

Achieving the Impossible? :

The Status Quo of the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* Issue and Possible Way Forward

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Recent occurrences of debates and movements with regards to the East Sea/Sea of Japan naming issue re-confirm that there are groups of actors in this naming game with diverse interests and perspectives. Governments, as the main actor of the game, try to persuade other actors with tracks of arguments and counter-arguments. Given the parallel realities going forward without meeting each other, there could be some options for agreement suggested other than two extremes of the Korean and Japanese positions; looking for alternative methods of showing two names; listing all the names in one map as a table; distinguishing international from domestic use of the name and agreeing on a new name for international use. It is suggested that the next focus should be placed on the meanings of 'human' and its applicability to such elements as value, justice, perception or cultural heritage. The relevance of this focus is confirmed in the recent adoption of dual naming in a US state, people's deep emotional tie to a feature and its name, and growing emphasis on geographical names as having higher value as intangible cultural heritage.

1. Three prolonged debates and one success story

1) SCENE #1: Monaco, October 2014

The matter of how to proceed with the publication of a new edition of the IHO Special Publication S-23 *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, which had been stagnating since the previous conference in 2012, was tabled and discussed again at the 5th Extraordinary International Hydrographic Conference. Different views were expressed regarding its revision; arguments for seeking a new way forward to issue a revised version, supported by the logic of its necessity among member states; arguments against discussing the matter at the current conference, due to the resource constraints of the current work program. Discussion of this issue has been postponed until the next conference.

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2) SCENE #2: Washington DC, June 2014

A workshop was held at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, on the naming of *East Sea/Sea of Japan* by the U.S.-Korea Institute and the Society for East Sea. After presentations and designated discussions on how to understand the issue and how to solve the problem, a diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan stated that *Sea of Japan* was the only internationally established name, not imposed by Japan onto the international community and, therefore, should remain without any change. Responses were extended by the presenters and discussants, doubting that *Sea of Japan* could be regarded as an “internationally established name,” given that no definition of it was attempted by the academics of toponymy and there were other names used with equal weight. It was also noted that in US history or geography classes, students reached a conclusion that dual naming would be the solution to this sea area.

3) SCENE #3: New York, May 2014

Delegates of the Republic of Korea presented a series of working papers at the 28th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, held in UN Headquarter New York. After the presentation of the last paper on the International Seminar on Sea Names 2013, a diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan stated that *Sea of Japan* was the only internationally established name, not imposed by Japan onto the international community and, therefore, should remain without any change. The presenter responded that this paper was just reporting an ‘academic’ international forum which accommodated diversified perspectives on sea names, and emphasized that the statement would be out of context of the agenda item.

4) SCENE #4: Richmond, Virginia, March 2014

The Virginia General Assembly finally passed House Bill No.11, which had been already reviewed as Senate Bill No.2, by an overwhelming majority of votes. The bill requires that all textbooks approved by the Board of Education in Virginia, when referring to the *Sea of Japan*, shall note that it is also referred to as the *East Sea*. A number of Korean Americans were sitting in the audience and imposing silent pressure. The

bill was later signed by the Governor of Virginia and began to be effective as of July 2014. Korean Americans and various media houses in Korea call it as “*East Sea* Dual-naming Bill.”

2. Actors of the game

As seen in the recent occurrences of debates and movements, naming is a kind of game where groups of actors with different interests and perspectives participate; international organizations, governments, either concerned or third party, commercial map makers, map users including media houses, and even nationals of countries concerned. The game becomes more complicated when powers are involved with regards to politics of representation. Berg and Kearns (2009, 19) states that naming is a form of *norming* in that the naming of places is a key component in the relationship between *place* and *politics of identity* (italics by authors).

Inter-governmental organizations have been places where governments extend their arguments for or against a specific geographical name to be considered. With regards to the sea naming issue between Korea and Japan, the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) has been the main forum due to its publication of so-called S-23, *Limits of Oceans and Seas*. Since its third edition in 1953, where the sea was written as *Japan Sea*, there have been several attempts to publish a revised edition, but without success. Such methods as dual naming, i.e. *Japan/East Sea*, or as printing blank pages for the sea area in question were suggested or even circulated to vote, but no result was obtained. The IHO operated a working group to publish a revised version of S-23 for three years before the 18th Conference in 2012, but unfortunately failed to draw an agreed version, mainly due to the issue of naming the sea area between Korea and Japan.

