actor of analysis. A state maintains a consistent sense of identity by constructing a self-narrative that is reinforced through its routinized relationships with other states.⁷⁰ A state achieves ontological security when it possesses “a strong sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognized in and through their relationships with others.”⁷¹

However, a state may face an event that challenges its narrative, which casts doubt on how the state itself and other states perceive its identity. Steele notes that when a state realizes that its current actions no longer align with the self-narrative it had previously promoted, it experiences profound feelings of shame.⁷² Shame develops into ontological insecurity, which results from “destabilized relationships and understandings” and generates negative reactions such as “anxiety,

⁶⁷ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, 3 (2006): 341. doi:<http://journals.sagepub.com/loi/etja>.

⁶⁸ Brent J. Steele. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 3. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00823a&AN=ceu.b1127319&site=eds-live>

⁶⁹ Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.

⁷⁰ Steele, *Ontological Security*, 3.

⁷¹ Kinvall and Mitzen, “An Introduction,” 4.

⁷² Steele, *Ontological Security*, 13.

paralysis, or violence.”⁷³ Thus, a state will seek to reclaim its self-narrative by re-routinizing its relations with others, which will help restore a sense of ontological security.

4.2 Ontological Security and the Case of Russia

From the perspective of ontological security, two key historical episodes played a pivotal role in shaping Russia’s contemporary national narrative and subsequently, its attitude towards the Southern Kurils. The first event was Russia’s—or the then-Soviet Union’s—involvement in the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War in Russian nomenclature. Many Russians idealize the war as an era of heroic glory and attribute the successful Soviet resistance against Fascist occupation, not to mention the Allied victory over the Axis powers, to the courageous sacrifices of Soviet citizens and soldiers.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the Soviet Union emerged as an internationally recognized great power in the aftermath of the war. The Soviet Union affirmed its newfound prestige at the Yalta Conference, in which it played a major role in shaping the postwar world order. One of the results of this event, of course, was the Soviet acquisition of the Southern Kurils.⁷⁵ Stalin framed the Great Patriotic War as an “examination” of the Soviet Union’s legitimacy as a worthy successor to the Russian Empire and a potential global power, and its wartime victory confirmed that it had passed the test with flying colors.⁷⁶ The Great Patriotic War established a narrative that validated the Soviet Union’s great power status, and since Soviet Union

⁷³ Kinvall and Mitzen, “An Introduction,” 4.

⁷⁴ Tatiana Zhurzhenko. “The Geopolitics of Memory.” Eurozine, last modified May 10, 2007. <https://www.eurozine.com/the-geopolitics-of-memory/>.

⁷⁵ “The Yalta Conference, 1945.”

⁷⁶ Evan Mawdsley. “World War II, Soviet Power and International Communism” in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, edited by Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons, and Sophie Quinn-Judge, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 32.

tioned the Southern Kurils to its wartime triumph, the islands became a crucial element in sustaining the postwar Soviet Union's ontological security.⁷⁷

If the Great Patriotic War served as the pinnacle of greatness in Russia's national narrative, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 signified its fall from grace. As the newly-established Russian Federation emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it experienced political and economic turmoil as it pursued a rocky transition to free market liberal democracy.⁷⁸ The loss of Russia's great power narrative was compounded by the fact that territories throughout the former Soviet Union declared independence, and areas that had previously constituted one country suddenly transformed into foreign entities.⁷⁹ These rapid changes disrupted Russia's sense of ontological security, and thus it turned to remnants of its former Soviet identity to maintain a sense of familiarity during this time of chaos. The Southern Kurils gained heightened symbolic capital due to their connotations of wartime glory and Soviet superpower status, and Russia felt a greater sense of urgency in ensuring that the islands would remain Russian territory. Russia has continued its quest to restore its great power ontological security—most notably with the 2014 annexation of Crimea⁸⁰-- and thus regards its continued sovereignty over the Southern Kurils as an essential component of upholding that narrative.⁸¹

4.3 Ontological Security and the Case of Japan

Japan's defeat in the Second World War ruptured its sense of ontological security as a great power, and Russia's subsequent annexation of the Southern Kurils only amplified that sense of

⁷⁷ Linkhoeva, Tatiana. "At the Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia's National Identity." By Paul B. Richardson. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. Xvi, 244 Pp. ISBN: 9780824872625 (Cloth)." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, 3 (2019): 688.

