

The Author



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Fishing for Political Control: Tangled Lines of Fishing Activity and Korean Maritime Boundary Disputes

Asia accounts for nearly 90 per cent of the world's fishers, and is home to most of the approximately 4.36 million fishing vessels around the globe. The region is also, unsurprisingly, a hotbed of maritime disputes. Competing claims over marine boundaries and island ownership in Asia generate displays of nationalism and confrontations amongst neighbouring countries, as well as entangling fishing boats in militarily-charged and politically-driven struggles.

Are these disputes simply the result of an incidental spatial overlap? Or have fishing activities become tools of geopolitical strategy?

My research looks at state strategies for the governance of fishing activities that assist military-political objectives — in other words, the use of mundane civilian fishing operations as a tool in the extension of state legitimization and the reproduction of sovereignty claims in disputed waters. My initial investigations have focused on the Yellow Sea, an area west of the Korean peninsula, and a maritime boundary (part of the fallout of the Korean War) called the Northern Limit Line (NLL).

The validity of the NLL has been disputed to the point of fatal clashes between the two Korean navies. Claiming de facto standing, South Korea controls the boundary by mobilizing political narratives and military forces, while the North denounces any attempt to legitimize the unilaterally-promulgated line. The Yeonpyeong Islands and its swimming crab fishery, lying just south of the NLL, have become embroiled in the dispute, acquiring high strategic importance solely as a result of their proximity to the NLL.

My investigations have yielded several interesting facts about the entanglement of fishing activity with geo-political strategy:

- The swimming crab fishers of the Yeonpyeong Islands' observe the NLL by fishing within the state-enacted fishing zone; but they are also required to attend an annual, state-sponsored education session [about the area that reinforces the South Korean claim of sovereignty?]
- The continued fishing presence in the region has been used to justify

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added military vigilance (via claims of a need for 'protection' of the fishers).

- The fishers themselves — instructed to report any suspicious at-sea objects to the state authority — have become a form of unofficial NLL surveillance on behalf of the state.

My investigation also unveiled a more complex reality — the fact that the fishers' personal tendencies amount to a subtle refusal to cooperate with the imposition of a geopolitical agenda upon fishing operations:

- Fishers — driven by economic, rather than political, imperatives — have displayed an inclination to infringe upon boundaries whenever they can.
- The maverick actions of fishers who violate boundaries for economic gain have sometimes triggered military responses that have not only exposed the porosity of the NLL, but have hindered Seoul's efforts at firm control of the boundary.

The South Korean government, as a result, faces a dilemma in terms of implementing this 'fishy' form of geo-political control: greater support for the fishing sector may widen the size and presence of the fishery, which, in turn, may benefit the nation's political objectives via the natural enhancement of the government's ideological justification of its sovereignty in an area in which it has a significant industrial presence. It may also provide greater self-policing that would naturally arise from an increased number of fishing boats in the area. On the other hand, a larger fishery could also mean more fishing boats making unauthorized detours across the NLL with subsequent increases in military responses, and still more disruption to a state agenda that requires the presentation of a closed and unassailable border.

The evidence seems to suggest that a strategy of deliberate involvement of fishery in the boundary disputes of the state fails to work as the state intends; or, at least, it will not work without entangling the fishers themselves in the strategic plans of the state.

Given the growing importance of ocean space for shipping, resource extraction and geopolitical rivalry, an analysis of other Asian seas could not only unveil similar geo-political strategies and their results but also, hopefully, prevent the escalation of maritime conflicts between coastal states as well as ensure the safety of civilian fishers/fishery operators.

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