

**Paul B. Richardson, *At the Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia's National Identity*, University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu: 2018, 264 p., ISBN: 978-0-8248-7262-5**

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More than seven decades after the end of the Second World War, the status of the four southernmost Kuril Islands controlled by Russia, which Japan calls the Northern Territories located off the Japanese coast of Hokkaido, continues to pose as a roadblock towards an official peace treaty between Russia and Japan. Paul B. Richardson's book, *At the Edge of the Nation: The Southern Kurils and the Search for Russia's National Identity*, published by University of Hawai'i Press in 2018, is a recent addition to the literature exploring the linkages between borders, identity and territorial disputes. This book is a valuable contribution for those seeking to understand the Russian dimension of this long-standing territorial dispute with Japan, and the islands' significance in the struggle to define a new national identity for post-Soviet Russia.

This is an especially timely book given the latest attempt by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin to accelerate the bilateral territorial and peace treaty negotiations. Despite the early optimism and momentum following a meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN-Russia Summit on November 14, 2018, in Singapore, the two countries have yet to enter into concrete talks over the disputed islands. At this time of writing, the two sides were unable to reach a broad agreement over peace treaty negotiations when Abe and Putin met during the G20 meeting in Osaka in late June, as Abe had initially hoped for. Through this book, Richardson relates the numerous lost opportunities, mistimed overtures and mismatched intentions and expectations between the two sides in negotiations over the decades. While this book covers up to the 2015 period, what is detailed inside will appear somewhat familiar to those following the latest negotiation efforts between Putin and Abe.

According to the author, the book analyzes "how territory, borders and the ideas of 'national identity' and 'national' space are mutually constituted, interrelated, negotiated and contested." (p. 3) In this context, the author explores post-Soviet Russia's search for a new identity through the prism of Russian debates over the status of the Southern Kurils. Through the debates, he uncovers the competing ideas and conflicting agendas, where,

Russian national identity becomes refracted into a kaleidoscope of different ideas on the "nation" and "national" space. Each with divergent, competing and contradictory definitions and desires. (p. 3)

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Richardson's analytical skills and his ability to draw out the multi-layered complexities and nuances surrounding the debates over the status of the islands in relation to Russia's search for national identity is reflected across the nine chapters of the book. The book is divided into two parts according to the center-periphery framework which many scholars use to analyse Russia's domestic situation. His research focuses on the perspectives of leading politicians and public intellectuals at the center, followed by the perspectives of those at the periphery—namely, the regional elites and local island communities.

The context of his research is meticulously laid out across the first two chapters of the book. Chapter One provides his justification for research into this topic, together with an overview of his key findings. Chapter Two lays out in detail key concepts and definitions applied in subsequent chapters. Here, he discusses the construction of national identity, and explains the interaction between national interests and foreign policy. Then he details the concepts and definitions associated with the term "hyperborder" and how it applies in his own research on the extreme periphery of the state with the residents of the Southern Kurils. In order to let readers understand the evolving status of the Southern Kurils in the context of Russia's center-periphery relations, the author included a section detailing Putin's assertion of federal authority over Russia's governors and republic presidents after coming to power. This chapter ends with a section on the origin and history of the Southern Kurils dispute. The emphasis here is on the interaction between Japan and the Soviet Union during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, up to December 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved and with the coming into being of the Russian Federation.

Chapters Three to Five provide three perspectives on the debate regarding the status of the Southern Kurils among different groups of elites, which Richardson refers to as *liberal institutionalists*, *territorial imperativists* and *pragmatic patriots*. Each have their own thinking on the utility of these islands in the context of Russia's national identity and interests. Chapter Three covers the perspectives of the *liberal institutionalists*, who believe in "returning" the Southern Kurils as a way for post-Soviet Russia to overcome the "imperial syndrome" of the past. Chapter Four describes the position of *territorial imperatives*, who represent a broad coalition including "democrats" and "reformers" alongside disenfranchised communists, military elites and elements of the far right. This group's belief that Russia's territories are unnegotiable as national territory is linked to security, stability and even the viability of Russia.

Chapter Five details the *pragmatic patriots* who represent those who would consider a concession of territory under certain limited circumstances as a means to secure Russia's future status as a Great Power. Some members of this group support the idea of forging a strategic and geopolitical partnership with Japan, and to use Japanese investment to counter the growing influence of China. Richardson describes this as a "mixed-identity coalition" with the most significant member being Putin himself. This is because of how the members of this group co-opt and fuse ideas and competing beliefs of the other two groups.