⁷⁸ Richardson, "Geopolitical Cultures," 11.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Aliaksei Kazharski. "Civilizations as Ontological Security?: Stories of the Russian Trauma", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67, 1 (2020): 30. doi: [10.1080/10758216.2019.1591925](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1591925)

⁸¹ Richardson, "Geopolitical Cultures," 11.

humiliation. Therefore, Japan's mission to reclaim the islands serves as a means to recover some of the reputational costs it incurred in the aftermath of the war.

Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan established a state narrative as the sole Asian country to have joined the European-dominated club of great powers, particularly in terms of its economic and military clout.⁸² Japan's sense of ontological security as a great power fueled its imperialist ambitions: during the Second World War, Japan framed its military expansion in the Pacific theater as an attempt to spread its 'civilizing' influence to the rest of Asia.⁸³ Japan's defeat in 1945, however, destroyed its security of self. Japan experienced a profound sense of shame when its former enemies occupied the country and forced it to demilitarize.⁸⁴ Its trauma over the outcome of the war was aggravated by the loss of the Southern Kurils.⁸⁵ Japan argued that the Soviet Union had no legal basis for laying claim to the Southern Kurils, as the 1945 Yalta Agreement and the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty were insufficient grounds for justifying Soviet sovereignty over the islands.⁸⁶ The fact that the international community did not directly address Japan's qualms over the treaties contributed to the country's perception that the rest of the world looked down on it and did not take its grievances seriously.⁸⁷ Since the end of the Second World War, Japan has partially recovered its security of self, as well as its great power ontological security, due to its postwar economic miracle.⁸⁸ However, other factors, such as its lack of military

⁸² Hitomi Koyama and Barry Buzan. "Rethinking Japan in Mainstream International Relations." *INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC* 19, 2 (2018): 198. doi:10.1093/irap/lcy013.

⁸³ Ayse Zarakol. "Ontological (in)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan." *International Relations* 24, 1 (2010): 17.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edswst&AN=edswst.1604562&site=eds-live>.

⁸⁴ Koyama and Buzan. "Rethinking Japan," 201,202.

⁸⁵ Sun, "Why Japan Cannot Break," 795.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. *Japan's Northern Territories: For a Relationship of Genuine Trust* (Tokyo, Japan, 2008). <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/pamphlet.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Koyama and Buzan. "Rethinking Japan," 202.

autonomy, limit Japan's great power capacities compared to other states.⁸⁹ The loss of the Southern Kurils serve as a sore reminder of Japan's diminished great power status. Thus, as Streltsov observes, taking back the islands would symbolize "an important milestone in overcoming [Japan's] insecurity of [being] a 'losing power' that must constantly apologize for its past sins" and would help rebuild its great power ontological security.⁹⁰

Japan's ontological insecurity over the Southern Kurils does not only concern the damage done to its great power reputation: it also attaches a human face to the loss of the islands. Prior to 1945, approximately 17,000 Japanese citizens resided on the Southern Kurils. However, virtually all of them were forcibly evacuated to mainland Japan after the Soviet Union took control over the islands.⁹¹ The refugees from the Southern Kurils would end up playing an instrumental role in establishing Japan's national campaign to recapture the islands. In 1958, a group of former islanders established the League of Kurile-Habomai Residents to secure economic assistance for their struggling communities and to advocate for the return of the Southern Kurils.⁹² The organization's activities eventually caught the attention of the national government, and it incorporated the return of all four islands as a foreign policy objective. The Japanese government kickstarted a nationwide movement to inform Japanese citizens about the dispute and rally support for reclaiming the islands.⁹³ Everything from stamps, maps, and anime depict the Southern Kurils as Japanese territory, and the Japanese government established "Northern Territories Day" to officiate remembrance of the dispute.⁹⁴ The plight of the Southern Kurils' exiled population

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Dmitry Streltsov. "Why Russia and Japan Can't Solve the Kuril Islands Dispute," *The Moscow Times*, last modified January 24, 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/24/why-russia-and-japan-cant-solve-the-kuril-islands-dispute-op-ed-a64277>.

