

# South Korea's Fight Against the 'Sea of Japan' Pays Off

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The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) reached an agreement to use a numerical system of marking the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan in a map of the world's oceans during a virtual session with 90 IHO countries on November 16.

The move is expected to lead to the end of South Korea's battle since 1997 for using the name it has demanded, "East Sea," while most countries call the body of water the "Sea of Japan." The name evokes poignant memories for South Koreans of the humiliating Japanese colonial period from 1910 to 1945.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said in a press briefing on November 17 that it is going to actively participate in the process of completing a new digital format for the map of oceans, S-130, through public-private partnership.

The Japanese government, however, downplayed the IHO's decision by saying that the name "Sea of Japan" will be maintained on the organization's map of oceans in the print version, known as S-23, leaving room for the international community and press to keep using the term.

The IHO Secretary-General's report, however, confirms that S-23 is no longer a valid standard, according to the South Korean Foreign Ministry.

The IHO has been using the "Sea of Japan" name in S-23 from 1929, but it has reached an agreement to use numerical identifiers on seas in S-130 to so as not to trigger such unnecessary disputes between countries anymore.

That was made possible after the two Koreas, the U.K., the U.S., and Japan reached agreement in April 2019 in a closed-door meeting over using a code number for the sea between the two Koreas and Japan, according to local news media.

Seo Kyung-duk, a professor at Sungshin Women's University in Seoul and a prominent campaigner over the historical issues between the Koreas and Japan, told The Diplomat on Monday that it is more crucial than ever for the government to promote the new IHO's standard, S-130, to those who have been calling the body of water the "Sea of Japan" under S-23.

"From now on, the government should do more efforts on promoting the S-130 with cooperation with related Non-Government Organizations as Japan would consistently promote 'Sea of Japan' in citing the S-23," he said.

The print editions of S-23 have been criticized by Koreans and experts for using the name proposed by Japan, even though the sea is situated between the two countries. With this publication, the IHO has served as a principal shield whenever South Korea filed a complaint against those, especially the foreign press, who use the name the “Sea of Japan.” Japan has succeeded in maintaining “Sea of Japan” in S-23, but the IHO reported that S-130 is going to be an official and valid standard when it is created.

Some South Koreans have said that it is a partial victory, because the IHO has not approved the co-use of the name “East Sea.” But experts, including Seo, argue that the IHO’s new digital format means it is inappropriate to call the waterway the “Sea of Japan” anymore.

Experts, however, emphasized that the IHO’s decision does not mean that the government’s campaign over the name of the sea is completed.

Even though “the IHO’s S-130 would not trigger conflicts between countries over this issue anymore, the organizations such as [the] press, web search engines, and electronic companies could continue to use ‘Sea of Japan,’” Seo warned. “Therefore, the government and NGOs should start tracking what they call the sea on their contents from now on and should request them not to [use the] name ‘Sea of Japan’” after S-130 is introduced.

The South Korean government has been working on this issue on the global diplomatic stage since 1997 but Japan has been cold to the proposal of South Korea to use “East Sea” together with “Sea of Japan.” The IHO demanded arbitration between the countries on this issue but it was not carried out.

Yuji Hosaka, a professor at Sejong University in Seoul and a Korea-Japan relations expert, told The Diplomat that it was unjustifiable to name the sea as “Sea of Japan” during the IHO conference in 1929 at a time when Korea was under Japanese occupation and not able to express its opinion.

“Japan has officially named ‘Sea of Japan’ since the late 19th century, in the days of Meiji Restoration, but before that, ‘Sea of Joseon,’ which means the ‘Sea of Korea,’ was also mentioned on many Japanese maps,” Yuji said, explaining that the country’s imperialism had affected the decision to use the “Sea of Japan” name in S-23 during the IHO’s conference in 1929.

More recently, Japan has calculated that accepting the Korean government’s demand to co-name the sea as the “East Sea” would be seen as a diplomatic failure that could upset Japanese public opinion. To avoid this, Japan has shown a preference to maintain the status quo.

In addition, there is a more realistic issue it has been dealing with, according to Yuji.

“There are Japanese literatures and novels [referring to the] ‘East Sea’ but it means the Pacific Ocean because it is ... on the east side of Japan.” While the Japanese government has not officially mentioned this, “some in Japan have said it would cause Japanese confusion once the IHO fully accept Korea’s demand.”

Yuji also mentioned that the IHO’s latest decision has effectively carried out the Korean side’s claim and it will have repercussions for the Japanese government once S-130 is finalized.

In the eyes of third parties, using the name the “Sea of Japan” might not seem to merit the serious treatment it has received from South Korea. However, even experts in the West argue that it was an unnecessary dispute.

“I’ve long thought that something neutral might be the best way to resolve the controversy over the ‘Sea of Japan’ label, which is an argument in favor of the kind of numerical identifier proposed by the IHO,” said Alexander B. Murphy, a professor of geography at the University of Oregon and a past president of American Association of Geographers, in an email interview with The Diplomat.

There are various names of international bodies of water that bear the names of only one of the countries or nations bordering those bodies of waters. According to Murphy, the ones that are controversial tend to be those that bear the name of a historical hegemon in the region. He said the toponym is controversial in the case of the “Sea of Japan” label but the toponym “Gulf of Mexico” was not that controversial because Mexico has not been a historical hegemon.

Even though the IHO has decided to prevent such cases in the future by adopting S-130 as its new standard, Murphy was pessimistic about the Korean government’s hope that no one would use the long-established standard of the calling it the “Sea of Japan.”

“The challenge is that people don’t tend to identify with numbers as labels for place names, so even if a number gets used on certain maps, that doesn’t mean the numerical approach will be widely adopted.”