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Maritime feature names:
The role of UNGEGN during its first decade

**focusing on the role and purpose of Resolution 20 of the
Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names**

Paul Woodman

Former Secretary of the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

woodman@litstad.u-net.com

Abstract

This paper summarises the early history of the involvement of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in the subject of maritime feature nomenclature, and looks at relevant resolutions passed during the first decade of UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Particular attention is paid to Resolution 20 of the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (= Resolution III/20), which is frequently invoked to encourage the international community to use 'East Sea' alongside 'Sea of Japan' on cartographic products. My personal belief is that it is incorrect to invoke Resolution III/20 in this manner, and this paper is in part intended to demonstrate why I believe this to be so.

The First UN Conference

The First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) took place in Geneva in 1967. The topic of maritime names was not given a specific agenda item, but was instead included within Item 12(f) of the conference agenda, titled ‘Treatment of names beyond a single sovereignty’. The discussion took place under Committee IV of the conference, chaired by Mr J K Fraser of Canada, and the focus of this discussion was on the standardization of names in international waters. Resolution I/8B emerged as the result; its aim was to acknowledge ‘the necessity for international standardization of names in and under ocean areas to promote the safety of navigation and to facilitate the exchange of scientific oceanographic data’¹. It is clear from the wording that the conference placed a definite emphasis on the technical rather than the political aspects of maritime nomenclature.

The Second UN Conference

At the Second UN Conference in London in 1972, maritime names for the first time became a specific agenda item in their own right. They featured within Agenda Item 14, which read as follows:

14. Names of features beyond a single sovereignty:
- (a) Features common to two or more nations
 - (b) Maritime features
 - (c) Undersea features
 - (d) Extraterrestrial features

Interestingly, the agenda split discussion of shared or divided features (14a) from discussion of maritime features (14b) and undersea features (14c). The discussion of Item 14 came under Committee V of the conference, chaired by Mr M F (‘Pete’) Burrill of the United States. The outcome of the discussion as far as maritime names were concerned was Resolution II/22, which built on Resolution I/8B and read as follows²:

Resolution II/22: Standardization of maritime nomenclature

The Conference,

Recognizing that the increased interest and activities of countries in the marine environment require an improvement in international nomenclatural standardization,

Recommends that the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names study existing national and international practices concerning the delimitation and naming of oceans and seas, including their integral subdivisions, beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, with a view to recommending improvements in current nomenclatural practices and procedures.

This little-remarked resolution is I believe significant in providing UNGEGN with the licence to look at the question of ocean and sea nomenclature. It encourages UNGEGN to determine, develop and recommend the best and most appropriate general nomenclatural policies and practices, though again for technical rather than political reasons. It was understood, of course, that it remains outside the remit of UNGEGN to recommend action on the naming of any one specific feature.

¹ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCSGN-Reports/1-UNCSGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; p 12.

² <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCSGN-Reports/2-UNCSGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; p 14.

Through the same Committee V of the conference emerged Resolution II/25. It is important to note that this resolution was drafted in relation to features common to two or more nations (Agenda Item 14a) rather than maritime features (14b) or undersea features (14c). The resolution read as follows³:

Resolution II/25: Names of features beyond a single sovereignty

The Conference,

Considering the necessity of an international standardization of names of geographical features which 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 a different name form should endeavour to reach agreement on fixing a single name for the feature concerned;
2. *Further recommends* that when countries sharing a given geographical feature and having different official languages do not succeed in agreeing on a common name form, it should be a general rule of international cartography that the name forms of each of the languages in question should be accepted. A policy of accepting only one or some of such name forms while excluding the rest on principle would be inconsistent 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 name forms belonging to one language or another.

This very important resolution asked the international community to accept equally all the endonyms for a shared feature, rather than accepting just one endonym at the expense of others.

The Third UN Conference

The Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in Athens in 1977, was my own first experience of the UN, and as a newcomer to toponymy the proceedings left a deep and lasting impression on me. At this conference, the subject of features beyond a single sovereignty was included under Item 14 of the conference agenda, which read as follows:

14. Policies, procedures and co-operative arrangements for the naming of features beyond a single sovereignty:
- (a) Features common to two or more nations
 - (b) Maritime features
 - (c) Undersea features
 - (d) Extraterrestrial features

Along with the related topic of Exonyms, which constituted Item 13 of the conference agenda, Item 14 was placed under the work of Committee III of the conference, under the chairmanship of Mr A A Komkov of the Soviet Union. The discussion on maritime features (14b) and on undersea features (14c) produced Resolutions III/21 and III/22 respectively, both of which called for close relations with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO)⁴. But a better-known outcome from the discussions of Item 14 was Resolution III/20, and this resolution merits a closer look now.

³ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCSGN-Reports/2-UNCSGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; p 14.

