

## The Geopolitics of Naming Seas

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### Introduction

The naming of things is how we humanize the world. Naming gives shape and meaning to our world, it turns space into place. Naming geographical features results from a variety of processes, but the larger spaces (e.g. mountain chains and rivers) and the more formal spaces (e.g. states) arise in a political process with different interests. Naming is never innocent of politics. In this paper I will consider some basic attributes of the geopolitics of naming oceans and oceans.

### Naming The Earth

The naming of the earth's surface is shaped by three basic toponymic processes, indigenous, colonial and postcolonial. The first is the names given by indigenous people. Consider the case of Australia where there is still legacy of Aboriginal names. Cities such Wollongong speak to an Aboriginal past. We should be wary, however, of a linear, uncomplicated legacy; native names were often transcribed by colonials into another language. Between the 'original' name and the legacy names lies a complex translation process rather than simple recording. Then there are the colonial names. In Australia the principal cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth all refer to the names English aristocracy and gentry. We live in a postcolonial period in which we are aware of the indigenous legacy as well as the colonial rewritings. 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.

### Naming The Seas

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 U.S.; 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. The contention is heightened by proximity and the number of actors involved.

We are more concerned with things closer than further away. It is easier to agree with other countries when things are far away. Thus both Germany and UK both refer to the Indian Ocean (Indischer ozean); it is far away from either country and both share the same toponymic history of the area. However, closer to home, the Baltic Sea in English is referred to as the East Sea (Ostsee). The English name probably draws upon Russian (boloto= marsh) or Lithuanian (baltas=white) while the German refers to its location with respect to Germany.

For very large bodies of water with numerous landmasses and hence a variety of different nation-states involved, the indigenous names can be so varied and so many 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 languages. After the 16<sup>th</sup> 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 name persists 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 namings often replace a myriad of indigenous names. The larger the number of divergent indigenous names the greater the force of singular colonial namings.

Second, territories try to exert greater influence on the naming of seas closer to them. National imaginaries cast a stronger shadow over more proximate territories. If nations are imagined communities, to use Anderson's term, they are also named communities and this national toponymy extends to the seas as well as the land. States rarely argue over the names of seas far from their shores. But seas close to their coastline are part of the national imaginary and the nation's sense of itself.

Third, conflict is more pronounced when there are only a few indigenous names in a sea with higher degree of closure, ie. relatively small number of countries involved. Again we can compare the Pacific Ocean, a vast sea body with many different original indigenous communities and nations-state, with a small body of water surrounded by few nations states. Take the case of the Sea of Japan/East Sea controversy. A relatively small body of water surrounded by only three countries, Korea (North and South), Japan and Russia, for whom it was at the edge of 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'.

### **Towards A Postcolonial Naming of The Seas**

We live in a postcolonial world. And the names of geographic features should reflect this fact. This does not imply a return to indigenous names as many have been lost, wrongly translated and for large geographical features there is a bewildering array of different indigenous names. We live in global as well as a postcolonial world. We need a shared language of names. In some cases the colonial name fulfills the global role of a transnational, long established, easily recognized name such as the Pacific Ocean. But in other cases the colonial/postcolonial issue needs to be addressed. Two principles are important in naming seas; ensuring global intelligibility and a postcolonial sensitivity.

### **References**

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