

Japans Claim Over Dokdo Reflects Its Colonial Mentality

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In this essay, I want to look at the related issues regarding the debate over the naming of the East Sea/Sea of Japan and the territorial claim over Dokdo islets. Both issues, in their different ways, represent a colonial legacy in a postcolonial world. Their resolution highlights the need for a postcolonial sensitivity and more positive global citizenship.

Naming the Sea

The naming of things is how we humanize the world. Naming gives shape and meaning to our world, it turns space into place. Naming is never innocent of politics. The naming of the Earth's surface is shaped by three basic processes: indigenous, colonial and postcolonial. The first is the names given by indigenous people.

Consider the case of Australia where there is still a legacy of Aboriginal names. Cities such Wollongong speak of an Aboriginal past.

Then there are the colonial names. In Australia, the principal cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth all refer to the names of English aristocracy and gentry. We live in a postcolonial period in which we are aware of indigenous legacy as well as colonial rewriting.

In some cases, the postcolonial results in new names; witness the case of Chennai and Mumbai in India, formerly known as Madras and Bombay respectively under the British Raj.

Three things make the naming of seas a much more distinctive element than the naming of land features. First, large bodies of water often surround different territories. The east coast of China faces the west coast of the United States, while England's south coast is France's northern coast.

Seas are shared spaces often surrounded by different national territories. There is no simple hegemony over naming rights as in the case of land surfaces. The larger the sea or ocean, the greater the number of potential nation-states with access to naming.

The naming of seas can thus be a contentious issue. Proximity and the number of actors involved heighten the contention. We are more concerned with things closer than further away. It is easier to agree with other countries when things are far away.

For very large bodies of water with numerous landmasses and hence a variety of different nation-states involved, indigenous names can be so varied and numerous that colonial names become the standard.

Take the case of the large body of water we call the Pacific, it probably had a rich variety of names as indigenous people named it in their own language. After the 16th century, it was opened up to European colonial trade and mercantile interests. In English it was named with reference to Europe and was originally called the South Sea.

When Magellan crossed the ocean in 1520-21, he encountered no storms and named it Mar Pacifico. As the dominant global power the Spanish name displaced all the indigenous names and the Spanish names persist to this day.

This persistence is because of both the continuing Spanish legacy in the region and also because it was an easy solution to the complexity of many competing indigenous names. Colonial names often replace a myriad of indigenous names. The larger the number of divergent indigenous names, the greater force singular colonial names have.

Second, territories try to exert greater influence on the naming of seas closer to them. Seas close to their coastline are part of a nation's sense of itself.

Third, conflict is more pronounced when there are only a few indigenous names for a sea with a high degree of closure, i.e. relatively small number of countries involved. Again we can look at the Pacific Ocean, as an example of this.

Take the case of the Sea of Japan/East Sea controversy. A relatively small body of water surrounded by only three countries, Korea, Japan and Russia, for whom it was at the edge of the empire. The principal proximate interests are thus only Japan and Korea. That a colonial relationship exists between the two countries makes the naming controversy as much about colonial as indigenous naming rights. The more neutral name of East Sea looks like the more postcolonial solution compared to the hegemonic and colonial "Sea of Japan." A postmodern flexibility of dual naming is more common; witness the growing use of the dual naming of the English Channel/La Manche on maps to refer to the strip of water between southern England and northern France

The Case of Dokdo

Dokdo consist of two small rocky islands surrounded by approximately 33 smaller rocks. In total it amounts to just less than two square kilometers. For such a small place it has generated intense political heat. There are two issues, the precise details of the counter claims and the more general historical context. In terms of the details, the historical record is clear; Dokdo was under effective Korean sovereignty until 1905. It was then annexed as part of Japanese imperial expansion in 1905.

With Japan's defeat in 1945 Japan's title was effectively renounced. The Allied Powers specifically excluded the islands from Japanese control in 1946. It is here that things get a bit hazy.

Japan managed to influence the San Francisco Peace Treaty so that the islets' sovereignty was put in doubt. Successive drafts of the treaty had conflicting conclusions. Korea's case was weakened by President Syngman Rhee's inability to make the Korean case for Dokdo. He instead focused on the quixotic case of Korean sovereignty over Tsushima Island.

Even as Japan-Korea relations improved, Dokdo remained unresolved. It has been used as a rallying platform for nationalist Japanese politicians, especially those wishing to burnish their "tough" stance. The reality, however, is that Dokdo remains under effective Korean control. With sustained, low key persistence, Korea will remain in control of Dokdo.

The issue is not just one of political posturing. The rich fishing stocks and existence of gas hydrate makes the

competing claims all that more economically relevant. Even the smallest of islands can become opportunities to extend 200-mile exclusive economic zones.

There is also the more general historical context: in the first part of the 20th century Japan was an imperial colonial power. The naming of the Sea of Japan as well as the claiming of Dokdo were part of the same imperial-colonial expansionism.

Behind recent Japanese claims lies a continuation of a colonial mentality and imperial expansionism. At the heart of both issues are a colonial legacy and a continuing colonial mentality.

A Postcolonial World

We live in a postcolonial world and we need postcolonial sensitivity. Around the world there is recognition of the evils of the past.

The Australian government has formally apologized to the indigenous people, while the U.S. House of Representatives as well as numerous state legislatures around the United States have passed resolutions apologizing for the inhumanity of slavery.

Around the world effective communities and nations are responding rather than denying or perpetuating colonial mentalities. Global citizenship now implies, indeed demands, an honest historical reckoning of a nation's colonial past. And to move into the future as a proactive force in the global community, a nation, and especially its leaders, need to see the colonial legacy that continues to guide their policies. By recognizing the dual naming of the East Sea/Sea of Japan as well as Korean territorial sovereignty over Dokdo, Japan can invoke a postcolonial sensitivity and embrace a more effective global citizenship.

Japan needs to accept its colonial legacy in order to transcend it and become a more effective and morally powerful force in the world.