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Streltsov, D. (ed.). *Japan's Historical Disputes with Neighboring States. Russian Perspectives.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2025.

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As the importance of Japan's increasingly proactive foreign policy and its solid footprint as "liminal" status quo power keep growing in an increasingly non-Western-centric international order, the structural elements of Japan's immediate neighborhood – Northeast Asia – attract close attention. Japan's position in post-war Asia was largely shaped by the "San Francisco system," yet, as is the case with many post-conflict settlements, certain bilateral issues either remained unresolved or achieved only a partial reconciliation, whereas their interpretations in national historiographies kept diverging despite attempts to develop

shared multilateral narratives. While certain bilateral territorial disputes are considered “flashpoints” and regularly make it to the news headlines, their historical undercurrent and “skeletons in the closet” linger in the background. Extrapolating Maruyama Masao’s characterization of the Tokugawa rule as the “congealed state of civil war” onto contemporary Northeast Asian politics, one might wonder if grievances related to the disputes that remained unresolved in the “San Francisco system” harbor the potential of contributing to further conflict in contemporary East Asia, especially if compounded by resurgent nationalism, tensions in the region, and a permissive environment.

Japan’s Historical Disputes with Neighboring States, edited by Dmitry V. Streltsov, with chapters authored by several Russia-based researchers makes a robust contribution to the field, as it examines a wide array of contentious matters focusing on the historical memory of the 20th century, identity, and various resulting disputes between Japan and its regional neighbors: China, Taiwan, the two Koreas, and Russia. At the same time, the book’s another important contribution is that its authors reflect both on the policy-relevant disputes that often gain immediate media scrutiny and on those issues of the historical past that garner less spotlight but are of no less importance to Japan’s bilateral relations in terms of substance. The scope of the volume includes the issues of colonial and wartime legacies, the effect of historical memory narratives on attitudes and identities, and the implications of those underlying problems for diplomacy. The book also addresses the reverse effects, including distorting ones, made by evolving policies and diplomatic strategies on the perceptions of historical past, ranging from “apology diplomacy” to “diplomacy of complaints” and a variety of options in between. The narratives of aggression and victimhood, including the discourses treating ordinary Japanese people as victims of war, and the context of those discourses, are closely explored in several chapters throughout the volume.

The book’s academic contribution is particularly valuable as it uses an extensive array of primary and secondary sources in the

Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, English, and Russian languages. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate a notable pluralism of Russian perspectives in terms of disciplinary boundaries, conceptual approaches, and diverse critical evaluations.

In the introduction, D. Streltsov focuses on mutual perceptions and attitudes, which allows for comparing and contrasting the perspectives in each country, as those shape the interpretation of historical grievances as well as their use in political expediency of different post-war and post-Cold War periods. Streltsov stresses that the book's scope concerns not so much the empirical description of the underlying issues, but their assessment in various countries and how the attitudes and perceptions toward the issues become refracted, instrumentalized, and sometimes distorted in changing politics, domestic and international, and in their accompanying narratives.

The first chapter, authored by Sergey V. Grishachev, sets the region-wide conceptual scene by addressing the ideational aspects of national identity in East Asian states and retracing their origins and periodization. Grishachev draws upon constructivist approaches, including Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, to contextualize the issues of historical memory within the making of identities in modern and contemporary East Asia. The chapter elucidates the paradoxes of historical shifts in attitudes toward Japan's war-time aggression in PRC and South Korea throughout the postwar period. Tackling the cases where historical memory wars did not eventuate, Grishachev points to the instances of defusing tensions between the U.S. and Japan, Taiwan and Japan, and Russia and China, arguing that successful rapprochement contributed to reducing mutual accusations over historical grievances. The chapter then proceeds to the cases of Japan, PRC and South Korea. Grishachev points to the role of trans-war continuities in Japan's statehood as a contrast to post-war Germany's reforms and their impact on historical memory and analyzes the shifts from more conciliatory approaches to war memory in the region in the 1950s – 1960s towards more antagonistic ones from the 1980s and 1990s.

