

# **The Use of National Names for International Bodies of Water: Comparative Considerations<sup>13</sup>**

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Far from holding up a simple mirror of nature that is true or false, maps redescribe the world—like any other document—in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences, and priorities. What we read on a map is as much related to an invisible social world and to ideology as it is to phenomena seen and measured in the landscape. —J. B. Harley, 1990

## ***Introduction***

Over the past two decades, the study of the history of cartography has undergone a significant transformation. Traditionally, maps were treated as objective representations of reality, and studies in the history of cartography emphasized the development of different approaches to rendering the spatial organization of the world in maps. The mapmaker was treated as someone who was a product of his or her time—influenced by available technology and information, and even subject to personal biases and preferences—but the basic questions concerned the degree to which cartographic representations corresponded to that which could be observed.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, a growing number of commentators began

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highlighting the idea that maps and mapmaking are not neutral or value-free. Commentators such as J. B. Harley (1988) pointed to the importance of looking at maps in terms of the social and political context in which they are produced. Such arguments paved the way for new research agendas centered on the ideological underpinnings of cartographic undertakings (Belyea 1992). In the process, maps began to be seen as windows into the political and social world, revealing the ideas and prejudices of the human-geographical contexts out of which they arose.

Efforts to contextualize cartographic representations led scholars to investigate a variety of matters related to the production and construction of maps. Attention was focused on why maps were made of some place by not of others, why certain features of the landscape were singled out for emphasis, and how particular cartographic design elements were used to make specific social and political points (see, e.g., Wood 1992). Yet for all the attention to different facets of map making, the actual naming of places on maps has received little attention. The index to Denis Wood's (1992) influential book, The Power of Maps, for example, did not contain a single entry for place names.

Yet the choice of place names is no more an objective feature of a map than is any other decision that goes into its construction. Indeed, place names themselves are deeply embedded in particular historical and geographical contexts, and they are often contested (Room 1997). Hence, the rendering of place names on maps can be an important way in which political statements are made and ideologies are reproduced. The geographic literature of recent years evidences growing recognition of this point (see, e.g., Nash 1999), but work on the politics of place names has been spotty. One notable gap concerns the naming of international bodies of water. There are many cases in which more than one name is used for an international body of water, and the cartographer must make a choice about which name to use. Since the choices that are made both reflect and influence political understandings and relationships, they are worthy of consideration by those concerned with the relationship between cartographic representations and the "invisible social world" (to refer back to the Harley quote that opens this paper).

One possible approach to the studying the naming of international bodies of water is to consider the circumstances surrounding the adoption of particular place names on maps. This issue has received considerable attention by participants in past International Seminars on the Naming of Seas. A second possible approach is to consider the circumstances surrounding a controversy over the naming of a specific body of water, which then finds its way into competing cartographic representations. This too has been addressed in prior seminars. A third approach is to consider more generally the types of naming practices and circumstances that are likely to give rise to controversy. This is the approach adopted in this paper. More specifically, the effort here is to consider the circumstances in which the use of national names for international bodies of water raises

problems of a political nature, and to highlight the changing character of those problems in a few notable cases.

## ***Naming International Seas after Nations or States***

There are many different names attached to international bodies of water around the world, and most of these are entirely unproblematic. However, when an international body of water bears the name of a nation or state, the potential for conflict arises. This is because of the extraordinary importance of the modern territorial state system in the perceptual and functional ordering of human affairs. As I have argued elsewhere (Murphy 1996: 102-103):

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of the territorial assumptions that have developed in association with the post-World War II political order. In general terms, they have made the territorial state the privileged unit for analyzing most phenomena while discouraging consideration of the nature of the territorial state itself. In the political sphere they have directed overwhelming attention to state government and governmental leaders at the expense of extrastate or substate actors and arrangements. In the economic sphere they have prompted us to frame our most basic theories of development in state terms. In the cultural sphere they have encouraged us to collapse our understandings of diversity into state-based categories; for every reference to the Quechua, Aymara, and Guaraní peoples there are thousands to Bolivians. In the environmental sphere they have prompted us to conceptualize issues that do not correspond to state boundaries as "transnational" (read trans-state) or "transboundary" issues, not Upper Rhine or Southeast Asian lowland issues.

Accompanying and reinforcing this situation is the power of nationalism, which defines peoples' identities in many parts of the world and which operates as a powerful perceptual and functional divider between societies.

