

Sea Naming Issues from the Perspective of Korea-Japan Relations and Peace in East Asia

Andrey KOVSH*

East Sea naming controversy for centuries, Republic of Korea and Japan have used different names to refer to the sea that lies between the main islands of the mainland Asia and Japanese archipelago. Republic of Korea (and as well North Korea) refers to these waters as the “*East Sea*” while Japan refers to them as the “*Sea of Japan*”. For many Koreans, the predominant use of “*Sea of Japan*” is a legacy of the period when Korea was under Japanese rule, because a number of key decisions about the world’s geographic names were made during the first half of the XXth century.

In recent years, the South Korean government appears to have been broadening its appeal to atlas publishers. The government states that there is a “steady increase” in maps using both names. From the other side, the Japanese government states that the name “*Sea of Japan*” is “overwhelmingly” used. And these statements grounded by historical records and documents. As many of Japanese historical records and geographical books reveal that the name “*Sea of Japan*” did not appear until the late XVIIIth century. Even Japanese scholars acknowledge the fact that it was Matteo Ricci who first used the name in 1602.

Moreover, there are a number of historical documents showing that the sea area was called the “*Sea of Joseon*” among the Japanese. Even official maps produced by the Japanese government during the XVIIIth and XIXth century refer to the sea as the “*Sea of Joseon*”. This refutes Japan’s argument that the Japanese simply adopted the name “*Sea of Japan*” because it was already predominantly used by Westerners in the late XVIIIth and early XIXth century.

Taking into consideration the complexity of the above-mentioned issue the third parties sometimes try to escape the straightforward statements as for this problem. For example, the United States, geographic place name policies for federal government

* Professor, Saint Petersburg State University, Russia

agencies are set forth by the Board on Geographic Names (BGN), pursuant to P.L. 80-242. The BGN's policy is that "a single conventional name, if one exists, will be chosen as the standard name" for seas and oceans. The BGN decides on what constitutes a "conventional name" by consulting various print and online geographic references to determine which name is "under widespread and current usage."¹⁾

Reaching an agreement on a common name for a sea adjacent to several countries is obviously a difficult and sensitive task, since the name of the sea reflects the culture, history, and identity of the people living nearby. Especially taking into consideration fact that relations between two countries continued to worsen in late 2013 and early 2014. Furthermore, the Republic of Korea – Japan frictions could lead to unpredictable consequences.

¹⁾ United States Board on Geographic Names Foreign Names Committee, "Statement Regarding the US Board on Geographic Names' Decision on the Name 'Sea of Japan,'" approved by e-mail vote March 29, 2013. 18.