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FEATURES BEYOND A SINGLE SOVEREIGNTY: FEATURES COMMON TO
TWO OR MORE NATIONS

How to name the Sea Area Between the Korean Peninsula
and the Japanese Archipelago

Paper submitted by the Republic of Korea

Historical Background

Historically, the sea area between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago has been referred to by various names. Before the 18th century, no single name had been consistently used to designate this body of water. Various names, including “East Sea,” “Sea of Korea,” “Sea of Japan” and “Oriental Sea” appeared on old maps and in publications.

From the early 18th century to the mid-19th century, however, “Sea of Korea” and “Sea of Japan” were the two names most frequently used by cartographers. It is worth noting that as late as 1870, even many Japanese maps referred to this body of water as the “Sea of Choson”, which literally means “Sea of Korea,” Choson being the ancient name for Korea.

When and why did the name “Sea of Japan” replace other names?

It was only after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 that the term “Sea of Japan” became the most prevalent term used by cartographers. This is because that war drastically influenced Western perceptions of East Asia in Japan’s favor.

In 1910, when Japan colonized the Korean Peninsula, the country of Korea itself was no longer designated on world maps. This led to the replacement of such names as the “Sea of Korea” and the “East Sea” with the “Sea of Japan”.

Thus, when the first edition of “Limits of Oceans and Seas” was published according to a decision made at the 1929 Monaco Conference of the International Hydrographic Organization (MO), there was no opposition to the use of the term “Sea of Japan” to designate the body of water in question. This book has been used ever since as an authoritative world reference for the designation of maritime features.

The Republic of Korea maintains that this inherently partial decision cannot be justified as it is wholly biased in favor of Japan and should therefore be rectified urgently.

In this regard, at the 15th International Hydrographic Conference held in Monaco in April 1997, the Republic of Korea requested that the name “East Sea” should be used in the new edition of “Limits of Oceans and Seas.” Consequently, it is expected that the 1999 edition will reflect this request

3. What should be the proper name? : “East Sea” instead of “Sea of Japan”

The Republic of Korea believes that the sea in question should have a neutral name, and not be named after any single country. Lying between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago, and extending north toward Russia, the body of water in question does not belong to any one of the encircling countries. Naming such a sea area after a particular country gives the false impression that it belongs to that country, leading to unnecessary discord among neighboring countries.

It is for this reason that the Republic of Korea, in opposing the name “Sea of Japan,” has proposed the term “East Sea” rather than the name “Sea of Korea”. Being a neutral term, the name “East Sea” implies no affiliation to a specific geographical area. Moreover, with the adjective “East”, it has the added advantage of perfectly fitting its geographical position in the far eastern part of the Asian continent, just as the North Sea draws its name from its position relative to the European continent.

4. Efforts by the Republic of Korea to restore the correct name

The Korean people have never accepted the name “Sea of Japan”. Since its liberation in 1945, the Republic of Korea has made consistent efforts to restore the correct name to the sea area in question.

This issue was formally taken up with Japan by the Korean Government during the negotiations on the 1965 Fisheries Agreement between the Republic of Korea and Japan. Korea proposed that the body of water be designated “East Sea”, while Japan insisted on the term “Sea of Japan”. Failing to agree on a common designation, the two countries did agree to use their own respective names in the original texts of the Agreement, i.e. “East Sea” in the Korean version and “Sea of Japan” in the Japanese version.

The Republic of Korea has made vigorous efforts to convince the international community of the validity of its arguments. For instance, the Republic of Korea brought this issue to the attention of the Member States of the United Nations at the Sixth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in 1992. At that time, it made a strong case to the international community seeking support for the use of the name “East Sea”. As a result, the Sixth Conference suggested that relevant parties consult with each other to resolve this issue. [See pp. 21-2, Vol. I Report of the Conference E/CONF 85/31

The Republic of Korea followed this suggestion and sought to engage Japan in a constructive dialogue to find a mutually acceptable solution. However, no progress has been achieved, since Japan refused to enter into serious discussion.

5. What does the Republic of Korea expect from the Seventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names?

Geographical names often have serious implications for a nation’s identity, culture, language and history. Thus, resolving this issue is not just a question of a change in name. It is rather a part of the efforts by the Korean people to redeem their past legacy and to redress the unfairness that has resulted from it.

Bilateral discussions between the Republic of Korea and Japan have stalled due to Japanese intransigence, and Japan does not appear likely to change its attitude in the

foreseeable future Under these circumstances, it is evident that, unless something is done by the international community, the name “Sea of Japan” will continue to prevail. The continuation of the status quo would only perpetuate injustices of the past and would not be acceptable to the Republic of Korea

The Republic of Korea, is therefore of the view that, as an interim measure pending a final agreement between the two countries on a common designation, the two names “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan” should be used simultaneously in all official documents, maps and atlases in accordance with a general rule of international cartography. This view is in line with the spirit of the recommendations adopted by the following two authoritative international organizations in the area of standardization of geographical names:

- 1) The IHO, in its resolution A.4.2,6 adopted on March 13, 1974, endorsed the principle of simultaneous recognition of different names for a shared geographical feature when the sharing countries do not agree on a common name. This principle was later reaffirmed by the Third UNCSGN held in Athens in 1977 in its resolution III/21, entitled “Maritime Features Names”
- 2) The Third UNCSGN went further in adopting resolution III/20, entitled “Names of Features beyond a Single Sovereignty”. This resolution recommends that, when countries sharing a given geographical feature do not agree on a common name, it should be a general rule of cartography to recognize the names used by each of the countries concerned.

The simultaneous use of the two names is further justified by the examples of “English Channel/La Manche” and “Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas”.

The Republic of Korea’s efforts have begun to yield encouraging results, thanks to the understanding of the international community, including the world’s leading map-

makers, broadcasting companies, newspapers and publishers. Notable examples in this regard include the recent decisions made by Rand McNally, a prominent U.S. map-maker, and the Encyclopedia Britannica to use both “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan” in their maps and publications

As an interim measure pending agreement on a common designation, the Republic of Korea therefore calls upon the Member States and the international community to use both names “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan” simultaneously in any official documents and world atlases.