⁹¹ Alexis Dudden, "Japan's Island Problem," *Dissent* 61,4: 108. doi:10.1353/dss.2014.0079.

⁹² Kuroiwa, "Russo-Japanese Territorial Dispute", 195, 196.

⁹³ Ibid., 201,202.

⁹⁴ Burrett, "National Interests," 22

offered momentum for the Japanese government's campaign to call for the islands back. Providing justice and security for the victims of the dispute became another outlet for overcoming Japan's wartime shame and securing the country's ontological security.

4.4 An Evaluation of Ontological Security

Ontological security explains why Russia and Japan lay claim to the Southern Kurils, as they help sustain the Russian and Japanese great power identity narratives. In the case of Russia, the Southern Kurils epitomize the Soviet Union's ascension to great power status following the Great Patriotic War. The fall of the Soviet Union fractured its sense of great power ontological security, and thus the Southern Kurils allow Russia to hang on to that sense of identity as it attempts to reestablish its former status. As for Japan, the loss of the Southern Kurils signifies its weakened great power ontological security that resulted from its defeat in the Second World War. Furthermore, the loss of the islands represents the human tragedy of Japanese citizens being forced to evacuate from their homes.

Ontological security backs up neoclassical realism's insights as to why Russia values the Southern Kurils so much. It also delves into the ideational factors that drive Japan's campaign to reclaim the islands, which was an area that neoclassical realism left rather unclear. However, one curious aspect of the case that ontological security does not sufficiently explain regards the Russian government's involvement in negotiations over the islands. In particular, Putin has been relatively willing to discuss settling the dispute with his Japanese counterparts. He began talks over the islands in the early 2000s and continued to negotiate with Abe throughout the 2010s. Putin and Abe even came close to drafting a potential settlement in 2018. According to ontological security, Russia should not be expected to give the islands up, as it attaches too much symbolic importance to them: however, Russia has willingly participated in negotiations with Japan about transferring

the islands. Ontological security cannot fully explain all the aspects of the Southern Kuril dispute, and therefore the thesis will turn to the two-level games framework to clarify why Putin, and by extension Russia, behaves in this manner.

SECTION 5: TWO-LEVEL GAMES

Based on the analyses from the previous chapters, neoclassical realism and ontological security elucidate certain facets of the Southern Kurils case study. However, neither approach can fully explain the reasons as to why Russia and Japan have carried on this dispute for so many decades. While neoclassical realism convincingly argues how Russia values the islands to bolster its Asian-Pacific power potential, it is less conclusive as to why Japan wants the islands back. The Southern Kurils offer limited gain to Japan's relative material power, so Japan's motivations for demanding the islands requires a more comprehensive ideational explanation than what neoclassical realism has to offer. Ontological security provides an in-depth account of how emotionally charged notions of identity are embedded into Russia and Japan's claims over the Southern Kurils. However, one anomaly of the case regards how Russia has frequently been a compliant participant in negotiations over the Southern Kurils, even though ontological security would assume they are too symbolically significant for Russia to want to hand them over. While neoclassical realism and ontological security offer a starting point for identifying the key motivations behind the Southern Kurils dispute, they still leave room for further exploration as to why the dispute continues.

One potential weakness in both neoclassical realism and ontological security's ability to explain the Southern Kurils dispute regards the level of analysis that each theory utilizes. Both theories primarily focus on the role of international-level interactions in affecting foreign policy outcomes. For neoclassical realism, a state's relative power capabilities in the international system are the main drivers of a state's actions, while ontological security focuses on how a state sustains its self-narrative through its routinized relationships with other states.

