The Kuril Island Dispute

What is the issue?

Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook for 2022 described the Kuril Islands as being under Russia's "illegal occupation".

What are the Kuril Islands/ Northern Territories?

- Japan calls the Kuril Islands as Northern Territories while Russia calls it as the South Kurils.
- These are a set of four islands situated between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean near the north of Japan's northernmost prefecture, Hokkaido.
- The Soviet Union had seized the islands at the end of World War II and by 1949 had expelled its Japanese residents.
- Japan claims that the disputed islands have been part of itsince the early 19th century.

What lies behind the dispute?

- **Japan's claim-** Japan's sovereignty over the islands is confirmed by several treaties like
  - The Shimoda Treaty of 1855
  - The 1875 Treaty for the exchange of Sakhalin for the Kuril Islands (Treaty of St. Petersburg)
  - The Portsmouth Treaty of 1905
- **Russia's claim**- Russia claims its sovereignity by quoting
  - The Yalta Agreement (1945)
  - The Potsdam Declaration (1945)
  - The San Francisco Treaty of 1951
- **Persisting differences**- Under Article 2 of the treaty, Japan had "renounced all right, title and claim to the Kuril Islands."
- However, Japan argues that the San Francisco Treaty cannot be used here as the Soviet Union never signed the peace treaty.
- Japan also refuses to concede that the four disputed islands were in fact part of the Kuril chain.
- The islands that Japan considers its own are named
  - Kunashiri (known in Russian as Kunashir)
  - Etorofu (Iturup)
  - Shikotan
  - Habomai islets

Have there been attempts at resolution?

- **Japan-Soviet Joint Declaration 1956**- The declaration restored diplomatic relations between the two nations.

- In 1956, it was suggested that two of the four islands would be returned to Japan once a peace treaty was signed.
- In 1960, Japan and the United States signed the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security by which the US adopted the role of guarantor of Japanese security and laid the foundations for continued American military presence in the Pacific.
- The influence of the United hampered the signing of a peace treaty between Soviet and Japan.
- **Recognition of dispute**- The Soviet Union later hardened its position and only in 1991 it recognised that the islands were the subject of a territorial dispute.
- **Joint economic development**- Under the then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure, joint economic development of the disputed islands was explored.
- Both countries had agreed to have bilateral negotiations and Russia was even willing to give back the Shikotan Island and the Habomai islets to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty as per the 1956 declaration.
- But nationalist sentiments on both sides prevented resolution of the dispute.

What is the current issue and what lies ahead?

- Japan stresses that the Kuril Islands must be demilitarised if any serious proposals are to come to fruition.
- Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japan made a statement that Russia had occupied the southern part of the Kuril Islands, thereby violating international law.
- Japan has been among the most loyal of Western allies in denouncing Russian aggression and punishing it with sanctions.
- Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook for 2022 describing the Kuril Islands as being under Russia's "illegal occupation" will further damage relations between the two countries.
- Japan might have felt that this is a good opportunity to further isolate Russia and paint it as a "habitual offender" of international law.
- Japan has also said that a constructive relationship with China is best for both parties purposefully not mentioning directly to the Senkaku Islands dispute.
- Japan's policy shift on the Kuril Islands might affect the bilateral relations with Russia while advancing the possibility of its two neighbours, China and Russia, coming together against it.

References

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