



There is an old observation about Russian strategic thinking: "Russians play chess. When they move pawns it doesn't mean that's what they are moving." The remark, made by a Moscow-based businessman discussing the difficulties of interpreting Russian behaviour, was intended as advice to Westerners not to take individual developments at face value. Whether or not the stereotype is fair, it is an appropriate warning when looking at Vladimir Putin's sudden appearance on the Kuril Islands.

Putin's visit to Iturup on 13 August was his first to the disputed Southern Kurils. Japan regards Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and the Habomai islets as its Northern Territories; Russia has controlled them since the final days of the Second World War. Tokyo immediately protested the visit, which came just two days before Japan's annual commemoration of the end of the Pacific War.

Taken on its own, this could be dismissed as familiar Russian signalling: a reminder to Japan that Moscow considers the territorial question closed. But the timing is more interesting. Putin was not simply visiting a remote island. He was visiting it as Russia's Pacific Fleet was conducting one of its largest exercises of the year, and after an unusually conspicuous period of Russian and Chinese naval activity around Japan.

The exercise began on 4 August and covers the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk and the north-western Pacific. According to the Russian Defence Ministry, it involves more than 13,000 personnel, approximately 60 warships, submarines and support vessels, and around 30 fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters and naval aviation unmanned systems. The stated purpose is to defend Russia's Far Eastern borders and to practise the integrated employment of precision weapons and new-generation military equipment.

That is a sizeable demonstration of force. More importantly, it is being conducted across a strategically coherent geographical area.

The Pacific bastion

The significance of the Kurils is not principally the islands themselves. It is the geography they control.

The volcanic chain stretches from Hokkaido towards Kamchatka, separating the Pacific from the Sea of Okhotsk. For Russia, the latter is strategically important because it provides a relatively protected operating environment for its Pacific Fleet's nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines. The Kuril chain, together with Russian air, naval and coastal-defence forces, therefore contributes to what can reasonably be described as a Pacific strategic bastion.

This is the Pacific equivalent, in broad conceptual terms, of the protected maritime spaces that Russia seeks to establish around its Northern Fleet's strategic submarine forces in the Barents and adjacent Arctic seas. The geography is different and the comparison should not be pushed too far. But the underlying logic is similar: control the approaches, make hostile access expensive and dangerous, and create depth behind which strategic forces can operate.

The Kurils are consequently much more than a territorial dispute left over from 1945. They are part of Russia's contemporary military architecture in the Far East.

That helps explain why Moscow has progressively strengthened its military infrastructure there. It also explains why Japanese concern is not simply historical. Russian military activity in and around the islands directly affects Japan's northern approaches and the maritime and air space around Hokkaido.

The exercise matters more than the visit

It may therefore be a mistake to regard Putin's visit as the principal event and the exercise as background.

The exercise is the more substantial military signal.

Its geographical spread matters. The Sea of Japan points towards Japan and the Korean Peninsula; the Sea of Okhotsk towards the Russian strategic bastion; and the north-western Pacific towards the wider approaches through which US and allied naval and air forces would have to operate in any major regional contingency.

The stated emphasis on the integrated employment of precision weapons and modern military systems is also worth noting. This is not merely a naval parade. It is an exercise in the combined use of maritime, air and missile capabilities across a large theatre.

Nor is this occurring in isolation. In late July, Russian and Chinese warships completed a more than two-week joint patrol which took them through important waters around Japan. The ships were reported operating south of Hokkaido, and the patrol subsequently returned to Vladivostok.

That does not prove a coordinated Russian-Chinese operational plan. It would be premature to suggest one. But it does mean that Japan is currently having to watch Russian and Chinese naval activity from different directions at the same time.

Why Iturup, why now?

Putin's decision to visit Iturup during the exercise adds political weight to the military activity.

The message to Japan is straightforward: Russia regards the Southern Kurils as sovereign Russian territory and is prepared to demonstrate that sovereignty physically and publicly. The choice of date makes the symbolism particularly sharp.

But there may be another audience.

Putin's visit coincides with a period in which Japan is becoming more explicit about its defence posture and its security relationship with the United States. Tokyo's response was correspondingly robust: Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi called the visit "absolutely unacceptable", while the Russian ambassador was summoned.

The Kremlin therefore achieves something at relatively little cost. It reinforces Russian sovereignty claims, reminds Japan of the military presence on its northern doorstep, and forces Tokyo to devote political and military attention to the north.

This is where the chess analogy becomes useful — not because Putin necessarily has some elaborate sequence of moves mapped out many years ahead, but because the value of a move can lie in the options it creates and the choices it imposes on the opponent.

A Russian exercise does not have to be preparation for an attack on Japan to have strategic utility. It is enough that Japan has to consider the possibility.

A developing dilemma

That distinction matters particularly at present.

The United States and its allies are already operating in an unusually demanding strategic environment. Washington has been forced to consume substantial quantities of air-defence interceptors and precision weapons during the war with Iran, on top of continuing support for Ukraine. Reuters reported this month that approximately 65 per cent of the US Patriot interceptor stock had been used between February and July, leaving fewer than 850 interceptors.

The significance for the Pacific is obvious even without assuming that Russia intends to create

a diversion.

The United States does not have to believe that Russia is about to attack Japan. It has to be sufficiently uncertain about Russian intentions that it cannot simply disregard the Russian Pacific Fleet.

That creates a strategic problem of allocation.

Japanese and US planners must consider the defence of Japan's northern approaches, the Kurils, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Korean Peninsula and the wider north-west Pacific at the same time as they are contemplating the possibility of a crisis around Taiwan and managing other global commitments.

Russia therefore gains something simply by making the Pacific a more complicated problem.

And the geography is particularly useful. The Kuril chain sits between Japan and the Russian Pacific Fleet's principal strategic bastion. Russian forces operating there can threaten maritime approaches without requiring Moscow to initiate an overt confrontation with Japan.

This is deterrence by complication.

A warning rather than a prediction

None of this means that Russia is preparing to attack Japan, or that Moscow and Beijing have agreed some grand scheme to distract the United States from Europe.

There is insufficient evidence for either proposition.

Nor should the exercise itself be exaggerated. Russia's Pacific Fleet is not the Soviet Pacific Fleet of the Cold War. Its available forces are constrained, as is the rest of the Russian military, by the demands of the war in Ukraine. A large exercise is therefore not necessarily evidence of an imminent operation.

But it would be equally unwise to regard the activity as routine.

The combination of a major Pacific Fleet exercise, activity extending across the Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk and north-western Pacific, a recent Russian-Chinese naval patrol around Japan, and Putin's first personal visit to the disputed Kurils represents a pattern worth watching.

The important question is not simply what Russia might do next.

It is what Russia's moves require Japan and the United States to do.

That is the essence of the strategic problem. A chess player does not necessarily win by attacking the king immediately. Sometimes the purpose of a move is to force the opponent to reposition pieces, consume time and reveal intentions.

Russia's Pacific bastion gives Moscow a particularly useful set of pieces with which to do that.

For the moment, Iturup is therefore best understood not as the opening of a new Russian-Japanese confrontation, but as a signal from a strategically important corner of the board.

It is a signal that Russia remains capable of generating military dilemmas far beyond the European theatre — and that the Pacific, after several years in which European attention has understandably been concentrated on Ukraine and the High North, may deserve

rather more attention than it has recently received.