



‘Ali Baba’s Cave’: The Sea of Okhotsk’s Contentious Triangle

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Abstract: Amidst international furor over its annexation of Crimea, Russia quietly acquired a far more lucrative territory through different means: in March, the United Nations recognized Russia’s claim to the resource-rich “Peanut Hole” in the center of the Sea of Okhotsk. This strategically and economically important body of water—a “real Ali Baba’s cave” of untapped oil and gas reserves—lies within a contentious triangle formed by eastern Russia and northern Japan. Securing the Okhotsk’s legal status as an internal sea goes far to advancing Russian claims in the Arctic, and bolsters Russia’s bargaining position over four disputed Kuril islands which Japan calls its “Northern Territories.”

The days of an inward looking Japan are over. Japan now sees threats elsewhere in the world in the context of its own security, and will react appropriately.¹

Yuriko Koike

*The sea
Something to look at
When we are angry.²*

Reiko Chiba

¹ Yuriko Koike, “Japan’s Russian dilemma,” *The Japan Times*, Apr. 4, 2014. Yuriko Koike served as Japan’s Defense Minister (2007), Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for National Security Affairs (2006-2007), and Minister of State for Okinawa and Northern Territories Affairs (2004-2006).

² Reiko Chiba, “Invite Tranquility,” *Hiroshige’s Tokaido in prints and poetry* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1957).

Much has been made of the churning security environment in the East and the South China Seas, and properly so given manifold territorial disputes that perennially threaten to escalate into wider and much hotter conflicts. To the north lies another region that has long been rich soil metaphorically for Asian territorial disputes. It is the contentious triangle of the Sea of Okhotsk,³ a marginal sea bounded by Russia's Kamchatka peninsula and Sakhalin Island, and the Kuril Islands archipelago.

In a March 2014 action somewhat obscured by events in Crimea,⁴ a United Nations commission formally certified Russia's territorial claim to a resource-rich, 52,000 square kilometer (20,000 square mile)⁵ area—one three times the size of New Jersey, and larger than Slovakia or Switzerland—in the center of the Sea of Okhotsk.⁶ This action will spur further security and resource competition in the region, and has already provoked strident nationalist outbursts, especially in some Japanese circles. Captured succinctly by Russia's *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*—"the Sea of Okhotsk is our everything"⁷—the action gives Russia some timely, much needed leverage against the prospect of Crimea-related sanctions.⁸

³ "Ojotsk" and "Ojótskoe" are sometimes used as phonetically closer transliterations of the Russian language place name, *Охотское море*, in which the suffix *море* means "sea."

⁴ The Azerbaijani news outlet *ABC.az* opined, "Russian territory has started to increase for the first time since 1946 when Federation annexed Kaliningrad region, Southern Sakhalin and Southern Kuril Islands. The total increase of the Russian territory for the past weekend made about 78,860 square kilometers that is comparable to the territory of Azerbaijan. The annexation of Crimea by means of 'citizens' self-determination' has little chances to be recognized by the world community, but the main territorial acquisitions of Putin were sanctioned by the UN. The case is that the special UN Commission recognized Sea of Okhotsk to be the internal sea of Russia and gave Russia the exclusive right to use the central part of the sea. During the past weekend, Putin became one of the best rulers in Russian history from the point of view of the state borders' expansion. ... The only question now is if Putin would stop at absorption of the mentioned 79,000 km2 and prospects of annexation of the giant section of the Arctic Ocean's shelf or continue expansion to the former USSR territory. The West is already speaking about new Russian nationalism not based on some political ideology as it was at the Soviet stage of history and more similar to 'Tamerlane's expansion.'" [sic] <http://abc.az/eng/news/80093.html>.

⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press Release about the Approval of the Russian Application Regarding the Sea of Okhotsk," Mar. 17, 2014, www.mid.ru.

⁶ "РФ ожидает принятия решения ООН по шельфу в Охотском море в 2014 году," *PILA Новости*, Aug. 20, 2013, <http://ria.ru/economy>.

See also "Foreign Ministry: Sea of Okhotsk enclave now Russian," *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, Mar. 18, 2014, <http://en.itar-tass.com>. Russian Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Sergey Donskoy said the UN decision was "the first step in our Arctic applications, which will be ready in the near future." See "Far East bonanza: Resource-rich Sea of Okhotsk all Russian, UN confirms," *RIA Novosti*, Mar. 15, 2014, <http://rt.com>.

⁷ Tatyana Zykova, "Sea of Okhotsk is our everything," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Mar. 17, 2014, pp. 1-2.

⁸ For example, see: Zachary Keck, "Amid Ukraine Crisis, Russia Pursues Energy Deals With Asia," *The Diplomat*, Mar. 26, 2014; Amitav Ranjan, "Putin's 'envoy' seeks India deals to counter Western sanctions," *The Indian Express*, Mar. 22, 2014; "Russia offers India crude oil

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