

## **Geopolitics and naming controversies: with specific focus on the sea between Korea and Japan**

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### **Abstract**

Although the geography of state power has been obviously represented in the use of toponyms, there are some differentiated dimensions of debates, according to whether the focus is given on territorial or naming issues and to who uses what name. Given the emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the sea area between Korea and Japan, the controversial issues of territory, economic zone and sea name should be resolved in any way. In consideration of the status quo of the arguments on the name East Sea/Sea of Japan, three possible solutions are repeated; agreeing on a new name, using dual names and separating sea areas and naming each of them. Any of these solutions should be preceded by the political decisions of the countries concerned.

Key words: East Sea, geopolitics, East Sea/Sea of Japan, toponymy, dual names

### **Geopolitics and Toponymy: Three Cases**

Geopolitics has risen to prominence as a term indicating ideas about the ordering, arrangement and division of the surface of the earth (Painter and Jeffrey, 2009). We are constantly engaging in geopolitics by ordering the world by the amount of wealth and subsequent political hegemony, by arranging states by the degree of political freedom, and by dividing countries by economic and political blocs. In this process, state competition and the geographical dimensions of state power has been emphasized.

The geographical dimensions of state power have been obviously represented in the use of toponyms. A geographical name has a diverse range of cultural, political and symbolic meanings beyond the name itself, which may have different connotation between adjacent regions or countries with long history of competition and conflicts under complex political situation. In this case, there emerges evident 'politics of toponymy' with some different dimensions. Let's look at three different cases.

The country name *Macedonia* (or *Makedonia*), opposed by Greece to the country in its north, is the case in which a naming dispute could lead to actual warfare. Greece argues that the name is covered by Greek copyright and claims of the South Yugoslavians to this name might in time lead to political demands towards Greece, and finally to military aggression (Kadmon, 2004). The Republic of Macedonia (or FYROM, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) might have the intention to extend this naming into *irredentism*, the movement of annexing lost territories on the grounds of common ethnicity or prior historical possession. But this contention is in nature focused on naming disputes, not much on territorial matters.

In comparison, the case of Senkaku Islands (*aka* Pinnacle Islands) located in the southern South China Sea is more concentrated on the aspect of territorial claims. Because the islands, although claimed by both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, are currently controlled and administered by Japan, the Japanese name *Senkaku-shoto*(尖閣諸島) may well be used as an endonym over a Chinese exonym *Daoyui-dao*(釣魚島). But there seem to be very few serious debates on the naming. This may be due to the fact that the countries concerned are sticking to the territorial disputes, not much to the name itself. The Chinese party could make use of much older history of its name, which dates back to the early fifteenth century, in its argument for territorial claims.

The name of the water between Iran and the Arabian peninsula provides another dimension of geopolitical ramification as a hydronym. When the older name *Persian Gulf*, which has a history of more than 2,500 years, was under dispute with the name *Arabian Gulf* in the 1960s, some map-makers showed the flexibility to adopt both names in their maps. Since the 1990s with the war in this area, the water has been also called by a third name *The Gulf* by journalists. This name is still in use by the US government, even though *Persian Gulf* is listed as the conventional name in the US official names database. This case implies that a hydronym has the flexibility to be labelled with more than one name form or, not preferably, with a new one by the third party. Provided that the water surrounded by a few countries is a geographical feature whose sovereignty is shared by them, the name forms used by each of the countries need to be respected.

There are diverse cases that the geopolitical situation is influencing or influenced

by the use toponyms in the area concerned. Of crucial importance is to understand the toponymic issues in the context of geopolitics and to try to find solutions to the problems which could bring maximum satisfaction to all the parties concerned. This is especially so for the case of the sea between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago.

### **Geopolitical Characteristics of the East Sea<sup>1)</sup>**

East Sea is a marginal sea of the Pacific Ocean which is surrounded by the northeastern part of the Asian Continent, the Korean peninsula, the Russian far east, the Sakhalin island, and the Japanese archipelago. Its area is 1,007,300km<sup>2</sup> with longest south-to-north and east-to-west distances of 1,700km and 1,100km, respectively. Its continental shelf is measured to be about 210,000km<sup>2</sup>.