Against this backdrop, the idea of attaching the name of a single state or nation to an international body of water is a potentially problematic practice—for the very use of a state or national appellation can connote ownership or control by a single people. Yet an examination of the place names used for international bodies of water reveals that this is a relatively widespread practice.

It is difficult to develop a definitive list of international bodies of water bearing the names of states or nations because different sources list different names and because

various societies have attached names to bodies of water that have not been widely accepted. Nonetheless, a general sense of the more visible cases in which this occurs can be obtained through an analysis of the place names used in widely circulated maps and statistical sources. Beginning with a list of “major bodies of water” in a well known statistical source (Showers 1973), and supplementing that list with reference to other geographical materials (Cohen 1998; Veregin 2005; Munro 1988; *Merrriam-Webster’s Geographical Dictionary* 1997), I developed a list of twenty-seven prominent cases in which a commonly used name for an international body of water was either (1) the name of a current independent country, (2) the name of the dominant national group in a currently independent country, or (3) the name of a national group/region that has actively sought independence during the latter part of the twentieth century. The list consists of the following cases:

Arabian Sea	Bay of Biscay	Bight of Benin
Bight of Biafra	Denmark Strait	East China Sea
English Channel	Gulf of Finland	Gulf of Guinea
Gulf of Honduras	Gulf of Mexico	Gulf of Oman
Gulf of Panama	Gulf of Thailand	Gulf of Venezuela
Irish Sea	Korea Bay	Korea Strait
Mozambique Channel	Norwegian Sea	Persian Gulf/Arabian Gulf
Philippine Sea	Sea of Japan/East Sea	Singapore Strait
South China Sea/Bien Dong	Taiwan Strait	Timor Sea

As is evident from a review of this list, there are international bodies of water bearing the names of states or nations in many parts of the world. Moreover, there is much diversity in the circumstances surrounding the adoption of those names. Some of the names have been in use for long periods of time (e.g, Persian Gulf), whereas others are relatively recent adoptions (e.g., Sea of Japan). The key point is that the use of any national or state name for an international body of water carries with it a suggestion of exclusive ownership that is arguably at odds with its international legal standing.

## ***Factors Affecting Contentiousness***

Despite the potential volatility of using national names for international bodies of water, there is little evidence of serious controversy surrounding many of the names on the list. The challenge, then, is to consider why some cases are more contentious than others. To address this matter, I consulted a variety of internet and newspaper indexing

sources to see if there was reported evidence of controversy over the names used for the bodies of water on the list. Based on the results of this analysis, I divided the cases up into the following “degree of contentiousness” categories:

**High Degree of Contention** (Active Efforts to Oppose Current Naming Practices)

Persian Gulf                      Sea of Japan/East Sea  
South China Sea

**Moderate Degree of Contention** (Different Renderings on National Maps but Little Active Effort to Oppose Current Naming Practices)

Bay of Biscay                      English Channel  
Gulf of Thailand

**Low Degree of Contention** (Little Evidence of Concern over Current Naming Practices)

Arabian Sea                      Bight of Benin  
Bight of Biafra                      Denmark Strait  
East China Sea                      Gulf of Finland  
Gulf of Guinea                      Gulf of Honduras  
Gulf of Mexico                      Gulf of Oman  
Gulf of Panama                      Gulf of Venequela  
Irish Sea                      Korea Bay  
Korea Strait                      Mozambique Channel  
Norwegian Sea                      Philippine Sea  
Singapore Strait                      Taiwan Strait  
Timor Sea

Although there is inevitable subjectivity in the grouping of cases into these categories, they provide a useful starting point for considering the circumstances that may produce differing levels of confrontation over the use of national names for international bodies of water. In looking for factors affecting the level of controversy, I first developed a list of states that potentially have a direct interest in the naming of particular bodies of water—essentially those states bordering those bodies of water. I then looked at the presence or absence of historical/geopolitical commonalities in the relations among states

involved in cases where similar levels of contentiousness are present. Based on this analysis, the following circumstances appeared to be of particular relevance:

A. Circumstances present in highly contentious cases:

1. A name commonly used for the body of water is the name of a state with a history of political or economic hegemony in the region.
  - a. Persian/Arabian Gulf
  - b. Sea of Japan/East Sea
  - c. South China Sea/Bien Dong