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), together with its hierarchically higher body United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), stands out of direct concern of controversial names because it is an international forum normally to share experiences and discuss principles of national standardization of geographical names and international cooperation concerning names. However, the sea naming issue was raised at these meetings under the agenda item “features common to two or more nations” or at the reporting of IHO as

one of the liaison officers and international organizations. After debates of one or two rounds, the conclusion remained the same all the time; “encouraging the countries concerned to continue their efforts to find a solution acceptable to all of them.”

Government activities go beyond the multi-lateral settings and approach to individual third party governments, normally to names authorities, and commercial map makers and users, sometimes in the form of *démarche*. Some names authorities stand firm enough to adhere to their naming principle. e.g. “one feature, one name” or “adopting the most conventional name in their language,” while others become positive in considering arguments from other name users and take a more balanced position in the naming, e.g. adopting dual names.

Map makers in the private sector comprise another important group to be persuaded, together with map users, e.g. newspaper and broadcasting companies, book and magazine publishers, etc. As these groups are liable to act according to the commercial motives, they could possess high probability of adopting a balanced position, not skewed to a specific one, when assured of the logics they face. As a matter of fact, the rate of using the name *East Sea* together with *Sea of Japan* has increased in recent years in commercial maps and atlases. There is always fragility, however, to turn back to the previous position, as found also in the case of some governmental names authorities.

3. Arguments

As summarized in the previous works, some tracks of arguments can be traced with regards to the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* issue (Choo, 2010; Choo, 2014).

One is the historical legitimacy or names origin argument. Japan argues that *Sea of Japan* has such a long history to appear in a western world map published in 1568. In the late 18th to early 19th centuries, the name began to be established by European explorers. In this process, Japan did not impose the name onto the cartographic world. Korea in response emphasizes that various names were used in western old maps, but none of them was established. The frequency of using *Sea of Japan* increased since the 1850s in parallel with Japan’s imperial growth and it was in 1929 when the first edition of IHO’s S-23 was published that the name began to be widely known. At that time, Korea could not make its voice heard under the Japanese colonial rule. Korean people have used the name *Donghae* for a much longer period and its translated form *East Sea* should be respected in the international society.

Secondly, debates are made surrounding the international practice argument. Japan insists that *Sea of Japan* has been recognized as the official name by international organizations and governments of major countries. Korea in response confirms that it will be an internal practice for such international organization as UN to use the most frequently used name, and this practice does not support a specific name. UN and IHO recognize the problem of its single use and recommend that Korea and Japan reach an agreement on a common name. In addition, many major map-makers of the world have begun to use *East Sea* simultaneously with *Sea of Japan*.

Thirdly, arguments are exchanged surrounding the IHO Technical Resolution 1/1972 (A4.2.6) and UNCSCGN Resolution III/20 which recommend that when countries sharing a given geographical feature fail to agree on a single name, the name used by each of the countries should be accepted. Korea insists that these resolutions be applied to the sea between Korea and Japan, for which both names should be used concurrently as an interim measure before agreeing on a common name. Japan in response argues that these resolutions presume that the geographical feature concerned is under the sovereignty of two or more countries, such as in cases of bay or strait, and do not apply to this case because the sea area in question is a part of the high seas. Korea further argues that falling within the definition of 'semi-enclosed sea' as stated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, it is a 'geographical feature' shared by 'two or more countries.'

What are these arguments for, when arguments of each party go parallel with each other and do not meet permanently? Experts of the world exposed to these arguments feel anxious whether extending heated arguments in international meetings by each side would be really helpful in solving the problem. Moreover, each party would be ever eager to strengthen its logic and develop new ones to support its position.

4. Options for agreement

Separately from the logics, it will be worthwhile to figure out a few options for agreement which could be feasible between countries concerned.

At one extreme, there is an option of using dual names of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*, namely the current position of the Korean government. A few methods of dual naming are suggested; using slash or parenthesis; writing in subsequent lines; locating re-

spective names in each side. Whatever the methods, Japan's current position seems not to accept this option. What could be expected, however, would be that Japan might have very few choices but to consider this option seriously when more countries endorse it as a reasonable solution and the name East Sea is more widely used in world maps and atlases.

At the other extreme, there is an option of using a single name of *Sea of Japan*, namely the current position of the Japanese government. But this will not be regarded as an option for agreement because much has already gone so far from its breakable status and Korea will not take it into consideration in any way.

Then, what options are lying in between? Three possibilities can be identified. The first two were suggested at the S-23 Working Group in a few years ago in the framework of S-23 publication.

Firstly, alternative methods of showing two names can be devised. As suggested by Australia at the S-23 Working Group, one name comes on the first page with a reservation by other country noted and the other name comes on the second page also with a reservation by other country noted. This method will have the benefit of showing alternative names without being burdened by dual naming on one page. Japan, in the similar context, made a proposal to continue using one name in the main map, while noting on the other name in an appendix or footnote, which could not be accepted by Korea due to its greater degree of subordination.