The prospects for oil and gas cooperation between Japan and Russia is also covered in Chapter Five. Japan is actively seeking to diversify from Middle Eastern oil and gas and has been interested in Russian resources for many years. In 2013, there were talks between Abe and Putin on establishing a

Russia-Japanese investment platform to develop Siberian gas fields. Unfortunately, this momentum deflated soon after, as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. This development complicated Japan's efforts to engage Russia due to sanctions initiated by the West.

Chapters Six to and Eight cover the attitudes of both the regional elites in the Russian Far East, and the local communities from the Southern Kurils. In Chapter Six, Richardson asks "how and why political and intellectual elites in the region went about constructing a symbolic image of the Kurils as 'the edge of the nation,' and the wider resonance of these debates in public opinion." (p. 94) It appears that the people in the Far Eastern periphery possess a strong regional sense of belonging, along with embedded anxieties in being part of the frontier. According to Richardson, this explains the significance of the Southern Kurils islands to the Far Eastern region's identity and its symbolic and irredentist "over-representation," particularly in the Sakhalin region.

Chapter Seven focuses on the locals on the Southern Kurils and the "hyperborder," a blurred, non-static ideational boundary which transcends "traditional understanding of state border and state sovereignty." (p. 18) Richardson's conceptual explanation of the hyperborder in Chapter Two is instrumental in helping readers make sense of the lives and activities of affected individuals and communities depicted in this chapter. He explains that,

[t]hrough the hyperborder can be exposed the dynamic, ephemeral, and contradictory nature of bordering practices, as well as the various forms of power-economic, political, and social—that are instrumental in both constituting sovereignty and "persuading people of their identity. (p. 18)

In this chapter, we learn that the islands have been regarded as a remote and backward edge of Russia since the 1990s. They are populated by a small marginalized community with material needs and a strong pragmatic desire for a better life. Here the author describes how local interactions with Japan led to the creation of a hyperborder which became a locale outside of Russian "national space." In this case, Richardson explains how the interstate border of the two countries "dematerialized" as a result of legal and illegal economic contacts, and growing interaction between the island population and Japan. (p. 141) This hyperborder created and revealed the ambiguous and divided loyalties of the local islanders between Russia and Japan, especially during the 1990s when the economic and social situation on these islands reached an acute stage.

Chapter Eight focuses on the revitalisation programs for the Kurils from 2001 onwards under the leadership of Putin. By 2006, the Southern Kurils had become the most subsidized region per head in Russia. Through these efforts, Putin managed to reassert the Southern Kurils' status as part of Russia's national space and as a secured border. Dmitry Medvedev's visits to the islands in 2010 and in 2012 is testimony to the islands' significance to the center. However, questions remain about the long term sustainability of such federal development programs. The book concludes with Chapter Nine which succinctly summaries the earlier chapters.

Through this book, Richardson has provided a nuanced and compelling account demonstrating the instrumental relationship between territory and national identity. He reminds us that the process of

constructing a “national identity” is never complete, and that it will continuously be reconstituted and challenged. (p. 11) On the issue of territory, a key observation resonating with this reviewer is Richardson’s remark early in the first chapter on how territory is “invoked as a shorthand to identify the *true* [sic] meaning of a nation” and “often used to conceal wider strategic, economic, and political interests,” as well as to justify and legitimise the actions and behaviour performed, “in the name of the self-interest of individuals and institutions.” (p. 3) This explains why attempts at settling territorial disputes across the world are usually protracted even with goodwill and best efforts—because there are many spoilers with vested interests who can disrupt the negotiation process.

Since the end of the Second World War, there have been numerous attempts at settling the Southern Kurils islands dispute. Today, it remains unclear if this protracted territorial dispute can ever be resolved. However, to end on a positive note, both Russia and Japan have indicated their willingness to improve relations. In a joint statement issued following a meeting between Putin and Abe in April 2013, both leaders agreed that the absence of a peace treaty between Russia and Japan is an abnormal situation. It should be pointed out that while this dispute is a serious obstacle to improved official relations between contemporary Russia and Japan, it is at least not a flashpoint between the two countries. In this regard, credit should be given to the leaders of modern Russia and Japan for their willingness to engage in dialogue and contribute to the peaceful resolution on this thorny issue.