However, while both theories emphasize the importance of domestic factors in shaping foreign policy, they do not explicitly explain the processes in which domestic forces influences the state's actions at the international level. Neoclassical realism defines “systemic incentives as the independent variable in determining foreign policy,” but claims that “internal factors intervene to ultimately shape the final foreign policy outcome.”⁹⁵ However, the theory does not clarify exactly how the two levels interact, nor does it specify the degree of influence that each has in determining foreign policy outcomes, or when we might expect the domestic to equal or even outweigh the systemic.⁹⁶

As for ontological security, it can be unclear in terms of determining exactly *what* societal actors play the leading role in constructing a state's identity.⁹⁷ In fact, ontological security has a tendency to portray the states themselves as individual actors that create their own self-narratives.⁹⁸ Therefore, neoclassical realism and ontological security do not provide sufficient explanatory tools for understanding exactly how and under what circumstances domestic factors influence international factors. Therefore, the thesis will incorporate the two-level games framework to delve more deeply into the inner workings of each country—breaking open the “black box” of the state. This new framework explicitly systemizes the interaction of international and domestic forces in determining foreign policy, and thus it offers additional insight into why Russia and Japan continue to negotiate over the Southern Kurils, but ultimately block real progress towards an official peace settlement.

⁹⁵ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories," 154.

⁹⁶ Kevin Narizny. “On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism.” *International Security* 42,2 (2017): 188. doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00296.

⁹⁷ Laura Schelenz. “Ontological Security – What's Behind This New Theory Trending in IR?” Sicherheitspolitik-blog, University of Frankfurt, August 28, 2017. <https://www.sicherheitspolitik-blog.de/2017/08/28/ontological-security-whats-behind-this-new-theory-trending-in-ir/>

⁹⁸ Steele, *Ontological Security*, 18

5.1 A Theoretical Overview of Two-Level Games

One heuristic device that can fulfill this purpose is Putnam's framework of two-level games. Putnam's framework of two-level games claims that "synergy [exists] between a state's behavior toward others and the political circumstances and events inside that states", and therefore, domestic factors play an integral role in shaping a state's foreign policy.⁹⁹ The title 'two-level games' derives from a metaphor that situates a national leader at two game boards. One board represents the 'international game', in which a leader pursues negotiations with a foreign government, while the other board represents the 'domestic game', in which domestic actors attempt to sway the results of the negotiations to match their preferences.¹⁰⁰ The leader strives to receive 'ratification', or domestic support, to continue his or her actions in the international game.¹⁰¹ When the national leader attains ratification, he or she achieves a 'win-set', or "a foreign policy outcome [that is] acceptable to domestic constituents,"¹⁰² and thus achieves a result that satisfies his or her international and domestic counterparts. However, it can prove nearly impossible to achieve a win-set, as a suitable play at one table can be detrimental at the other table.¹⁰³ If the leader fails to gain domestic support for the state's proposed course of actions, then he or she will most likely concede to domestic pressures by forfeiting the international negotiations. This tendency can be explained by the core assumption of Selectorate Theory, which claims "once in office, leaders want to remain in office."¹⁰⁴ The leader does not want to alienate

⁹⁹ Harry Noone. "Two-Level Games and the Policy Process: Accessing Domestic-Foreign Policy Linkage Theory." *World Affairs* 182, 2 (2019): 167. doi:10.1177/0043820019839074.

¹⁰⁰ Putnam. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics," 434.

¹⁰¹ Eugenia da Conceicao-Heldt and Patrick A. Mello. "Two-Level Games in Foreign Policy Analysis," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 3. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.496

¹⁰² Noone, "Two-Level Games", 169

¹⁰³ Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics", 434.

¹⁰⁴ Randolph M. Siverson and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita. "The Selectorate Theory and International Politics," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017.

