THE KURIL ISLANDS

Russia and Japan are discussing the ownership of the Kurils—fifty tiny Pacific islands under Soviet and Russian control for more than 50 years. Speculation is that the islands may be returned to Japan in exchange for $1 billion in loans, grants and medical aid, according to the Associated Press.

Japan wants the Kuril Islands back and the Russians need financial help. In 1991, a similar deal was discussed with the Soviet’s Mikhail Gorbachev, but it fell through as the Soviet Union dissolved and Boris Yeltsen took over.

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi recently traveled to the Kremlin in Moscow to broker a deal with Yeltsen. It was the first time a Japanese head of state has visited the Kremlin in 25 years. What is it about these cold and bleak islands that makes them so valuable to the Japanese?

The Kuril island chain stretches for 650 miles from Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula to Japan’s northernmost island of Hokkaido (ho-KAI-doe). The total land area of all 50 islands is only 6,023 square miles (15,599 sq. km.), which is nearly the size of New Jersey.

Located between 45 and 51 degrees north, the Kurils are situated at about the same latitude and east coast position as Canada’s Newfoundland. Winters are long, cold and windy, as frigid, dry arctic winds from the Siberia high pressure area pour outward from the northwest.

The adjacent cold Oyashio (OOH-yah-SHE-oh) Current swings against the western side of the Pacific Basin as it heads south along the East Asian shore, just as the cold Labrador current swings against Newfoundland.

The meeting of cold, dry Siberian air and cold, moist maritime air around the Kurils results in frequent advection fog, snow and bitter, damp cold. It is precisely these conditions, however, that make the seas around the Kurils one of the world’s premiere fishing grounds.

When the Kurils were first visited by the Dutch in 1643, a group of people called the Ainu (EYE-nu)—probably the first people to settle Japan— inhabited the islands. They were of a different origin and culture than the Japanese who had driven the Ainu northward. Today some Ainu still live on the Japanese island of Hokkaido.

Both the Russians and Japanese claimed the Kurils throughout most of the last two centuries. In 1875 the Japanese agreed to relinquish claims on the island of Sakhalin (SAHK-ah-LEAN) just across the Sea of Okhotsk to the Russians in exchange for the Kurils.

After Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, however, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt convened a peace conference in Portsmouth, N.H., and awarded southern Sakhalin back to Japan. Discovery of petroleum on Sakhalin in 1931 led to Russian colonization of the northern end of the island and set the stage of complete Soviet takeover after World War I.

When Japan lost World War II to the Allies, it lost all of its Pacific territory except the four main Japanese islands. Parts of mainland Asia and some of the larger Pacific islands were returned to their respective owners, but the smaller island groups were placed mostly under the administration of the Allies. Both Sakhalin and the Kurils fell to the Soviets.

Nonetheless, the Japanese still claim the southernmost four Kuril islands. This claim is mainly based on the residing Ainu population and Japan’s security interests. The former Soviet Union established listening posts on the islands within sight of Hokkaido.

There are now an estimated 17,000 Russians residing on the Kurils. The Soviet breakup and Russian economic collapse have left them so impoverished that, incredibly, they are petitioning Russia to turn the islands over to Japan.

In an effort to win the Kurils, Japan has offered more than $800 million in loans to Russia, plus a financial development package of $100 million for the Kuril islanders. Although the deal is not complete, Russia has agreed to allow some elderly Japanese to make a sentimentally journey back to their pre-World War II Kuril island homes.

Japan’s is the world’s third largest economy, while Russia’s is in a free fall. Russia needs friends with the means to help keep its economy afloat, and Japan’s offer is more and more appealing to Russia’s cash-strapped economy.

Even the price of $1 billion is not too high for the Japanese to pay to reunite the Kuril Islands with the Japanese homeland.

And that is Geography in the News, November 17, 1998.

(The author is a geography professor at Appalachian State University. Email: lineback@appstate.edu) #458

© 2000 maps.com