

Interpreting United Nations Resolutions on Geographical Names

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Introduction

In terms of the Charter of the United Nations, the primary aim of this global body is to keep peace and avoid conflict. Geographical names were identified at an early stage by the UN as one of the areas of human activity most likely to cause conflict and endanger peace. The reason is that geographical names are complex and easily cause misunderstanding. They stem from different languages and different scripts, are derived in some instances from languages now extinct; are used by people who do not understand the languages from which they are derived, and by people in different countries, and irrespective of the language in which they originate, they are used also in the contexts of other languages. There may be more than one name for a feature, either in the same language or in different languages; the same name may be used for different features; names may occur in different spellings, or different written forms may occur for the same name.

In addition to their linguistic and onomastic aspects, geographical names form part of the national culture, are part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the people, symbols of their national pride and prestige. Geographical names honour national heroes such as explorers, statesmen, warriors, artists, writers, scholars, and others. In bilingual or multilingual countries they are extremely important as part of the common heritage. Geographical names are thus socially, linguistically and politically sensitive.

Because of the linguistic, social, political and economic complexity and sensitivity of geographical names, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) was established to advise the United Nations and its member States on the treatment of geographical names so as to avoid or minimize conflict, and to further

the standardization of geographical names at both the national and international levels with the concomitant social and economic benefits. The establishment of the UNGEGN was done in pursuance of Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolutions 715 A (XXVII) of 23 April 1959 and 1314 (LXIV) of 31 May 1968.

The UNGEGN consists of experts in toponymy, linguistics, cartography and related fields subjects, delegated by governments of member countries of the United Nations. Individual experts have at times been invited to participate in their personal capacity, and governments can be requested to delegate individual experts with special experience and expertise.

The Group of Experts is, by virtue of its composition and status, the most authoritative body in the world dealing with geographical names. It usually meets every two years, and in conjunction with the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names which are held every five years.

To date nine UN Conferences have been held, namely in 1967 (Geneva), 1972 (London), 1977 (Athens), 1982 (Geneva), 1987 (Montreal), 1992 (New York), 1998 (New York), 2002 (Berlin), and 2007 (New York).

At the conferences, issues and problems of national and international standardization are discussed and resolutions adopted. Implementation of the resolutions ensures that the standardized geographical names of a country are used correctly by the country itself and by the international community, thus promoting the standardization of geographical names at both national and international levels. It also ensures that the maps, gazetteers and other printed and electronic products of that country are of an internationally acceptable standard. This leads to improved communication, with concomitant economic, social and other advantages. Implementation of resolutions also ensures maximum maintenance of peace and avoidance of conflict among nations.

The significance of UN resolutions

The temptation is strong to assume that everybody understands and accepts the importance of United Nations resolutions, but a lack of comprehension of the issues has recently been noted. Indeed, even United Nations experts themselves sometimes

underestimate how essential it is that resolutions are strictly implemented. Idiosyncratic interpretations or leniency in their implementation are not permissible.

The resolutions are formulated and adopted by the full assembly at the conferences. They are the products of long and intense debate, of careful thought and deliberation, by the world's top experts on geographical names, representatives of scientific organizations, politicians and delegates from all UN member States and other countries, people with experience, expertise, knowledge, wisdom and intelligence. The resolutions adopted by the Conference are subsequently ratified and endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). They are thus United Nations resolutions, at the disposal of the United Nations for implementation as United Nations policy.

The resolutions are there for a good reason. There was chaos before they were introduced and implemented, and there is chaos when they are ignored or violated. When the resolutions are implemented, they minimize misunderstanding and confusion, keep the risk of conflict and contention to a minimum, and ensure optimal social and economic benefits.

The successes of rigorous implementation are evident in toponymic products and practices of numerous countries on the planet. On the other hand, ignorance, recalcitrance and similar factors in some quarters have continued to confound the best efforts of the UNGEGN for the past fifty years and more.

A portion of the blame may be attributed to the nature of the subject. The issues appertaining to geographical names are complex and dynamic, and although resolutions are carefully formulated and specifically phrased, they are couched in technical and scientific terms. For this reason the resolutions are sometimes not easily understood, or misconstrued, or not correctly interpreted, or open to different interpretations. Similarly, some definitions, although clearly formulated, are so complex that they are difficult to comprehend. Disagreements over interpretation may lead to conflict and antagonism.

