

# 동해의 지정학적 의미와 표기 문제\*

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## Geopolitics of the East Sea and the Issue of Its Naming

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### 요약

동해 표기를 둘러싼 갈등의 문제를 동해 수역이 갖는 지정학적 의미로부터 살펴보고 그 해결책을 찾아보는 것이 이 논문의 목적이다. 태평양의 연해로서 공산주의와 자본주의 세력이 대립한 최전방으로서의 입지적 특성, 환동해 지역경제권의 등장, 동해를 둘러싼 네 개 국가의 정치적 이해와 대립 등의 요인들이 이 지역에 지정학적인 영향력을 끼쳐 왔고, 이것은 영유권, 경제수역의 경계 획정, 그리고 표기 문제의 갈등으로까지 진전되어 왔다. 여기에 지명 표기가 갖는 독특한 정치적 의미가 더해져 동해 표기 문제는 여전히 해결되지 않는 문제로 남아 있다. 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

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to search for the geopolitical implications of the East Sea, relate them to the conflicts surrounding the name of the sea, and find some solutions of the problem. Such factors as the locational characteristics as the meeting place of communist and capitalist powers, the emergence of the East Sea Rim as a development axis, and the political interests and antagonism between the countries, have influenced on the geopolitics of this region, and had it extended to the controversial issues of territory, economic zone and sea name. To this, distinctive politics of toponymy has been added, which has induced the naming problem to remain unsolved. In consideration of the status quo of the arguments on the name East Sea/Sea of Japan, three possible solutions are suggested; 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

## I. Introduction

It is not difficult to find references to East Sea or

Sea of Japan<sup>1)</sup> in the news on politics and economy in daily newspapers and broadcasting. One of the recent news was that North Korea released a South Korean fishing boat and seven crew members which it had seized from the East Sea and detained for a month. Another news has been heard that Mongolia

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attempts to connect its railways all the way to the East Sea in order to facilitate its exports of natural resources and escape from the Chinese economic dominance. Other news include North Korea's missile launch to the East Sea, conflicts between Korea and Japan surrounding the hegemony of doing scientific research in this sea area, etc. Such issues as Japan's claim on Dokdo, a Korean island located at the center of East Sea, and a series of rebuttals from the Korean side are already familiar.

In this way, East Sea itself occupies not a small portion in the international politics and economy for two Koreas, Japan, Russia and even Mongolia. Then why is it that just one sea contains such practically and also symbolically important meanings in the international society? The purpose of this paper is to search for the geopolitical implications of the East Sea, relate them to the conflicts surrounding the name of the sea, and find some solutions of the problem. The politics of toponymy, especially maritime names using country names, will be dealt with in the context of this stream.

## II. Geopolitical Characteristics of the East Sea

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 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 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 with each other are merging together, pushing the 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 toward 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, B-G., 2010). There is also tendency to extend the sea power for resource mining, fishing or initiatives of scientific research, mostly to secure the interests of each country.

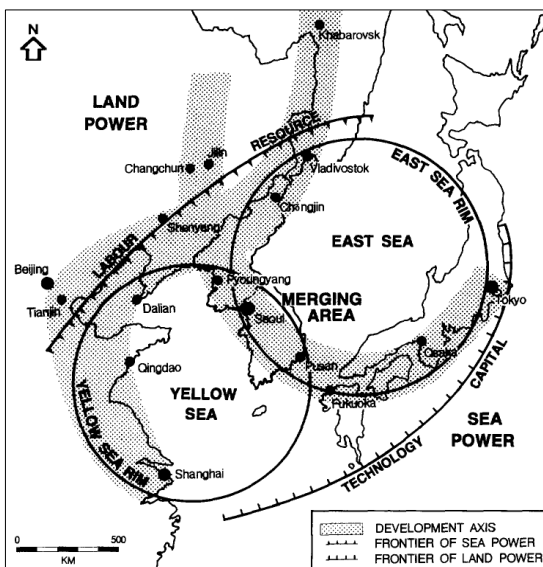


Fig. 1. Emergence of the East Sea Rim  
Source: Yu, 1993, p.317.

### III. Politics of Toponymy and Maritime Names

#### 1. Some Cases of Politics of Toponymy

A geographical name is an expression of the people’s perception on their places which reflects culture and history of the place and people. For this reason, it has diverse ranges of cultural, political and symbolic meanings beyond the name itself. This is especially so when adjacent regions or countries have long history of competition and conflicts under complex political situation. There are evident ‘politics of toponymy,’ or ‘politics of maps’ as a collection of toponyms.

The case of the name *Macedonia* clearly shows how politics of toponymy are manifested in the real world. When the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was disintegrated in 1991, one of the four countries proclaimed its independence under the name *Republic of Macedonia*, which put Greece into an extreme anger. The Greek argued that the name *Macedonia* belonged to them as the native land of Philip and Alexander the Great. It is also the name of a northern province of Greece.