B. Circumstance present in moderately contentious cases

1. There is a long history of conflict between two of the states bordering the sea
  - a. English Channel
  - b. Gulf of Thailand
2. The name of the sea raises issues that concern the territorial integrity of interested states
  - a. Bay of Biscay

C. Circumstances present in relatively non-contentious cases

1. Only one state has a significant border on the sea
  - a. Denmark Strait
  - b. Gulf of Panama
  - c. Philippine Sea
  - d. Norwegian Sea
2. The sea bears the name of a nation with no hegemonic potential in the region
  - a. Bight of Benin
  - b. Bight of Biafra
  - c. Gulf of Guinea
  - d. Gulf of Oman
  - e. Irish Sea
  - f. Timor Sea
3. The sea bears the name of a state with no history of hegemonic dominance in the region
  - a. Gulf of Honduras
  - b. Gulf of Mexico
  - c. Korea Bay
  - d. Korea Strait

- e. Mozambique Channel
  - f. Singapore Strait
4. There are special geopolitical considerations at play that militate against controversy
- a. Gulf of Finland - Estonia's historic ethno-cultural ties to Finland
  - b. East China Sea - Japan and Korea's concern not to upset power balances
  - c. Taiwan Strait – China's concern to show that Taiwan is not an independent country

As the foregoing enumeration of circumstances suggests, there are strong geopolitical and geo-historical correlates to levels of controversy over the use of national names for international bodies of water. Most obviously, every one of the highly contentious cases shares a geopolitical commonality arising out of differential power relations. Moreover, the moderately contentious cases seem to occur where at least some historical territorial issues can be identified. The latter is clearest in the case of the English Channel—referred to as La Manche on French maps—which relatively few citizens of France see as a major issue, but which arguably registers as an annoyance to many given the history of territorial conflict between England and France. The most speculative case is that of the Bay of Biscay—a name referring to the Basque people. The Spanish use the term Cantabrico to refer to this body of water, whereas the French use the term Gascogne. The roots of this naming controversy are not entirely clear, but they may well be tied to concerns among both Spanish and French over what an independent Basque state might mean for the territorial integrity of their respective states.

Turning to the cases that are essentially uncontested, most of these arise in circumstances where either no other state has a significant interest in the naming issue or where the name that is attached to the international body of water is that of a state that has not been a historic threat to others in the region—and is unlikely to become such a threat. The only cases not explained by these factors are those of the Gulf of Finland, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. Yet in each of these cases, special geopolitical circumstances are present that militate against controversy. The identification of these is somewhat speculative—particularly as they relate to the case of the East China Sea—but there are clearly special dynamics at work in the case of the relationship between Finland and Estonia and between China and Taiwan that must be taken into consideration. China cannot object to the use of Taiwan's name for the Taiwan Strait without seeming to undermine its argument that Taiwan is merely a part of China, and Estonia is not about to raise a controversy with a country with which it shares strong historical and

ethno-cultural ties and which has provided significant help to Estonia in its transition from communist rule.

## ***Implications for Current and Prospective Controversies***

It is clear from the foregoing that geopolitical and geo-historical circumstances are of great relevance to the development of controversies surrounding the use of national names for international bodies of water. Perhaps the clearest implication of this insight concerns the prospective development of controversies over the names of international waterways. Such controversies can develop and change over time, and just because a place name is not contested now does not mean that it will not be contested in the future. The foregoing analysis suggests that the cases where such contests are most likely to develop are in situations where shifting power relations among interested states produce concerns about the hegemonic ambitions of the state after which the international body of water is named. To use an example for illustrative purposes only (i.e., to present a hypothetical example that is not meant to suggest an actual development), if Mozambique were interested in, and able to assert, a growing level of economic and political dominance over Madagascar, the currently benign situation surrounding the naming of the Mozambique Channel might well change.

A more complicated set of implications must be considered in the case of currently active controversies. As we have seen, each of these arises in a situation where unequal power relations have been at play—and this state of affairs provides fundamental insight into the existence of the conflict itself. Yet once a controversy has developed, the visibility of that controversy does not appear to be strongly tied to an increasing level of hegemony by the state whose name is used for the international body of water. Instead, visibility seems to be tied to the growing ability of states objecting to current naming practices to assert their influence. An examination of the three more highly contentious cases noted above suggests the importance of this point.