The geopolitical importance of the East Sea begins with the fact that it is a marginal sea located in the East Asia. A marginal sea is a part of an ocean partially enclosed by peninsula, island or archipelago. Marginal seas, as mediterranean seas<sup>2)</sup>, generally have great geo-strategic importance in that when one of the countries in the region gains control of the sea, then it can also have dominance or strong power on the other countries adjacent to the sea.

Three geopolitical locational characteristics of the East Sea have been mentioned. First, East Sea is located at the forefront of the Eurasian rimland (Im, 1999, 207). In the Cold War era, from the end of the Second World War to the early 1990s, the communist heartland of Soviet Union, China and North Korea was facing the capitalist democratic rimland of Japan, South Korea and the United States at the location of the East Sea. In other words, East Sea played the role as a shield protecting against the heartland power.

Second, more attention has been paid to the geo-economic aspect of the East Sea area. In the era of global competition, there has been increasing trend of regional cooperation and this happens between the countries sharing one sea. It was already argued almost twenty years ago that the East Sea Rim, together with the Yellow Sea Rim, would be emerging as a development axis of the

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1) The name *East Sea* is used here to indicate the sea area between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. The dual naming of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan* would be a provisional solution until a consensus is reached between these countries on a single name.

2) The mediterranean sea is different from the marginal sea in that it is surrounded by lands.

Northeast Asia (Yu, 1993). From a broader perspective, this area occupies an important portion in the Pacific Rim which extends as far as to the North and South American countries (Im, 1999).

Third, East Sea is the meeting place of four state powers of South Korea, North Korea, Japan and Russia (Im, 1999, 209). In the past, these countries lied in the political or ideological confrontation with each other. Currently, this tension still continues, as shown in the territorial claims of Dokdo or delineation issue of exclusive economic zone or fishing zone between Korea and Japan and there is a perspective that the future evolution of the China-Japan bilateral relationship would have a profound and far-reaching impact on the overall environment in East Asia (Smith, 2009, 251).

The focus, however, has been transferring from the political to the economic issue. The land power and the sea power that have been confronting each other are merging together, transferring the former area of military conflict into a new era of economic cooperation (Yu, 1993, 315). In spite of recessive unstable factors, the benefit of regional economic cooperation is becoming more and more obvious and there are emerging visible signs of progressing for the Korea-Japan-China free trade agreement (Zhu, 2010). In the situation that there are high hurdles of political and economic factors to achieve cooperation between Northeast Asian countries, functional and localized economic zones, like East Sea rim, could be an accelerating engine for this move (Kim, 2010). There is tendency to extend the sea power for resource mining, fishing or initiatives of scientific research, mostly to secure the interests of each country. There is also possibility to open a seaway through the north pole, which would dramatically reduce transport cost from Asia to Europe.

### **Maritime Names and Controversies**

It is evaluated that toponyms of maritime features, such as seas, gulfs, bays or channels, are more prone or exposed to political controversies between countries. One of the main reasons would be the nature of maritime features. They are normally a complex combination of territorial waters, international waters or economic zones. They are sometimes transboundary or located beyond a single sovereignty.

What aggravates the situation would be the cases when country names are used for their names. Not all these cases cause controversies. Murphy(1999) classifies these names into three categories: 'high degree of contention' including *Sea of Japan* versus *East Sea*, *Persian Gulf* versus *Arabian Gulf* and *South China Sea* versus *Bien Dong*, 'moderate degree of contention' including *English Channel* versus *La Manche*, *Bay of Biscay* versus *Golfe de Gascogne*, and low degree of contention. He argues that very little controversy exists when one country occupies a significant part of the border, like *Norwegian Sea*, when the country has no hegemonic potential, like *Solomon Sea* or *Gulf of Mexico*, and when there are special geopolitical considerations at play that mitigate against controversy, like *Gulf of Finland* where Estonia has strong historic ethno-cultural and economic ties to Finland.