<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-293>.

his or her support base and risk losing power in the process, and therefore will not come to a resolution at the international game.¹⁰⁵ In most cases, when the national leader cannot reach an agreement with the international game, the status quo remains in effect unless the players try to achieve another outcome via a new round of the two-level games.¹⁰⁶

5.2 The “International Game” and the Southern Kurils

At first glance, it would seem odd that Russia and Japan have frequently discussed a transfer of the Southern Kurils on the international level. Russia would be expected to display virtually no interest in changing the status quo. As the neoclassical realist and ontological security analyses have shown, Russia has invested too much geostrategic and emotional value into the islands to willingly give them up, especially since Japan cannot offer an attractive alternative in exchange for the islands. Japan, however, wants the islands back: even if it seems like an illogical prospect from the standpoint of neoclassical realism, ontological security demonstrates how reclaiming the islands ties in notions of reclaiming national honor. The Japanese government pursues this objective by incorporating the Southern Kurils dispute into its foreign policy agenda with Russia. As a result, most high-level meetings between Russian and Japanese government officials inevitably include discussion of the Southern Kurils.¹⁰⁷

Russia, for its part, has tolerated this policy. Despite the ongoing tensions over the Southern Kurils, Russia and Japan have a relatively stable bilateral relationship overall.¹⁰⁸ Since Russia views Japan as an important partner, it will continue to engage with it, even if it has to endure further Southern Kurils negotiations in the process. Furthermore, both Russia and Japan can use bilateral forums over the Southern Kurils to address other interests. Some analysts believe that

¹⁰⁵ Noone, “Two-Level Games”, 169

¹⁰⁶ Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 442.

¹⁰⁷ Tsuruoka, “Making Sense”

¹⁰⁸ Kireeva, “A New Stage,” 78, 79

Putin has used the islands as a bargaining chip to reap additional concessions from Japan,¹⁰⁹ while Japan can use the dispute as an excuse to arrange more frequent meeting with Russia to discuss additional economic and political matters alongside the islands.¹¹⁰ Thus, the international level of two-level games helps to clarify why Russia continues to negotiate with Japan over the dispute, even though it seemingly has little incentive to do so.

5.3 The “Domestic Game” and the Southern Kurils Dispute

The analysis above demonstrated why Russia and Japan continue to perpetuate meetings over the islands via the international game. Nevertheless, why have none of these engagements over the years resulted in a resolution to the conflict? The answer to this conundrum can be found at the “domestic game” level of the dispute. Russian domestic forces oppose any sort of territorial handover to Japan, while their Japanese counterparts insist upon a return of all four islands: in short, neither side can reach a compromise over the issue.¹¹¹ Therefore, the national leaders of Russia and Japan—in the case of this analysis, Putin and Abe—cannot receive ratification over their Southern Kuril policies. As stated by the selectorate theory, most leaders do not want to lose their positions of power, and thus Putin and Abe are assumed to value their respective domestic base’s interests over those of the international counterparts. They do not want to incur audience costs by pursuing actions that could run counter to their domestic constituents’ interests and end up never making any real progress on the Southern Kurils dispute.

The following sections will explore how the specific domestic contexts of Russia and Japan constrain the countries’ capacities to broker a settlement. However, two disclaimers need to be addressed beforehand. First, these sections cannot address all the domestic forces that factor into

¹⁰⁹ Burrett, “Great Expectations”, 158

¹¹⁰ Tsuruoka, “Making Sense”

¹¹¹ Burrett, “Great Expectations”, 159

Russia and Japan's policies towards the island dispute. Nevertheless, they will focus on some of the most prominent examples covered in the Southern Kurils literature. Secondly, the sections will primarily focus on a timeline of 2014 to the present day. Although the analyses apply to other time periods in the history of the dispute, the scope of the historical focus was limited for the sake of topicality and brevity.

5.3.1 The “Domestic Game” and Russia

In order to understand how domestic forces directly impact a national leader's foreign policy decision-making process, it is vital to understand what societal groups comprise a national leader's selectorate, or “all the people who have a role in selecting the state's leader.”¹¹² The size of the selectorate is contingent on the country's political system: for example, democracies tend to have larger selectorates compared to authoritarian systems.¹¹³ The size of the selectorate is contingent on the country's political system: for example, democracies tend to have larger selectorates compared to authoritarian systems.¹¹⁴ Since the national leader must appease the preferences of his or her selectorate to maintain his or her position of power, he or she will most likely cater to the needs of this group during international negotiations, even if it means that the ‘international game’ ends in a stalemate.

