Old feud in the Far East

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Last week, the Soviets charged a Japanese diplomat and a Japanese businessman with spying and expelled them from the USSR.

Soon after, the Japanese replied in kind by kicking out some Soviet officials.

What was so unusual about this angry tiff was that Japan was involved in it at all.

The Japanese, who see the whole world as their export market, go out of their way to avoid offending existing or potential customers and usually keep a low profile in international political affairs. Business comes first — except, it seems, with the Soviet Union.

Neither Japan nor the USSR make much of a secret of their mutual antipathy and distrust. This bad blood dates back from the end of the last century when Japan was competing head-on with Czarist Russia for influence in the Far East. Modern day Russians still smart over their humiliating defeat by a supposedly backward Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

Between the World Wars, Japan and the USSR vied over Manchuria and fought a brief but quite bloody series of clashes. As the Japanese Empire crumbled in the last days of World War II, the Soviets attacked and seized from it the southern half of the large island of Sakhalin and the strategic chain of the Kurile Islands.

Since 1945, the Soviets have rejected all Japanese requests for a return of the Kuriles, while fortifying and colonizing them.

Soviet reluctance to return the Kuriles becomes plain when you look at a map. The Kuriles are like a chain of stepping stones connecting Japan's northern island of Hokkaido with the tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula. The narrow waters between these islands are the the main passage into the vast Sea of Okhotsk and the mountainous grey coast of Siberia.

Roughly rectangular, Okhotsk is enclosed on three sides by Siberia and Kamchatka; and on the fourth by the Kuriles. As a result, this "Soviet Lake" forms, along with the Barents Sea, a secure redoubt for Soviet ballistic missile submarines.

Such strategic value hardly moves the Japanese who continue to demand the Soviets return the Kuriles. The Soviets have responded, over the past two years, by beefing up their ground and air units on the Kuriles and by sending warships to skirt Japanese coastal waters. In recent months, intrusions in Japan's airspace by Soviet Bear and Backfire bombers have sharply increased.

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Given these intrusions and the fact that the southernmost Kuriles are virtually within sight of northern Japan, Tokyo's sensitivity is easy to understand. Nor are Japanese qualms eased by reliable reports of Soviet plans to invade northern Japan in the event of war.

Add to these long-simmering disputes a historical Russian dislike of Japanese (and Chinese, for that matter) and extreme Soviet nervousness about its Far Eastern provinces which, in time of war, would be very vulnerable to attack by the U.S. and China.

These emotions have caused normally cautious and well-reasoned Soviet foreign policy to flounder in angry confusion when dealing with Tokyo. Ham-fisted Soviet attempts to frighten Japan by rattling SS-20 nuclear missiles have alternated with sporadic and quite futile attempts to improve frayed relations. In fact, dealing with Japan has been one of Moscow's biggest foreign policy failures of the decade.

For both the Soviets and Japan, their ill feelings have deterred a great deal of mutually advantageous business. The Soviet Far East and Siberia would profit enormously from Japanese capital investment and technology. Japanese money and expertise could double the huge region's output of coal, gas, timber, metals and other raw materials that Japan now imports from distant places.

The Soviet Far East could also offer a splendid new market for Japanese consumer goods and even tourism. Vladivostok could one day turn into what Vancouver now represents for resource-hungry Japan.

But such happy economic co-operation will not come to be until Tokyo and Moscow can first resolve their thorny territorial problems. Japan has quite evidently contented itself to the loss of its pre-war empire that included Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan. But not to the loss of a few small islands in the cold northern seas.

With only 228,000 square miles of territory, every inch of land in Japan is precious. The Soviets, for their part, are not about to give back even a sliver of their wartime conquests. After all, if the Soviet Union agreed to return the Kuriles to Japan, this would open the question of restoring land seized from Germany, Romania, Finland and Poland.

So, unless Mikhail Gorbachev makes some dramatic compromise — like joint rule of the Kuriles — relations between Moscow and Tokyo will probably remain as cold as a Siberian wind in November.