Then, why do controversies arise when naming after countries? Murphy(1999, 508-509) argues three potential factors. First, after the Second World War, the modern territorial state system became stabilized and emerged as a very important being. The territorial state has been given high privilege for analyzing most phenomena, and each nation became very sensitive to its own identity, and even to the place names when they were different from what they were using.

Second, there has been the force of nationalism operating as a powerful perceptual and functional divider between societies. Third, the controversies are reinforced when there is a history of political or economic hegemony or conflict in the region. In this situation, maritime names using one of the country names evoke the feeling of ownership or control of that country, which cannot be accepted by the other countries.

These arguments are strongly related to the shape and nature of the maritime features. Most of the cases of high or moderate contention are for marginal seas (East Sea, South China Sea, English Channel) or mediterranean seas (Persian Gulf). In their own nature, these maritime features are surrounded by a few countries, and the name after one of these countries could cause problems.

All these factors are applied to the case of East Sea. The four countries surrounding this sea became stabilized as nation states after the war. There has been growing nationalism from each side of the countries and, moreover, there has been a long history of political or economic hegemony and conflict in the region. It is a marginal sea surrounded by four countries. In this situation,

naming it after one of the country names would have high potential to evoke a serious contention.

### **Possible Solutions for the Name**

Seen from its geopolitical or geoeconomic location, the East Sea region including South and North Korea, Japan and Russia, has high potential to extend increasing common interests in both political and economic respects. In the situation that East Sea has great value in the expansion of political power in Northeast Asia (Im, 1992), naming it after one of the surrounding countries would be problematic. It could be interpreted as an attempt of Japan's *mare nostrum* (meaning 'our sea' in Latin) strategies. It would be prerequisite to resolve the naming issue before intensifying cooperative atmosphere among the countries in this region.

Several ways of resolving the problem have been suggested. I already summarized them into the following three methods (Choo, 2010b).

#### **1. Agreeing on a New Name**

This method is endorsed by the IHO technical resolution A4.2.6 and UNCSGN resolution III/20, which say that countries sharing a given geographical feature under different names should endeavor to reach agreement on fixing a single name. For the sea between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago, a few new names have been suggested, such as *Blue Sea*, *Sea of Peace*, *Far East Sea*, and *Sea of Whales*.

It seems not to be easy, however, to adopt a third name, because it would ignore the historical tradition of current names and, therefore, it would be not easy to draw consensus from each party concerned. There are some cases of using new names, such as *The Gulf* for *Persian Gulf/Arabian Gulf* and *Der Kanal* for *English Channel/La Manche*. But these are all created by map-makers and journalists with specific motivations, not standardized internationally.

#### **2. Using Dual Names**

Adopting dual names for one feature is also acknowledged by the IHO and UN resolutions mentioned above. In conformity to these resolutions, the single name

*English Channel* has become to be accompanied by *La Manche* in the draft of IHO's S-23 (2002), *Dover Strait* by *Pas de Calais* and *Bay of Biscay* by *Golfe de Gascogne*.

In respect to dual naming, Japan argues that the resolutions do not apply to the case of the sea between Korea and Japan, and that using two names would cause confusion to the navigators of the sea area. Korea, on the contrary, points out that in the situation where about 300,000 Korean ships sailing the sea area each year use the name *East Sea* to describe it, the sole use of the name *Sea of Japan* would cause confusion.

A specific method of dual naming will be using dual endonyms, *Donghae* and *Nihonkai* (or *Nipponkai*) rather than *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*. This method seems to have two advantages. One is that these names are faithful to the principle of using endonyms which are the names in the language occurring in this area, Korean and Japanese. The other advantage is that these names could hide the literal meanings of each name which might cause unacceptable feelings when using *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*. I evaluate that it could be a good starting point to discuss the ways of resolving controversies surrounding this sea name.