Justice can obviously not be done within the constraints of a seminar paper to a topic of such magnitude, but some perspective may be achieved by extending the logical and analogous links propounded and intimated. At a joint meeting of the UNGEGN Working Groups on Evaluation and Implementation and Publicity and Funding in

Vancouver in June 2010 Professor Choo made the excellent proposal that the UN resolutions on geographical names be researched. The hope is expressed that the few remarks contained in the present paper, which touches on several salient aspects of interpreting United Nations resolutions on geographical names, will be of use in this research.

“National names authority”

The First UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names recognized that national standardization of geographical names is an essential preliminary to international standardization. Each country has the sovereign right to decide what the names of its features should be, and how they should be written. These names and their applications should then be used by everyone else as well. The said resolution accordingly recommended that each country should have a national names authority. There seems to be some misunderstanding about what is meant by a national names authority, and some countries believe they cannot standardize geographical names without such a body, and therefore postpone the issue. This is a pity, because the international community needs standardized names.

Resolution 1/4A(a) states that a national names authority could be “a continuing body, or coordinated group of bodies”. Such a body need not be called a “names authority”; it could be a council, committee or other body, such as a mapping agency. The Netherlands, for example, has no national names authority, but this country’s names are standardized and serves as one of the finest examples of standardization in the world, and for many decades The Netherlands’ experts have played a leading role in UNGEGN and in the international standardization of geographical names.

Integrity of United Nations resolutions

When the dissemination and publication of UN resolutions have been discussed in the past, the possibility has sometimes been mentioned of providing only the actual recommendations stated in each resolution This suggestion may have been made with the

intention of saving time and space. However, the recommendations stated in the resolutions are always given in a specific context, preceded by a preamble that provides the background and reason for the resolution, reflecting some of the discussion that led to it, e.g. ‘aware of ...’, ‘considering ...’, ‘recognizing ...’, ‘recalling ...’. The preamble is an essential part of the resolution, showing that the resolution is the product of serious consideration, taking relevant factors into account and based on them. In preparing digital or printed versions of the resolutions, the preamble to each resolution should therefore be retained as an essential integral part of the resolution.

Exonyms

Before discussing resolutions that deal with exonyms, it may be noted that the definition of the term *exonym* is problematic to some. According to the definition an *exonym* is a “Name used in a specific language for a geographical feature situated outside the area where that language has official status, and differing in its form from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.” The definition goes on to state that “The officially romanized endonym Moskva for Москва is not an exonym, nor is the Pinyin form Beijing, while Peking is an exonym. The United Nations recommends minimizing the use of exonyms for international usage.”

The definition is precise, but problems have arisen around the question of official languages, and that of romanized forms. Exonyms are generally used for places elsewhere in the world, in languages other than that used by the people who use the exonyms. Exonyms are thus important in understanding geographical names in languages unknown to the user, and in unknown scripts. But what is the position of circumstances where names in a country or area are from languages which are not official? Are such names to be termed ‘exonyms’ or not? It may be merely a question of terminology, but as stated, there have been uncertainties over such matters.

Exonyms are part of the language of the people who use them, and are used to facilitate communication. Thus *Cape Town* (for which *Kaapstad* is also officially standardized) is known as *Kapstadt* in German and *Kapkaupunki* in Finnish, both of

these exonyms apparently being direct translations of the English and Afrikaans name, and composed of words in German and Finnish respectively. The Xhosa name for Cape Town is *eKapa*.

Reduction of the use of exonyms

Resolutions II/29, III/18, IV/20 and V/13 encourage the reduction of the use of exonyms. Moreover, resolution II/35 notes the “keen interest expressed by various countries in abolishing exonyms and using nationally standardized names”. This statement gives cause for great concern. If all exonyms were to be abolished and replaced by official endonyms, that would imply requiring people to do away with words in their own language and getting accustomed to words, which names are, in thousands of other languages, many of which have sounds that are unknown in the language in which the exonyms occur. Such a situation would be unreasonable, and contrary to the intention of UN resolutions, which is to facilitate communication. If only official endonyms were to be provided (on maps etc.) for international useage, without an indication of any exonyms, problems would arise for users elsewhere in the world, for example *inter alia* because the generic terms in geographical names are frequently opaque, cf. *Proliv, Laut*.