Greece brought this issue to the United Nations, insisting that the new independent country should adopt another name. The international tribunal consented to this demand and coined the acronym FYROM – *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* (Kadmon, 2004). But the country still uses the name *Republic of Macedonia* for its domestic and international use and this makes Greece still angry. The Republic of Korea unfortunately keep its political position not to have diplomatic relationship with FYROM, assumably considering the Greek position on this country name.

Another example displaying the politics of toponymy would be the toponym of the water between Iran and

the Arabian Peninsula. It was named *Persian Gulf* by the ancient Persians on its eastern side, but the Arab countries on its western and southern sides wanted it to be called *Arabian Gulf*. As the result, these two names, either one or both of them, have been used in world maps and atlases.

But the journalists and government of the United States did not want to endorse any of these names, especially the one that Iranians use. When a war broke in this region in 1991, they called the region *The Gulf* and the war *The Gulf War*. The Korean journalists followed this way of naming, creating a name *Gulf-man* ('man' means 'gulf' in Korean), which is *Gulf Gulf*. This way of naming sometimes causes another tension. A newspaper article in January 2008 reported that the Iranian Foreign Ministry would not acknowledge a message from the US Navy because it used twice the name *The Gulf* instead of *Persian Gulf*.

Sometimes, weird geographical names are created

by other cultures in other languages. For example, Seoul was called '경성(京城)' in the Japanese colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century. When romanized, it should have been written as *Gyeongseong* and pronounced as such. But some maps at that time used the name *Keijo*, which was a romanized form of '京城' in Japanese pronunciation (Figure 2). This type of toponyms, called *exonyms* in the field of toponymy, is regarded as 'cultural aggression' and should be discouraged to use (Kadmon, 2004).

## 2. Controversies Surrounding Maritime Names

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 trans-boundary 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



Fig. 2. Use of an Exonym *Keijo* for Seoul

Source: Lautensach, H., 1945, *Korea: Eine Landeskunde Auf Grund Eigener Reisen und Der Literatur*, Leipzig: K. F. Koehle.

**Table 1. Country Names and Degree of Contention**

category	cases
high degree of contention	Sea of Japan vs. East Sea Persian Gulf vs. Arabian Gulf South China Sea vs. Bien Dong
moderate degree of contention	English Channel vs. La Manche Bay of Biscay vs. Golfe de Gascogne Gulf of Thailand
low degree of contention	Denmark Strait Eastern China Sea Gulf of Finland Gulf of Mexico Gulf of Oman Irish Sea Mozambique Channel Norwegian Sea Philippine Sea Singapore Strait Taiwan Strait

Source: Murphy(1999).

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.

## IV. The Name *East Sea* versus *Sea of Japan*

### 1. The Status Quo

The sea between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago has been more often called *Sea of Japan* or *Japan Sea* than *East Sea* in the international society. When the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) made its special publication number 23 (S-23), *Limits of Oceans and Seas* in 1929, the name *Japan Sea* was adopted, and world map-makers and navigators also began to acknowledge this name. No argument against this name was raised in a few revisions of this publication.

It was not until 1992, when the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names was held in New York, that the

Korean government officially raised the naming issue of the sea for the first time in the international forum. Since this important momentum, the Korean delegates, both from the government and the academic sides, has made continuous efforts to disseminate the sea name *East Sea* to the world.

This eighteen-year campaign of promoting the name *East Sea* has witnessed outstanding results. Most importantly, international organizations in charge of place names or sea names now perceive the seriousness of this naming issue and search for a visible change. The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), when first faced with this issue, took the position that it would be out of the scope of its discussions because it would be about the sea mostly composed of international waters. But now it "encourages the countries concerned to continue their efforts to find a solution acceptable to all of them, taking into account relevant resolutions<sup>3)</sup>."

IHO also realizes that the name of the sea currently listed as *Japan Sea* still remains unresolved. In 2002, it circulated a draft of the fourth edition of S-23 with the sea area left blank pages with no title, no description, and no map. In the 17th Conference of IHO, 2007, a proposal was made to publish S-23 in two volumes, the first of which would cover all the agreed issues while referring to the second volume, which would not be published, for the matters which remained unresolved. IHO currently operates a working group to publish a revised version of S-23. The name of the sea area between Korea and Japan belongs to the main issues to be resolved.

Along with these transitions of international organizations, major map-makers of the world, which exert their influences over the international society, have also changed their policies. In the past, they stuck to the policy of using the single

name *Sea of Japan*, but now tend to adopt *East Sea* simultaneously. According to a series of surveys, the rate of using the name *East Sea* together with *Sea of Japan* has increased sharply, from 2.8% (2000), 10.5% (2005), 23.8% (2007) to 28.1% (2009)<sup>4)</sup>.

## 2. Tracks of Debates

There are many arguments and counter-arguments for and against each name. It might well be called as a war of the names. These arguments can be categorized as the following three tracks (Choo, 2007a; Choo, 2010b).

The first debates are focusing on historical facts, which can be called as historical legitimacy debates. The Japanese side argues that *Sea of Japan* has such a long history to appear in 1602 in an old map by Mateo Ricci. In the 17th to 18th centuries, the sea was called with various names, but in the late 18th to early 19th centuries, the name *Sea of Japan* began to be established by European explorers.