### **3. Separating Sea Areas and Naming Each of Them**

Another possible way of resolving the controversy would be to separate waters into a few segments and give separate names to each segment (Choo, 2009). In case of the sea between Korea and Japan, if we could divide it into three segments according to the territoriality, we could give separate names; *East Sea* to the Korean territorial waters, *Sea of Japan* to the Japanese territorial waters, and either *East Sea* or *Sea of Japan*, a new name, or both names to the international waters. If the boundary of exclusive economic zone (EEZ) can be accepted as a jurisdictional boundary, then more simply *East Sea* for the Korean EEZ and *Sea of Japan* for the Japanese EEZ may be used.

This way of solution could reduce an unnecessary unhappy response from one of the neighboring countries when calling the whole body of water with one name. Korean readers feel inconvenient when they see newspaper articles which name the Korean territorial water as 'Sea of Japan.'

But this way of separating waters and giving separate names cannot be accommodated in small-scale maps. Moreover, there is a consistent view that maritime features should be perceived and named as a whole, not be separated (Woodman, 2009; Jordan, 2009), even though different views exist on the status of the name, endonym, exonym or any third terminology (Choo, 2009). This view even objects to adopting territorial boundary or sovereignty limit in naming geographical features.

### **Concluding Remarks**

East Sea is the meeting place of political and economic powers of four countries. In the past, they were confronted with each other, mainly centered on political or ideological interests. But now, more emphasis is placed on the respects of economic cooperation in the era of global competition. This focus on regional cooperation has been realized as the form of increasing trade and investment, emerging development axis passing through the countries concerned, but also as the provision of institutional framework to facilitate the flow of money and people.

In this era of emerging regional cooperation, the controversy surrounding the name of the sea located at the center of this region should be resolved in any way. I summarize the suggestions to resolve this problem into three methods: agreeing on a new name, using dual names of East Sea and Sea of Japan, and separating sea areas and naming each of them. I evaluate that using dual names or dual endonyms, Donghae and Nihonkai, would be the most practical and realistic way for the time being until a consensus on a single name is made between the countries concerned.

It would not be easy, however, to agree on a single name, either an existing or a new one. This is the reason why more explicit recognition should be given to the fundamentally political nature of the East Sea naming issue (Abler, 2006; Choo, 2007a). Any major change in current naming practices would occur only as a result of political decisions by Japan, so it is necessary to investigate in detail what is going on in the Japanese politics, how political decisions are structured, and what would be possible forces to influence its political structure. In this context, another track of future research should be oriented towards the interdisciplinary research of history and politics of Northeast Asia, and social psychology and sociology on national political cultures.

In addition, it is expected that every party concerned participates in the multilateral or bilateral talks with open mind to listen carefully to every argument and counter-argument. In some time after a series of debates, it is also expected, a decisive action should be taken. For some political decisions to be made, some kinds of exit strategies should also be prepared.

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## 명칭 분쟁에 관한 지정학적 접근: 동해를 중심으로

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### 요 약

국가권력의 지리적 요소가 지명의 제정과 사용에 구현되어 나타나는 것은 필연적인 일이다. 그러나 그 초점이 영토에 주어지는지 아니면 지명 자체에 맞추어지는지, 그리고 누가 어떤 지명을 사용하는지에 의해 다양한 차원의 논쟁이 진행되고 있다. 동해 수역의 지정학적, 지경학적 중요성 부각에 비추어볼 때 이 지역의 영토, 경제 수역, 그리고 표기를 둘러싼 문제는 어떤 형태로든 해결되어야 한다. 현재 동해/일본해 표기에 관한 양측의 주장을 고려할 때 세 가지의 해결방법이 가능하다. 새로운 제3의 이름에 합의하는 것, 두 개의 이름을 동시에 사용하는 것, 바다를 분리하여 분리된 바다에 각각의 이름을 부여하는 것이 그것이다. 그러나 어떤 해결이라도 각국의 정치적 결단이 없이는 불가능하다는 점을 고려해야 한다.

주요어: 동해, 지정학, 동해/일본해, 지명학, 병기