In the case of Russia, Putin has enforced increasingly authoritarian policies in the twenty years that he has been at the forefront of Russian politics.¹¹⁵ However, that does not mean Putin is immune to the influence of other domestic actors. Powerful elites, including ministry heads,

¹¹² Siverson and Bueno de Mesquita. “The Selectorate Theory”

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Robert Person. “Balance of Threat: The Domestic Insecurity of Vladimir Putin.” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (1): 46. doi:10.1016/j.euras.2016.11.001.

business leaders, and intellectuals, comprise the ‘selectorate’ that keep Putin in power.¹¹⁶ Putin’s initial rise to the presidency was precipitated by his ability to gain elite support, and his continued rule depends on his capacity to balance out the interests of the elite groups.¹¹⁷ Although Putin prioritizes the backing of the elite selectorate to stay in power, that does not mean that he completely overlooks the support of the general public. A key mechanism that he uses to sustain elite loyalty is by sustaining popular support throughout the country, as high approval ratings give Putin leverage over elites who may otherwise challenge his rule.¹¹⁸ To a certain extent, then, Putin must take public considerations into account as an indirect means of consolidating the support of his elite selectorate.

With regard to the Russian public’s stance towards the Southern Kurils, nationalist groups and public opinion are the main domestic factors that influence Putin’s ability to negotiate a deal with Japan. Nationalist groups became prominent societal fixtures following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, as this event set off a massive outpouring of nationalist sentiment across Russia.¹¹⁹ Putin, therefore, tries to maintain their approval in hopes they could preserve post-Crimea nationalist pride and keep up popular support for his regime.¹²⁰ However, this maneuver also runs the risk of backfiring, as national groups could also vocally criticize any foreign policy initiative they interpret as endangering Russia’s national interest. In the case of the Southern Kurils, nationalist groups vehemently protested the 2018 settlement discussions, as they feared it could

¹¹⁶ Matthew Sussex. “Putin It Down,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Society: Policy Forum*, March 22, 2018. <https://www.policyforum.net/putin-it-down/>.

¹¹⁷ Emil Avdaliani. 2019. “Russian Elites and Why They Matter.” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, May 22, 2019. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/russian-elites-why-they-matter/>.

¹¹⁸ Burrett, “National Interests,” 26

¹¹⁹ “Why Japan’s Prime Minister Pines for Four Desolate Islands,” *The Economist*, February 7, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/02/07/why-japans-prime-minister-pines-for-four-desolate-islands>

¹²⁰ Andrew Higgins. “Putin Quashes Japanese Hopes of End to Island Dispute.” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/world/europe/kuril-islands-putin-abe.html>

lead a Russian concession of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands.¹²¹ Their opposition reflected the attitudes of the Russian public, as a 2019 national survey found that seventy-seven percent of respondents believed that Japan should not get any of the islands back.¹²² The majority of elites also prefer keeping the islands: for example, business circles want to take advantage of the business opportunities in the Asia-Pacific, while intellectuals promote the idea of Russia as a Eurasian power.¹²³ Although Putin has negotiated over the Southern Kurils at the international game on multiple occasions, he has yet to receive ratification from his selectorate, which includes nationalist groups, public opinion, and—most crucially—elite groups. He does not want to endanger losing the support of these groups that keep him in power, and thus he has failed to achieve a win-set over the Southern Kurils.

5.3.2 The “Domestic Game” and Japan

In the case of Japan, Abe’s selectorate consists of the ruling political party—in his case, the Liberal Democratic Party—and the general public. Due to the nature of Japan’s parliamentary democratic system, Abe primarily favors the support of his fellow Liberal Democratic Party members in the National Diet, as their votes have the direct power to keep him in or out of office.¹²⁴ However, he also keeps the interests of the Japanese public close in mind, as their votes determine which political party wins a majority of seats in parliament.¹²⁵ Therefore, he needs to secure the approval of a large selectorate to achieve ratification for his foreign policy negotiations.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Overwhelming Majority of Russians Say No to Concessions on Kuril Islands Dispute,” *TASS Russian News Agency*, Jan. 28, 2019. <https://tass.com/society/1042073>.