### **1. The Persian/Arabian Gulf**

The Persian Gulf may be the oldest toponym for a body of water (Munro 1988). The historical influence of the Persian Empire helps to explain the persistence of the name, as does the lack of a competing, well organized political power in the region until recently (see generally Hourani 1991; Malmairian 1998). In the Ottoman Empire most of the Arabian peninsular region was at the economic and political periphery, and throughout the colonial period the economies of the region remained subsistence based (focused around fishing and pearl diving). It is probable that the *Persian Gulf* toponym

went unchallenged for so long because of the relatively recent political organization of Arab states surrounding the gulf.

It is unclear exactly when and where the *Arabian Gulf* name came into use, but it is likely that the term was first coined in the neighboring Arab Gulf states after independence and the discovery of oil. Outside of the Arabian Peninsula the toponym was not commonly used before the late 1970s. Some Saudi Arabian maps made as early as 1968 mark the body of water as the *Al-Khalij al-Arabi* (lit. The Arabian Gulf), and English-language maps published in the region during the 1970s use the *Arabian Gulf* designation. Nonetheless, most maps produced by the United States government, including those written in Arabic, continue to use the term *Al-Khalij al-Farsi* (lit. The Persian Gulf). Moreover, Iranian maps written in Farsi also use the Persian Gulf designation (*Al-Khalij-i-Fars*). The State Department of the United States officially recognizes the body of water as *The Persian Gulf*, although State Department officials sometimes refer to it as the Arabian Gulf in press conferences and interviews. Indeed, in an apparent effort not to take sides, the area is often referred to as *The Gulf* by United States government agencies and by the United States military.

The term *Arabian Gulf* is slowly gaining international attention, however. A search of world news service wires on Lexis-Nexis showed no incidents of the *Arabian Gulf* toponym being used by the world media until 1977, when the Xinhua News Agency (China) used the term. The frequency of the toponym has increased rather steadily since, with 14 incidences found in 1980, 25 in 1990, 109 in 1998, and 125 over the past twelve months. Interestingly, the frequency of use of the term *Arabian Gulf* in the international media loosely correlates with the growing international influence of the Arab states of the region in the wake of the war over Kuwait and the emergence of greater cohesion within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

The foregoing suggests that as the Arab states bordering the Gulf have grown in power and influence, they have been increasingly successful in promoting their views of the naming issue. In the early 1990s, for example, a university was founded in Bahrain under the name Arabian Gulf University to serve, among other things, as a symbol of solidarity among the Arab Gulf states (Gulf Daily News 1993). Growing success in promoting the *Arabian Gulf* name through initiatives of this sort seems to confirm the proposition that agitation over naming is tied to levels of international influence. Yet the case must not be overstated. The term *Persian Gulf* is still by far the most commonly used, and Iran can use its economic and political power to sustain that state of affairs. This became evident in 1997, when the publisher of an English-language archaeology book, *The Archaeology of the Arabian Gulf*, apologized to the Iranian government and pledged to change the title of the book in future editions after the leaders of Payam-i-Noor University in Tehran refused to allow the book to be used in classes (Compass Newswire

1997). More recently the use of the term “Arabian Gulf” as an alternate name for “Persian Gulf” in the eighth edition of the National Geographic Society’s (2005) *Atlas of the World* precipitated a vehement response from the Iranian government and many Iranian political groups (see El-Najjar and Habibi 2005).

## 2. The Sea of Japan/East Sea

The historical background to the controversy over the naming the Sea of Japan/East Sea has been the focus of attention in prior International Seminars on the Naming of Seas and need not be repeated here (see, e.g., International Seminar 1998). As with the Persian/Arabian Gulf case, the controversy is centered on different approaches to the naming of the body of water that lies between Korea and Japan—with much of the international community still using the relatively recently derived *Sea of Japan* designation, and Korea encouraging the use of the *East Sea* designation. For present purposes, the particularly interesting issue to note is the recent trajectory of the controversy.