The second chapter, authored by Vladimir V. Nelidov, focuses on the evolution of the role of historical memory in Japan's foreign policy discourses in the Cold War era and the post-Cold War period. Nelidov points to the trans-war continuities in the Japanese political establishment, also contrasting those with the resolute changes in post-war Germany as well as with the broader context and differences in Japan's and Germany's wartime expansion. The chapter locates the origins of Japanese discourses related to historical memory in the Cold-War context of changing USSR-U.S. relations and changing U.S. policy vis-à-vis Japan. Nelidov's account then proceeds to tracing the evolution of official rhetoric covering landmark statements, such as those by Yasuhiro Nakasone, Tomiichi Murayama, and Shinzo Abe, as well as controversies such as the history textbook debates and the Tamogami affair. The chapter is instrumental in connecting the treatment of historical memory in foreign-policy discourses to domestic politics in Japan and the agendas of various policy constituencies, including conservative and progressive political forces, as well as NGOs and other organizations.

The following three chapters (three, four, and five) address Japan's bilateral relations with its Northeast Asian neighbors: China, Taiwan, North Korea, and South Korea. These chapters examine, on the one hand, the common issues of the historical past, such as the problem of "comfort women" and Cold-War legacies, while, on the other hand, contrasting how and why approaches vis-à-vis Japan differed in Beijing, Taipei, Seoul, and Pyongyang.

Chapter 3, authored by Polina V. Kulneva, hits one of the regional "nerves" – the Japan-China relationship – and draws on a quadrilingual base of sources in Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, English, and Russian to elucidate the impact of historical past on the bilateral agenda. Kulneva points to the crucial, albeit equivocal, role of bilateral economic ties in production and trade and how the changing power distribution resulting from China's rise can somewhat sideline the politicization of historical past. The chapter points to certain cautiously optimistic trends, such as growing human ties in various fields, such

as research and academia, and generational shift, as potential catalysts of softening mutual attitudes. At the same time, Kulneva warns that at present unresolved issues can still resurface and aggravate the bilateral relationship. The book was published before the latest deterioration of Japan-China ties in late 2025 – early 2026 over the Taiwan issue, but this deterioration served as a stark reminder of persisting tensions in the relationship.

In Chapter 4, Vera A. Perminova shows why, despite heavy colonial legacies and painful memories, Taiwan's "memory" of the colonial period is markedly different from the one that persists in the Korean peninsula. Given the book's focus on foreign policy and diplomatic history, this is particularly interesting due to the close alignment of Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei with the U.S. in the Cold War era, especially in the earlier decades, as well as at present. Perminova's chapter is structured using a periodization of main stages in the Japan-Taiwan post-war relationship and showing how successive leaders of different parties and evolving geopolitical context changed the profile of the "comfort women" issue and the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai Islands dispute.

Chapter 5, coauthored by Ilya V. Dyachkov and Dmitry Streltsov, covers the long-established stumbling blocks in Tokyo's relations with Seoul, such as the "comfort women" issue, the Takeshima/Dokdo Island dispute and the issue of compensations for wartime forced labor. The authors, drawing on sources in the Japanese, Korean, Russian, and English languages, examine the conflicting and evolving interpretations of the 1965 Japan-Korea treaty as regards its provisions on settlement and compensation for Japan's colonial rule. The chapter then proceeds to focus on each contentious matter one by one, before arriving at a section on North Korea's historical claims to Japan – a topic that gets significantly less coverage in the English-language literature – where the authors address the similarities and differences in Seoul's and Pyongyang's grievances regarding Japan in matters such as the "comfort women" and forced labor.

Chapter 6 by Dmitry Streltsov then provides a comprehensive analysis of the measures the Japanese authorities have attempted in their diplomacy to placate their East Asian neighbors. Here, Streltsov periodizes Japan's "apology diplomacy" vis-à-vis China, South Korea, and North Korea by focusing on the Cold War era, the post-Cold War era, and the current state of affairs. Going over terminological nuances and locating the evolution of apology rhetoric in the context of domestic politics in Japan and its neighboring countries, the chapter traces the chronology of landmark pronouncements, such as the Kono, Murayama, Koizumi, and Abe statements, and the less well-known documents in fine detail. Streltsov estimates the likelihood of fully restoring Japan's relations with its neighbors as low in the near future amid growing nationalism in Northeast Asia, while leaving some hope for the subsequent generational shift.

The final "trio" of chapters (seven, eight, and nine) deal with various aspects of historical past in the Russia-Japan relationship: mutual images and shadows of the past in both countries' socio-political discourses, Japanese colonial presence in South Sakhalin in 1905–1945, and the Japanese prisoners of war in the USSR.

