

Policy Forum 06-83: Make Lemonade Out of Lemons: Invite North Korea to Join Japan/East Sea Survey



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Article by Mark J. Valencia

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I. Introduction

Mark J. Valencia, maritime policy analyst and Nautilus Institute Senior Fellow, writes, "The joint survey could relieve tension and even be a step towards joint development of resources such as fish, gas and minerals thought to be situated in the disputed area. North Korea should not be excluded from such a cooperative effort and any eventual joint development arrangement. Indeed, rather than ignore North Korea's claims and concerns and thereby further isolate and antagonize it, the two should invite it to join the survey."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Mark J. Valencia

- Make Lemonade Out of Lemons: Invite North Korea to Join Japan/East Sea Survey
by Mark J. Valencia

Often lost in the vitriolic atmospherics between South Korea and Japan regarding their competing sovereignty claims to two tiny islets - Dok Do (or Takeshima in Japanese) and overlapping 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ) are the equally valid claims and concerns of North Korea. North Korea also claims sovereignty over the features as well as an EEZ that overlaps that claimed by Japan from Takeshima. The 8 September 2006 agreement between Japan and South Korea to conduct a joint survey 7 - 14 October in their disputed waters in the Sea of Japan (or East Sea to the Koreans) offered a golden opportunity to build confidence between these two claimants and the third claimant---North Korea. Unfortunately, the announcement by North Korea that it intends to test a nuclear device and lack of time rule out its direct participation in the upcoming survey. However the results could be shared with North Korea as an expression of good faith and hope that it will participate in future such surveys.

For both North and South Korea, Japan's claim to the features is a remnant and constant painful reminder of its 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, during the April 2006 confrontation between South Korea and Japan resulting from Japan's plan to unilaterally survey the seabed in the disputed area, North Korea offered to help South Korea defend the features.

Trilateral joint surveys could relieve tension and even be a step towards joint development of resources such as fish, gas and minerals thought to be situated in the disputed area. North Korea should not be excluded from such a cooperative effort and any eventual joint development arrangement. Indeed, rather than ignore North Korea's claims and concerns and thereby further isolate and antagonize it, the two should attempt to persuade it to join future surveys.

The survey planned for 7 - 14 October will involve integrated crews from Japan and South Korea on two survey ships--one from each country-- measuring the level of radioactivity in the water and seabed that may be emanating from nuclear waste dumped by the former Soviet Union. The 1993 revelation that the former Soviet navy dumped 18 decommissioned nuclear reactors and 13, 150 containers of radioactive waste from 1978 to the early 1990s, most of it in the Sea of Japan/ East Sea, created an uproar in the world environmental community. It particularly jolted nuclear-sensitive Japan and South Korea. Adding fuel to the fire, soon thereafter a Russian naval vessel dumped nearly a thousand tons of low-level waste in that Sea.

Two of the nuclear submarine reactors were dumped just off the northeast coast of North Korea. This news prompted North Korea to severely criticize Russia for posing a threat with both nuclear arms and radioactive waste dumping while "having the cheek" to press North Korea to accept nuclear inspections.

Although most scientists agree that the dumped waste provides no immediate threat to the environment or humans, the longer term effects are unknown, particularly after the containers corrode. Thus frequent monitoring is wise and perhaps necessary. And regardless of the facts, consumers may avoid marine products taken from that area. Indeed at the time of the “bombshell”, the fisheries union in Hakodate said it feared consumers would boycott their squid, a favorite delicacy in Japan.

The initial report of Russian dumping prompted cooperation to deal with this specific issue at bilateral meetings between Japanese and Russian ministers and experts, proposals for joint South Korea/Japan/Russia surveys at specific dump sites, and a call by Japan for an international cooperative fund to help Russia treat its nuclear waste. At that time North Korea even offered to host an international seminar on regimes for pollution control. Thus there is some basis for involving all concerned parties.

Moreover, marine pollutants do not respect claim lines drawn on a map. This includes any radioactive contaminants from the reactors dumped on North Korea’s shelf. Thus all coastal countries on this Sea share vulnerability and an interest in mitigating it. Recognizing the shared nature of such seas, the 1982 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea urges those countries bordering semi-enclosed seas like the Sea of Japan/East Sea to cooperate with one another to protect the environment. Such cooperation by all concerned would be an ecologically appropriate response to this situation. And it just might help relieve some of the burgeoning tension between its coastal countries.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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