

## *Background*

# *The borders of Russia are still uncertain*

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Russia – as the biggest state on Earth in terms of territory – has border disputes since the long gone days of the tsars. The Russian intentions in world politics and its presence in Europe and Asia are sometimes accompanied by grave incidents.

It has been two years, since Russia and China agreed on their common borders. They agreed on that the disputed territories on their 4,300 kilometers long common borderline will be divided equally between the two countries. However, this region still suffers from some unsettled issues. During the World War II, the Soviets occupied the previously Japanese Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and Habomai Islands, that are now part of the Kuril Islands dispute.

Japan – even after six decades – refuses to revoke its claims from the islands; on the other hand, currently the islands are under Russian administration.

Besides China, the Russian leadership also agreed with Kazakhstan. In November 2005, a border agreement was signed, and the demarcation process is still taking place. A sign of good relations is, that one of the world's oldest and biggest space center – Baikonur in Kazakhstan – is being leased by Russia until 2050. In addition to that, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and the Russian leadership also agreed upon the equal partition of the Caspian Sea.

In the Caucasus, Russia's main disputant is Georgia. The disputed territories in Georgia and Abkhazia are being oversaw by observers from the OSCE. In its relations with Ukraine, Russia's positions are somewhat better, as their land borders have already been marked precisely, but in such territories as the Strait of Kerch and the borderline running across the

Sea of Azov, the solution – acceptable for both sides – still remains elusive, in spite of the fact that there was a framework convention signed by both states four years ago.

In Eastern Europe, Russia's borders with the Baltic states are subjects to constant disputes between the states concerned. In 2005 Russia revoked its previously acquiescent statement on the marking process of the Estonian and Latvian borderlines. This was a reaction to the unilateral statements of the mentioned states, in which they referred to loss of territory as a result of the Soviet occupation. The region's only agreement was signed between Lithuania and Russia, concerning their naval borders, in 2003. In addition to that, Lithuania facilitated the transition of Russian citizens between the exclave of Kaliningrad and the main territories of Russia.

The situation with Finland is however, a little more undisputed. There are some groups in Finland, who would be glad to regain the territories lost to the Soviet Union – Karelia and other territories – after the Second World War, but the Finnish government has no official current territorial claims towards Russia.

Nearing the North Pole on the other hand, relations also become frosty again, this time with Norway. The concerned states are still not done with the demarcation of the borderlines over the Barents Sea. Another problem lies between them with the Russian fishing rights around the Svalbard Isles, which are part of Norway.

The most particular dispute however, is with the former Cold War opponent, the United States. Alaska, which was bought by the States in 1867 for 7 million dollars, with its 500,000 square kilometers territory and its rich sources of oil, gold and fish is still a matter of dispute between the two giant states. The inhabitants of Alaska celebrate Seward's Day every year, when they commemorate the date when the United States bought Alaska.

The only problem with that it is still unknown where the exact borderlines run. The only map, containing the exact borders of the transferred territory, was lost almost 150 years ago. The border dispute remained unattended for a long time after the map was gone, and the Cold War era made it impossible to settle this issue. Only recent years have brought a solution on this topic. The USSR-USA Maritime Boundary Agreement was signed by both sides; however the Russian Duma has not ratified it since its signature in 1990.

From the facts above, it is clearly visible, that the borders of Russia are far from being permanent. The country – with its once more rising role in world politics – demonstrates its

power in many places. This great power from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea would once more strengthen its influence, but in order to do that, it should make its borders clearly visible in the first place.

It is a relieving fact for Russia, that the demarcation of borderlines is a non-ending process. As long as history flows, borders will change, could change.

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