The solution to the dilemma is to be found in the preamble to the first resolution in this regard. Resolution II/28 recognizes “that certain exonyms (conventional names, traditional names) form living and vital parts of languages, but that some “remain in the language after the need for them has diminished.” In other words, some exonyms remain in use even when they have become obsolete. The intention of the resolution is to reduce the use of **such obsolete** exonyms that are no longer in use. Even that is problematic, however. How does one decide which exonyms are still in use and which not? The process of obsolescence is a gradual one, and it is impossible to determine which corpus of exonyms is still in use by all people, which is in use by some, and which by none. It is also impossible to determine at what stage the reduction of exonyms impoverishes the language to the extent that names become unintelligible. The degree of reduction is thus problematic.

Lists of exonyms

Resolution II/28 recommends “that national geographical names authorities prepare lists of exonyms currently employed, review them for possible deletions, and publish the results.” Reference is also made to lists of exonyms in resolutions III/18, III/19, and IV/20. Resolution III/19 recommends that the lists referred to in resolution II/28 should not contain exonyms differing from the official name only by the omission, addition or alteration of diacritics or the article; those differing from the official name by declension or derivation; or those created by the translation of a generic term.

Although the original intention seems to have been the elimination of *obsolete* exonyms, such lists of exonyms are valuable because they also list the nationally standardized allonyms, and thus constitute reference guides of educational value and provide sources useful in international contexts, such as cartographic and other applications.

The solution to the uncertainty regarding the use of exonyms, especially in international contexts, is to both the exonyms and the national official endonym, with one form or the other in parenthesis, as the situation dictates. Resolution IV/20 recommends that “exonyms giving rise to international problems should be published in parenthesis with the nationally accepted standard name.” However, in national products there may be a preference for the exonyms to take precedence as part of the language in which they occur, with the nationally standardized names in parenthesis.

“Shared features”

Considering the reference to official languages in the definition of *exonym*, and the reference to exonyms being names in a language which is not the official one of the area in which the named feature is situated, the question arises what the status is of names of geographical features in unofficial, historical and obsolete languages in the area in which these features are situated. The situation is identical or similar in all bilingual or multilingual countries, but South Africa, which is perhaps the most recently democratized

country, and which was the centre of attraction for hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup, may serve as an example.

For hundreds and even thousands of years the different language groups have had their own names for the features in the country, and in many cases one and the same feature bears names in different languages. People speaking different languages have referred to, and still do refer to, the same feature by names in their own language, e.g. *Drakensberg* and *uKhahlamba*, *Pretoria* and *Tshwane*, *Bloemfontein* and *Mangaung*, *Durban* and *Ethekwini*, *Cape Town* and *Ekapa*, *Johannesburg* and *Erhauwutini*, *Nylstroom* and *Modimolle*. Under the previous regime South Africa had two official languages, namely Afrikaans and English. There are now eleven official languages, namely Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa stipulates that “All official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably”, and that “Conditions for development and use of Khoi, Nama and San languages must be created and promoted.”

Although there are now eleven official languages in South Africa, there are numerous names in Portuguese, German, French, Dutch, Khoikhoi and San, and none of these languages is official in the country. The question is whether these names could or should be termed exonyms. Furthermore, some officially standardized names (e.g. *Lephalale*, *Modimolle*, *Tshwane*) are adaptations of San (Bushman) names, while others (e.g. *Bloemfontein*, *Blood River*, *Genadeberg*) are direct translations of San names. In some cases features have more than one name, in different languages, of which only one has been officially sanctioned. Do the allonyms qualify as exonyms, or unofficial endonyms? That depends on whether the geographical description of ‘area’ referred to in the definition is seen as being in a foreign country or merely referring to the occurrence of the official language in that area.

Geographical names are part of language and enjoy the same constitutional considerations. Thus the names used by each of the language groups should be officially recognized and approved. This implies that no name used by another language group should be dropped in favour of another, a ruling which is in accordance with Resolution 9

of the Sixth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which reads that “The Conference, recognizing the cultural and historical significance of geographical names; aware of the sensitivity to deliberate changing of geographical names, which could lead to the loss of cultural and historical heritage, discourages the unauthorized changing of geographical names which have already been established by a legally-constituted entity and nationally recognized.”

Considering then the stipulation of the said Constitution and this UN resolution, it is recommended that in such instances approved geographical names be retained, and that geographical names originating in indigenous languages now also be approved, with the same status as the previously approved names, and that preferential forms be identified. The question of preference or priority is an important one. Although both names enjoy equal status, one name or the other may take precedence for use in certain applications for specific reasons, for example the lack of space on date stamps. Guidelines will need to be decided upon for example for local, national and international use; on maps and GPS systems; on road signs, and the like. In the case of important entities, such as cities, it may be decided to use both names in all situations at all times.