Secondly, there is a method of listing all the names in one map. As proposed by France, but regrettably withdrawn, all the endonyms and exonyms, either in local scripts as well as roman ones, English or French, can be provided for information in a table with multiple entries. Due to the page restriction, the sea area is to be noted as e.g. "See Table 7.6" and the table is to be inserted in an appropriate space.

Thirdly, another option for agreement would be to distinguish international from domestic use of the name. Titled as "contextual naming" by Woodman (2012), this option would give freedom in using *Donghae* and *Nihonkai* in Korean and Japanese scripts in domestic use, i.e. 동해 and 日本海, while agreeing on a new name to be used internationally. This method would be advantageous by its capacity of reducing unnecessary war of attrition regarding the name, frequently occurring in the international settings. It would not be easy to agree on a new name, or even to begin dialogue with this topic, but some suggested names might be noted, e.g. *Blue Sea*, *Sea of Peace*, *Sea of Whales*, *Sea of Harmony* or even *Sea of Resolution*. Smith (2011), an American

linguist and toponymist, suggests that in order to find a new name, poets and/or song-writers be asked to list twenty words each to describe or associate with this geographic feature and find the most overlapped shared values.

For the Korean side, it would be inevitable for the time being to take dual naming as the target and continue persuading governments and map-makers of the world. But it would be also worth noting what the third-party experts are suggesting. I believe the first two options are still valid and can be revived in the publication of a new edition of S-23. Even the third option, agreeing on a new standardized name for international use, can also be considered. What matters is, however, the feasibility of agreement or, in more correct words, the willingness of concerned parties to solve this problem and eliminate unnecessary tensions causing nuisance in international meetings.

5. Achieving the impossible? bringing human into the game

In the current situation, as seen at the beginning of this paper, it looks like “achieving the impossible” to solve the naming issue between Korea and Japan. It seems likely that each party concerned cannot stop strengthening its arguments and promoting them to the actors of geographical naming all over the world. Even if this ‘movement’ inevitably continues, it is hoped, all this process helps build identity of each side, not being a waste of resources.

Whatever the future of the East Sea/Sea of Japan issue might be, I believe that the next focus should be placed on the meanings of ‘human’ and its applicability to such elements as value, justice, perception, cultural heritage, identity, etc. This focus is to bring human into the game.

If we make a close investigation into the success of the Virginia case, the move of dual naming attracted high attention due to its clear focus on the “education value.” As it is important to keep the name *Sea of Japan* to Japanese people, it is equally important to cherish the name *East Sea* to Korean people. It is believed that on the occasions of education, among other things, it is strongly recommended to respect the renowned identity reflected in each geographical name. It turns into a matter of social justice, especially when associated with inhuman elements of the forceful Japanese colonial rule. In the practical sense, every student has the right to be informed of all the names, whether in dispute or not, in order to be prepared to work in the globalized world.

We can also turn back to one of the basic functions of geographical names - reflection of people's perception on the feature. Korean people's deepest emotional ties to the feature and subsequent unbreakable desire to keep their name could be a good answer to the question of why Koreans stick to the naming matter so strongly. According to a survey to 1,500 ordinary Korean people, most of them feel a certain kind of place identity with the sea; place of fisheries and related industries; place of travel and tourism, object of environmental conservation, place of resource value, etc. With regards to this identity, more than ninety percent of people think it important to use the name *Donghae*. Seventy-three percent of people are influenced in their emotional ties to the sea by the use of other names, e.g. *Sea of Japan*. Of course, those people who feel stronger emotional ties respond more sensitively to the need of using their name.

The task of bringing human into geographical naming is also recognized as being important and given high value among the works of the UNGEGN. Geographical names experts of the world began to pay attention to the elements of intangible cultural heritage included in geographical names and search for practical ways of preserving them from disappearing. UNGEGN recently extended the scope of a working group from dealing with indigenous, minority and regional language group geographical names to encompassing all the names with cultural heritage traces.

6. Breaking the stalemate

The sea naming issue between Korea and Japan is currently at a stalemate. Each side speaks loudly at international or inter-governmental conferences, but no solution or agreement is reached. Third-party countries remain spectators in fatigue.

This stalemate should be broken in any way by activating again the mechanism of dialogue between countries concerned. In order to achieve this goal, 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. While encouraging dialogue at the government level, expert groups of each country, i.e. academics, civil groups, journalists or any other opinion leaders, need to be encouraged to discuss this matter with each other.

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