In response to this argument, the Korean party emphasizes that various names were used in foreign old maps, but none of them was established. A series of surveys of old maps, produced by foreign map-makers since the 16th century, commonly show that such names as *Sea of Korea*, *East Sea*, *Eastern Sea* and *Oriental Sea* were more frequently used until the early 19th century, while the frequency of using *Sea of Japan* increased since the 1850s. The increase of using *Sea of Japan*, however, does not mean that it became an established name. Various names were still used and a considerable number of maps did not have a determined name. The name *East Sea* has been used for more than 2000 years and it has appeared in Korean old maps since 1531. Moreover, even Japan officially used the name *Sea of Joseon* (or *Chosun*), where *Joseon* is the name of dynasty in Korea which existed for six-hundred years before

the Japanese invasion, and began the official use of the name *Sea of Japan* as late as the early 20th century (Kim, H-D., 2010).

The second debates are made with regards to the international organizations' use of the name concerned. Japan insists that *Sea of Japan* has been recognized as the official name by international organizations and governments of major countries. The argument is extended that "the United Nations recognized *Sea of Japan* as the standard geographical term, and UN policy states that it should be used in official UN publications<sup>5)</sup>," Japan also points out the fact that governments of major countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and China, officially use the name *Sea of Japan*.

Korea, in response, emphasizes that *Sea of Japan* is not an authorized name, and that international organizations including UN and IHO recognize the problem of its single use, and recommend that Korea and Japan reach an agreement on a common name. Citing the UN Secretariat's letter, Korea also emphasizes that it is just UN's internal practice to use the most frequently used name, and this practice does not support for a specific 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 A4.2.6 and the UNCSCN resolution III/20. Adopted in 1974 and 1977, respectively, these resolutions recommend that countries sharing a given geographical feature under different names should endeavor to reach agreement on a single name, and that when failing to agree, the name used by each of the countries should be accepted. The Korean side insists that these resolutions be applied to the sea between Korea and Japan, for which both names should be used when failing to agree 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 the case of East Sea because the sea area in question is a part of the high seas. Korea further argues that regardless of its legal status, the sea area is 'a given geographical feature' as defined in the IHO and UN resolutions. Falling within the definition of 'semi-enclosed sea' as stated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, it is argued, it is a 'geographical feature' shared by 'two or more countries,' rather than an ocean such as the Atlantic or the Pacific.

Besides these three debates, Japan has argued that the most frequently used method of naming sea areas separated from an ocean is to use the name of a major archipelagic arc or a peninsula that separates the sea area in question from the ocean, and that the name *Sea of Japan* conforms to this principle. It seems likely, however, Japan does not adhere to this argument any more<sup>6)</sup>. There are diverse cases of naming seas, using a direction from a continent or a country, naming after an adjacent geographical feature, after an explorer or a discoverer, and expressing characteristics of the sea (Choo, 2007b).

## V. Resolution of the Problem for Better Cooperation

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 would summarize 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 UNCSCGN 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<sup>7)</sup>, *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; Choo, 2010a). 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 (Figure 3a). 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 (Figure 3b).



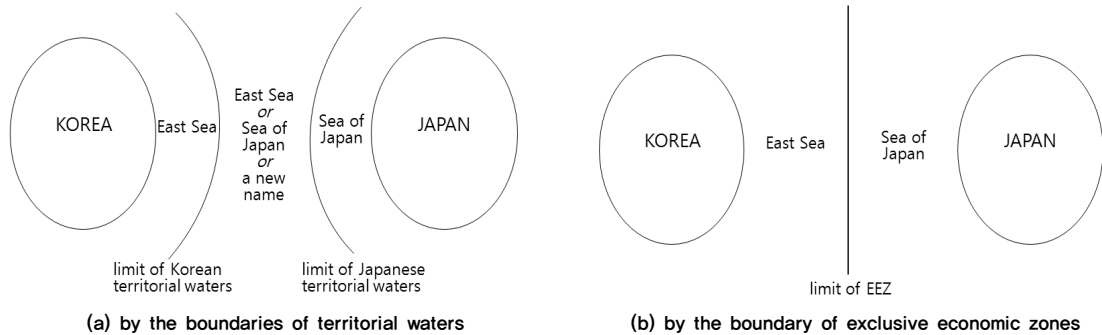


Fig. 3. Methods of Separating Sea Areas and Naming Them

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.

## VI. Conclusion

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, East sea and sea of Japan, 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.

## Notes

- 1) There are controversial positions from the sides of the Republic of Korea(South Korea), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea(North Korea) and Japan on the name of the sea between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago. I will use the name *East Sea* throughout this paper to refer to this sea area just for practical purpose. I believe dual names of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan* should be used internationally 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.
- 3) Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) Session Report(2007), paragraph 191.
- 4) The surveys of 2000 and 2005 were conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, while those of 2007 and 2009 were carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Korean government.
- 5) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2009,

*The One and Only Name Familiar to the International Community Sea of Japan*, p.4.

- 6) In the most recent publication of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2009, this argument disappeared.
- 7) An endonym is defined as the name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated.

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