It may be that previously approved names would be preferred for international purposes, because name changing is an ongoing process, and necessitates constant changes to maps, atlases, global positioning systems, trade and other agreements and treaties, scientific publications such as toponymic dictionaries, encyclopaedias, gazetteers, and other printed and electronic media. Furthermore, using previously officialised names for international purposes would avoid the cost and confusion that would otherwise ensue.

Names of features beyond a single sovereignty

It is particularly at the international level that problems may arise, for example when exonyms are used in different languages for features beyond the sovereignty of any one country, or “shared features”. It may be that the feature is “common to more than one country”. In such cases the sovereignty of each country concerned needs to be recognized. Therefore Resolution III/20 reads:

“The Conference,

Considering the need for international standardization of names of geographical features that are under the sovereignty of more than one country or are divided among two or more countries,

1. *Recommends* that countries sharing a given geographical feature under different names should endeavour, as far as possible, to reach agreement on fixing a single name for the feature concerned;
2. *Further recommends* that when countries sharing a given geographical feature do not succeed in agreeing on a common name, it should be a general rule of international cartography that the name used by each of the countries concerned will be accepted. A policy of accepting only one or some of such names while excluding the rest would be inconsistent in principle as well as inexpedient in practice. Only technical reasons may sometimes make it necessary, especially in the case of small-scale maps, to dispense with the use of certain names belonging to one language or another.”

Features beyond any sovereignty

Finally, there are names applied to features that lie beyond the sovereignty of any country. Since all land masses are under the jurisdiction of one country or another, such features beyond any sovereignty are generally maritime features. According to the charts of the International Hydrographic Bureau, each country has territorial waters 12 nautical miles in extent under its jurisdiction, measured from the low-water baselines. Beyond the territorial waters the sea to a distance of 24 nautical miles from the baselines are the Contiguous and Maritime Cultural Zones of the country. The sea beyond the Territorial Waters to a distance of 200 nautical miles is the Exclusive Economic Zone. Beyond these limits are international waters, falling beyond the jurisdiction of any one country, and sometimes called the high seas.

Since the term *exonym* is used for a geographical name falling outside the area where the language from which the name comes is official, and there is no official language in areas covered by the high seas, the term *exonym* is also appropriate to refer to high seas. United Nations resolutions are ineffectual in such instances, since they are effective in their respect for the national sovereignty of countries in the application to

geographical names, but do not cover the eventuality of names of maritime features that fall beyond the sovereignty of any one nation.

The name of the sea between Japan and the Korean Peninsula has been known *inter alia* by the English exonyms *Sea of Japan*, *Japan Sea* and *East Sea*. Since the water feature concerned lies between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, and the exonyms in the languages concerned are *Dong Hae* and *Nihon Kai* or *Nippon Kai* respectively, it has been suggested that these Korean and Japanese language exonyms should be used in order to implement resolution III/20.

Dissemination of UN resolutions on Geographical Names

As far as the question of romanization is concerned, the definition states, as has been indicated above, that the Pinyin form *Beijing* is not an exonym, while *Peking* is an English exonym. In other words, geographical names that have been converted to Roman script in accordance with United Nations approved romanization systems are not regarded as exonyms, while those converted to Roman script by romanization systems that have not been approved by the United Nations are regarded as exonyms. That *Beijing* is an official endonym while *Peking* is an English exonym can be known only by experts who know the difference between the Pinyin and Hunterian romanization systems for Chinese. The possibility is thus small that cartographers, and other people involved in the use of Chinese geographical names, would be able to implement resolutions that recommend minimizing the number of exonyms in international usage. The same applies to romanization systems for all the other non-Roman scripts. The matter is complicated even further by the existence of different romanization systems for Arabic, Cyrillic, Korean and other scripts, and by the periodic amendment and revision of romanization systems.

Publication of romanization systems

Without guidance it is practically impossible to know which are the romanization systems approved and adopted by UN resolutions. Accordingly, resolution II/13 reads:

“*The Conference,*

Having adopted a number of systems for the romanization of various alphabets for international cartography,
Recommends that these be published by the United Nations in a booklet for wide dissemination to its Members.”

In pursuance of this resolution, the former chairman of the UNGEGN, with the co-operation of relevant UNGEGN working groups, prepared the booklet *United Nations Documents on Geographical Names* (Pretoria: 1966) which contained *inter alia* the romanization systems approved by UN resolutions up to that point. This publication was hailed as an important and useful instrument in the standardization of geographical names and the transliteration of non-Roman scripts, but has long been out of print. With a view to assisting geographical names practitioners and others in the correct transliteration of non-Roman scripts it is recommended that resolution II/13 be implemented and an upgraded booklet with the transliteration tables approved to date be published.