In Chapter 7, Streltsov argues that, on balance, Russia and Japan have had an inimical relationship for most of the history of their bilateral ties, where "low points," such as the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan's military intervention in the Russian Far East (1918–1922), and the tense interwar period outweighed the periods of conditional warming: a rapprochement up to a quasi-alliance in 1909–1916, the neutrality pact era of 1941–1945, and the 1956–1960 aftermath of the 1956 Joint Declaration. Here, Streltsov points to how, despite the ideological constraints of the Cold War era and the presence of the island dispute, Japan's economic success and culture attracted positive interest in the USSR. Although the territorial issue persisted, both USSR and especially post-Soviet Russia displayed notable differences from Japan's East Asian neighbors in their rhetoric vis-à-vis Tokyo: for a long time, official Moscow refrained from antagonism and sought to maintain neutrality on the thorny issues of historical past that remain

unresolved between Japan and its East Asian neighbors. This approach started changing from 2014 amid increasing confrontation between Russia and the West – Moscow’s critical rhetoric of Tokyo in relation to the historical past became more frequent, according to the chapter. Streltsov argues that these trends are unlikely to result from some deliberate ideological campaign targeting Japan – instead, he finds, they reflected the general atmosphere in Russia’s social and political life, as well as major shifts in Japanese attitudes towards Russia from 2022. The chapter concludes that the main difference in Japan’s and Russia’s positions on historical past is due to their diverging assessments of the results of World War II. Streltsov stresses that Russia and Japan are also different in terms of how different domestic politics and institutions connect real politics with public sentiment (more directly in Japan and indirectly in Russia), but are similar in that in both countries the school system of teaching national history contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices. The chapter warns the ruling elites against falling prey to populist stereotypes and their distorting impact.

Chapter 8, by Sergey Grishachev, goes on a deep dive into the history and legacy of the 1905–1945 Japanese administration on South Sakhalin – an area of Japan’s colonial presence that has largely been treated as marginal in the English-language scholarship. The analysis starts by expounding on the history of colonial development of this area by Japanese authorities between the Russo-Japanese War and the end of World War II, contextualizing the Karafuto Governorate, as it was known at that time, in the overall Japanese colonial empire and contrasting it with other regions of the empire. The chapter then examines the post-World War II transition of South Sakhalin under the Soviet control and the changing fates of the Japanese, Ainu, and Korean residents, as well as mixed Japanese-Korean families. Grishachev shows how despite the inevitably somber postwar undertones related to repatriation and resettlement, the history of Sakhalin is largely a “bright spot” in the Russo-Japanese relationship, where conflicts occurred in other regions, such as Manchuria, Mongolia, and the Russian Far East, while the island did not witness any major antagonism. The chapter’s

point on the successful preservation of the Karafuto memory in both countries reiterates the importance of human ties aside from state-level interactions.

The concluding Chapter 9 examines the detainment of Japanese prisoners of war in the USSR, delving into its legal, social, and humanitarian aspects. Written by Elena L. Katasonova, a leading authority on this matter, the chapter meticulously addresses the interpretations of the Soviet decision, including its origins in Japan, legal and terminological interpretations, tragic human consequences, usage in Soviet and Japanese diplomatic practices, and further attempts to address remaining grievances in the post-Cold War period. Drawing on an extensive body of Japanese, Soviet/Russian, and English-language sources, Katasonova provides a comprehensive and poignant critical account of how the POWs and their relatives faced the harsh realities of the Soviet forced labor system and subsequently struggled with having their rights recognized upon return to Japan, and how the issue has shaped the overall bilateral relationship between Moscow and Tokyo. Katasonova's contribution and tri-lingual bibliography is also particularly valuable because, although this topic was addressed in the Japanese and Russian scholarship, it has remained largely marginal in the English-language literature, receiving coverage in recent years (for instance, in Sherzod Muminov's 2022 monograph).

The book's focus on Japan and geographical scope of Northeast Asia inclusive of China, Taiwan, Russia, North and South Korea provide a valuable bird-eye view of the regional neighborhood and its shared historical past cutting across various dividing lines. As the authors and their diverse perspectives demonstrate, "shadows of the past" persist, while their employment in domestic and foreign policies contributes to amplifying renewed animosities between Japan and its neighbors. However, the volume's studious analyses show that those issues did not always result in an intractable conflict and both Japan and other Northeast Asian states showed genuine attempts at resolving legacy issues, thus creating precedents of conciliatory or neutral policies.

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