¹²³ Korolev, “Russia’s Reorientation,” 65, 67

¹²⁴ Mike M. Mochizuki & Samuel Parkinson Porter. “Japan under Abe: toward Moderation or Nationalism?,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 36, 4 (2013): 26, 27. doi: [10.1080/0163660X.2013.861709](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.861709)

¹²⁵ Tomohito Shinoda. *Contemporary Japanese Politics: Institutional Changes and Power Shifts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013):12.

Abe faces a number of challenges in attempting to negotiate over the Southern Kurils while appeasing his electorate. With regard to the Liberal Democratic Party, its members promote nationalist causes, and Abe himself has long championed various nationalist movements including those dedicated to the historical revisionism of the Second World War.¹²⁶ Abe faces pressure from within his party to demand a handover of all four Southern Kurils, as accepting anything less, from the Liberal Democratic Party's perspective, would serve as an admission of guilt and defeat on Japan's part.¹²⁷ Members of the Liberal Democratic Party also fear that such a concession could risk crippling the party's support base and weaken its authority in Japanese government.¹²⁸

The Liberal Democratic Party's fears regarding a public backlash over the Southern Kurils are not unfounded, as decades of exposure to Japan's national campaign to reclaim the islands have influenced popular opinion towards the dispute. A 2018 public survey indicated that seventy-nine percent of respondents believed that Russia should return all four islands to Japan.¹²⁹ The respondents were flexible regarding the terms of the handover, as options for either an incremental transfer of islands or returning them *en bloc* both received popular support. However, only five percent of those surveyed supported a return of just two of the islands.¹³⁰

Abe tried to maneuver around his electorate's preferences over the Southern Kurils while he was pursuing his "new approach" to Russia: however, he learned the hard way that he could not ignore these considerations. After Abe and Putin agreed to formulate a peace settlement based on the 1956 Joint Declaration in November 2018, Abe did not clearly state what the final results of the deal would imply for Japan. On one hand, he publicly stated that he hoped that an initial

¹²⁶ Sven Saaler. "Nationalism and History in Contemporary Japan." *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 14, 20 (2016): 4,5. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=119228358&site=eds-live>.

¹²⁷ Tsuruoka, "Making Sense"

¹²⁸ Burrett, "National Interests," 26

¹²⁹ "46% Of Japanese Favor Initial Return of 2 Islands from Russia." *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 25, 2018. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/46-of-Japanese-favor-initial-return-of-2-islands-from-Russia>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

transfer of Shikotan and the Habomai Islands would leave open the possibility that Kunashir and Iturup would be returned in the future.¹³¹ However, he gradually began to avoid referring to a handover of all four of the islands,¹³² and the 2019 edition of Japan's foreign policy *Diplomatic Bluebook* omitted Japan's claim to sovereignty over the Southern Kurils.¹³³ Abe faced heavy political and public criticism for seemingly giving up on the possibility of a full territorial handover. The domestic response, coupled with disagreements over Russia's conditions for the settlement, ultimately led to a breakdown in negotiations.¹³⁴ The 2020 edition of the *Diplomatic Bluebook* proclaimed Japan's renewed commitment to reclaiming all four islands, which signified a reversal on Abe's efforts to appease Russia.¹³⁵ In short, even when Abe attempted to adopt a more conciliatory position towards Russia, the lack of ratification from his electorate forced him to revert to the original policy of staking claim to all of the Southern Kurils.

5.4 An Evaluation of Two-Level Games

The framework of two-level games helps to fill in some of the gaps that neoclassical realism and ontological security do not fully explain in the Southern Kurils dispute. The analysis of the international game describes why Russia and Japan continue to hold negotiations over the islands. Japan has included the dispute as a core component of its Russian foreign policy strategy, and thus Russia must accept further negotiations on the issue to uphold its bilateral relationship with Japan. However, the domestic game analysis solves the mystery as to why Russia and Japan

¹³¹ Kireeva, "A New Stage", 90, 91.

¹³² James D. J. Brown. "The Details of Abe's Proposed Peace Treaty with Russia." *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-details-of-abes-proposed-peace-treaty-with-russia/>.