Essential publication

The question of UN approved and other romanization systems; the reduction of the use of exonyms; the status of official and unofficial languages in standardized names; the question of shared features, and the like, are only a few of many problematic issues relating to geographical names. The only manner in which these issues can be dealt with is by means of implementing United Nations resolutions on geographical names, and in the correct interpretation of the resolutions.

In order to interpret or implement resolutions, it is necessary to have access to them. In this regard the Republic of Korea has taken the lead in two respects. In the first place, Professor Sungjae Choo and his colleagues have contributed to the establishment of a database website for easy searches of these resolutions. The address of this indispensable website is <http://www.land.go.kr/ungegn>. Searches can easily be done by conference, by subject, and by key words.

In the second place an important publication was prepared by Professor Ki-Suk Lee and Dr Lucie Möller for the 8th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of

Geographical Names held in Berlin in 2002. Entitled *Statutes, Rules of Procedure and Resolutions on Geographical Names*, it was published by the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation in Seoul in 2002. In this work, colloquially referred to as “The Green Book”, the resolutions are arranged alphabetically by subject to facilitate easy reference. This publication was distributed to more than 80 countries attending the conference, and was acclaimed an exceptionally useful product that facilitated the participation of all, including political delegates and others.

This book is one of the most indispensable products of the UNGEGN, and was prepared and compiled specifically to facilitate and make possible the implementation of UN resolutions. It also enables experts and delegates to the UNGEGN sessions and UN conferences to participate effectively, efficiently and confidently, since it provides the necessary background and guidance. It ensures, for example, that country and divisional reports comply with UNGEGN requirements as regards content and length, comprehensivity and clarity, allocation of time to oral presentations and summaries of reports, and other aspects. In brief, it is an essential reference guide to anyone seeking information and guidance in respect of the preparation of reports, proper procedures at UNGEGN sessions and conferences, and every aspect of national and international standardization of geographical names. Granted that everything is readily available on the Web, not everyone brings a laptop to the meetings, there is always the problem of plug-ins, the waiting period to get onto the Internet, the necessity of searching for the correct address, and so forth, whereas a compact, handy booklet with a good index and alphabetical listing of resolutions is quick and easy.

It is strongly recommended that this publication, updated to include the latest resolutions and any other relevant information, be made available to all participants and delegates, perhaps in advance of meetings and conferences, perhaps electronically, but also in published form as a part of the essential knowledge and reference work of participants, and should be widely advertised and promoted. Consideration may be given to this booklet being offered for sale, at a cost that will generate income for other activities.

The publication under discussion is fundamental to all Government, United Nations and other national and international organizations and bodies involved in the

standardization of geographical names, including names authorities, cartographers, map and other editors, teachers, geographers, historians, linguists and other academics, the media, and indeed the general public.

Resolution VII/7 recognizes the substantive need for wide dissemination of standardized place names in the global market-place for use by commercial ventures, communications firms, international software developers and others; recognizes also that the standardization of geographical names is dependent on the implementation of resolutions; recognizes that the private sector is prepared to enter into various funding and sponsorship arrangements with Governments [and with the United Nations], and recommends that the United Nations Secretariat promulgate the existing guidelines or otherwise recommend guidelines covering the engagement of the Group of Experts in cooperative agreements and sponsorships with elements of the private sector; further recommends that the Group of Experts actively pursue the underwriting of the activities proposed by interested parties in the private sector; and requests that the Secretariat report progress in this area at the next and future meetings of the Group of Experts.

In accordance with the stipulations of this resolution, the Working Group on Evaluation and Implementation should, as part of its basic activities, together with the Working Group on Publicity and Funding, seek sponsors and/or a publisher to publish the updated “Green Book”. The United Nations had the opportunity of doing so, but did not take it. Incredibly, this indispensable *vade mecum* is not even mentioned in the Press Kit being prepared by the UNGEGN Working Group on Publicity and Funding. Yet it is unquestionable the most fundamental of all the documents and publications of the UNGEGN, providing as it does the resolutions in an easily accessible form, as well as guidelines for delegates and experts to UNGEGN meetings for preparation of reports and correct procedures for the conducting of the meetings to ensure optimal efficiency and effectiveness in terms of time and expertise.