⁴ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCSGN-Reports/3-UNCSGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; pp 37-8.

Background to Resolution III/20

During the second meeting of Committee III of the Third Conference, on Thursday 25th August 1977, the representative of Nigeria (Mr R Oluwole Coker, Head of Federal Surveys) took the microphone to comment on Resolution II/25. He noted in particular the text at the beginning of section 2 of that resolution, which limited the scope of the resolution to ‘countries sharing a given geographical feature and having different official languages’. Mr Coker believed that this wording was unnecessarily restrictive, and that a resolution on this subject should apply also to countries sharing a given geographical feature and sharing the same official language. There was no disagreement with this proposal, so Nigeria moved to amend Resolution II/25 along these suggested lines, and the editorial team allotted to Committee III of the conference was instructed to draw up appropriate draft wording for a revised resolution. The resolution that resulted from this revision is the well-known Resolution III/20, which reads as follows⁵:

Resolution III/20: Names of features beyond a single sovereignty

The Conference recommends that resolution 25 of the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names be reworded as follows:

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.

Intention of Resolution III/20

It can be seen from the above paragraphs that the essential difference between Resolution II/25 and Resolution III/20 lies in the text at the beginning of section 2, where the scope of the resolution is extended in accordance with Nigeria’s wishes, to include also countries sharing the same official languages:

- Resolution II/25 refers specifically to
‘...countries sharing a given geographical feature and having different official languages...’
- Resolution III/20 refers more widely and simply to
‘...countries sharing a given geographical feature...’

⁵ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCISGN-Reports/3-UNCISGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; pp 36-7.

There is however no difference in the intention of the two resolutions. Both resolutions were intended to consider shared or divided features on land, and to ask the international community to accept on an equal basis all the endonyms for that feature. Maritime features were not intended to be included in the spirit of these resolutions. This can be demonstrated by looking again at the relevant agenda item for the Third Conference, Item 14:

14. Policies, procedures and co-operative arrangements for the naming of features beyond a single sovereignty:
- (a) Features common to two or more nations
 - (b) Maritime features
 - (c) Undersea features
 - (d) Extraterrestrial features

Agenda Item 14 shows that features common to two or more nations (14a) were separate from maritime features (14b) and undersea features (14c). The discussion introduced by Nigeria that eventually led to Resolution III/20 was dealt with exclusively under Item 14(a), as the relevant portion of the official UN report of the conference demonstrates⁶:

Features common to two or more countries (item 14 (a))

Nigeria drew attention to the need for revision of resolution 25 of the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names to cover cases in which two countries using the same language failed to agree on a single name. An appropriate draft resolution was recommended for adoption....

The discussions on maritime and undersea features (14b&c) were quite separate from the discussion on features common to two or more countries (14a), and took place after 14(a) had been completed. The draft resolution which became Resolution III/20 evolved solely from the discussions under 14(a) and not from the later maritime and undersea feature name discussions under 14(b) & 14(c). Resolution III/20 was intended to be applicable to land features only.

Exclusive Economic Zones

Because the feature known as the East Sea or the Sea of Japan is entirely covered today by Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), there is a temptation among some interested parties to say that this feature is a shared feature that comes under the orbit of Resolution III/20. This is in my opinion a false argument, for two reasons:

- Resolution III/20, as we have seen, resulted from a conference discussion on shared land features and was intended to have relevance to shared land features only.
- Resolution III/20 was passed in 1977, a full five years before the United Nations Law of the Sea introduced the concept of the Exclusive Economic Zone in 1982. Resolution III/20 cannot be construed as containing an intention to cover a concept that did not exist when the resolution was passed. As might be expected, the report of the conference makes no mention of EEZs anywhere under Agenda Item 14⁷.

⁶ <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNCSSGN-Reports/3-UNCSSGN-Rpt-en.pdf>; p 15.

⁷ In any event, it is highly questionable whether EEZs affect sovereignty as it was understood by Resolution III/20. EEZs do confer mineral and other resource rights to littoral countries, but do not compromise the international waters / high seas status of water bodies enjoying such status, regarding *eg* right of passage.

Summary

- Maritime issues were discussed at all three of the initial UN conferences, with the emphasis on the need for standardized maritime nomenclature, and the desirability of close relations with the IHO.
- Resolution II/22 in particular encouraged UNGEGN to explore policies and procedures relevant to maritime nomenclature in general, though it is of course beyond the remit of UNGEGN to consider individual feature names.
- The concept of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) cannot be retrospectively applied to UNCISGN resolutions pre-dating that 1982 concept.
- Resolution II/25 and its successor Resolution III/20 should not be invoked in support of a claim for dual nomenclature for the feature known alternatively as the East Sea and the Sea of Japan. Those resolutions resulted from conference discussions on shared land features and were not intended for application to major maritime feature nomenclature at all.