¹³³ "Japan Reasserts Its Claim to Northern Isles in Policy Document," *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 20, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13388556>.

¹³⁴ Kireeva, "A New Stage", 91.

¹³⁵ "Japan Reasserts"

have failed to actually settle the issue. The Russian and Japanese leadership depend on domestic support, in the form of their selectorates, to maintain approval for their actions and keep their positions of power. However, the selectorates in Russia and Japan cannot come to any sort of agreement over the issue, as both sides view any territorial concessions as unacceptable. The leaders do not want to betray their support base, and therefore they end up maintaining the status quo, as opposed to achieving a win-set that could potentially lead to a formal resolution of the Southern Kurils conflict.

CONCLUSION

The Southern Kurils territorial dispute poses a puzzling case study, as Russia and Japan have been unable to settle the conflict despite decades of attempts to broker a formal peace deal. The thesis utilized the analytical lenses of neoclassical realism, ontological security, and two-level games to identify the reasons why a resolution to the issue remains at a standstill. While neoclassical realism and ontological security shed light on a number of factors that account for why Russia and Japan have invested so much interest in the islands, neither theory could singlehandedly explain why the conflict has endured for so many years. Two-level games filled in the gaps that the other two theories missed by clarifying how mechanisms at the international level drive Russia and Japan to continue negotiations over the Southern Kurils, while domestic-level forces prevent an actual solution from being achieved.

Based on the conclusions of the thesis, Russia and Japan are unlikely to settle the Southern Kurils island dispute anytime soon. According to Trenin, “for the issue [over the Southern Kurils] to be fully sealed, a significant majority in the public opinion of Russia and Japan will have to support the agreement.”¹³⁶ Based on the two-level games analysis, however, shifting domestic attitudes towards accepting a compromise presents an extremely difficult undertaking. Nevertheless, the thesis determined which factors play an integral role in the continuation of the dispute, so at the very least it can help international relations scholars comprehensively understand why a resolution over the Southern Kurils issue remains such an elusive prospect.

The thesis offers broader contributions to the field of international relations as well. The findings of the thesis can be analyzed alongside other territorial disputes to establish the defining

¹³⁶ Dmitri Trenin. “The Kuril Social Contract”, Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified January 23, 2019. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78191>.

features of this phenomenon. Both Russia and Japan offer parallel territorial disputes that could form the basis of intriguing comparative case study research. For example, Russia's territorial disputes with Germany over Kaliningrad and Finland over Karelia also stem from the outcomes of the Second World War.¹³⁷ Japan, meanwhile, has territorial disputes with Korea over the Takeshima/ Dokdo Islands and China over the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands.¹³⁸ Analyzing these case studies in tandem with the Southern Kurils could offer further insight into each country's reactions to their respective conflicts, as well as how the motivating factors behind each dispute compare to one another.

The thesis also has important implications for the use of certain theories in international relations scholarship. The thesis advocates for more widespread usage of two-level games in particular, as this framework provided the most thorough overview as to what factors drive the Southern Kurils dispute. The Southern Kurils case study could help promote further study as to how both domestic and international forces can play an integral role in foreign policy development, which in turn could help scholars attain a more nuanced understanding of exactly why states pursue or avoid certain policies. The thesis also demonstrates how two-level games serves as a suitable supplement to neoclassical realism and ontological security. The latter two theories each identified certain layers of the dispute that would have otherwise been overlooked. Two-level games helped systematize those core findings, which painted a more complete picture of all the dynamics surrounding the Southern Kurils. Therefore, the thesis also calls for the expanded use of multi-theoretical analyses in international relations scholarship to unpack as many dimensions of certain case studies as possible.

¹³⁷ Trenin and Weber, "Russia's Pacific Future"

¹³⁸ Koji Furukawa. "Bordering Japan: Towards a Comprehensive Perspective." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 26,3 (2011): 303, 304. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=ejs27812453&site=eds-live>.

The Southern Kuril dispute will likely remain unresolved for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the thesis has provided a sufficient primer as to what motivations drive the conflict, and how these factors may affect the future of this case study, Russo-Japanese relations, and the state of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

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