A search of world news service wires on Lexis-Nexis (comparable to the one conducted for Persian/Arabian Gulf) showed a somewhat irregular pattern of use of the term *East Sea* or *East Sea of Korea* during the period 1988-2004. Yet the overall trend was toward increasing use of the term. This trend is arguably a reflection of an expanding effort by Koreans and others to attract attention to this issue at a time when Korea itself is emerging as an increasingly significant member of the international community and when Japan’s regional dominance has begun to be challenged. Emblematic of Korea’s growing assertiveness on the place name issue was the organization of a symposium in Pyongyang in July 1993 that brought together Korean historians and geographers to discuss the use of the terms *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*. The participants in the symposium argued that *East Sea* was the appropriate name for the body of water between Korea and Japan, submitting that Koreans were the first to explore and use the sea and that the use of the term *Sea of Japan* validated Japanese imperialism in the region (British Broadcasting Corporation Wire Service 1993).

In the aftermath of this symposium, the South Korean government set up a task force in October 1994 to study the controversy with Japan (Xinhua News Agency 1994b). The group, which consisted of government officials and professors, sought to enhance international recognition of the name *East Sea* by promoting it at the United Nations and at other international meetings. Moreover, the Korean government decided to boycott international meetings using the name *Sea of Japan* in reference to the body of water between Korea and Japan (Xinhua News Agency 1994a). In the latter 1990s, the Agence France Presse reported that several South Korean civic groups threatened to boycott the

U.S. weekly magazine *Time* if it did not apologize for using the term *Sea of Japan* in a July 7, 1997, article entitled “China Now” (Agence France Presse 1997). More recently, campaigns have been mounted to encourage the National Geographic Society to include “East Sea” as an alternate name for “Sea of Japan” in their maps and atlases (successful) and for the CIA to include the term East Sea on their World Factbook maps (unsuccessful). Collectively, such efforts have served to promote the visibility of the place name controversy at a time when Korea itself is attracting more international attention. They have also produced a backlash in Japan, where an effort has been made to defend the use of term Sea of Japan based on the argument that the term is not a product of Japanese imperialism, but instead was a name coined by Westerners that has become the international standard (see Scofield 2003).

### **3. South China Sea/Bien Dong**

The controversy over the term *South China Sea* is less well documented than the two previous cases, and it is thus difficult to assess its precise dimensions. Maps produced by the Vietnamese government over the last twenty years show that the Vietnamese are using the name *Bien Dong* (East Sea), rather than the Chinese name *Nan Hai* (South [China] Sea) (Quy Nho’n 1989). The Vietnamese take the position that *Bien Dong* is the traditional name for the body of water off the eastern coast of Vietnam (Farrell 1998).

The Vietnamese effort to promote the *Bien Dong* designation is of relatively recent origin. In 1972, the South Vietnamese government officially recognized the use of the *South China Sea* toponym. This is seen in *An Annotated Atlas of the Republic of Vietnam* (Nguyễn 1972), compiled in conjunction with the staff of the Information Section of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C. That naming practice led to the continuing use of the *South China Sea* designation on Vietnamese maps into the 1980s. By the late 1980s, however, Vietnamese maps began to appear with *Bien Dong* as the name for the sea off the Vietnamese coast. At present, most provincial maps of Vietnam produced by the Vietnamese government no longer recognize *South China Sea*, whereas Chinese maps do not acknowledge an alternative toponym.

Vietnam is arguably not in a strong position to push this issue very far. Yet the gradually increasing visibility of the issue seems to coincide with Vietnam’s emergence from a more isolated position and its concomitant assumption of a higher international profile. This, in turn, has apparently opened the door to at least modest initiatives to raise the naming issue. An example may be the formation of the *Bien Dong* shipping company in Vietnam. The choice of name arguably signals Vietnam’s growing assertiveness on this issue. The emergence of such initiatives supports the proposition that contentious

issues are likely to become more visible when the states objecting to current naming practices are themselves gaining international visibility.

## ***Conclusion***

The use of national names for international bodies of water has not led to controversies in many cases. However, by suggesting that a body of water belongs more to one state than another, the potential for controversy is always present, and in some cases controversies have emerged with considerable force. Differential power relations are clearly a critical element to the rise of such controversies, suggesting that naming international bodies of water after nations or states is a particularly problematic practice where power differences exist now, or where they have existed in the recent past. Moving beyond such controversies is clearly difficult, as both sides are likely to see the issue as one that touches on national pride, if not national self-determination. Yet it is impossible to confront controversies if the concerns of the involved parties are not acknowledged. This suggests that, in cases where a commonly used national name is in use, mapmakers, academics, and policy makers should be attune to the potential for controversy and should be open to the use of alternative names in cases where the name in use carries with it hegemonic overtones.

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