

## Exonyms of Vietnam's Vinh Bac Bo (Gulf of Tonkin)

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The presentation is exploring the various exonyms of this south-east Asian gulf, including some historical allonyms. Tonkin is the traditional historical name in most foreign languages for the northern part of Vietnam. Both the local Vietnamese and Chinese names for the feature mean in essence the same thing: “north bay”, even though it lies at the southern part of China. This commonly used meaning also helps co-operation and understanding in a region that saw so much suffering in the 20th century.

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The *Gulf of Tonkin* as is known in the English language, is a north–western portion of the South China Sea with an approximate area of 126,000 square kilometres. Its extent is larger than the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland combined, it is a much more open sea area, with Vietnam (763 km) and China (695 km) sharing its coastlines. Bordered by the northern part of Vietnam, China's southern coast of Guangxi Autonomous Region, Leizhou Peninsula and Hainan Island, it is outside the disputed maritime area further out in the South China Sea.

The local names for the feature are *Vinh Bac Bo* in Vietnamese and 北部湾 (Pinyin *Beibu Wan*) in Chinese. (Fig.1)

The toponym gained worldwide attention in 1964 when the controversial *Gulf of Tonkin* Incident marked the starting point of the escalation of the Vietnam War. The paper does not wish to deal with this event, but tries to present some aspects of the exonyms and local names of this marine feature over time. It also speculates that besides the agreement on territorial delimitations the use of the same name for the same feature in different languages may contribute to Chinese–Vietnamese cooperation in the gulf area.

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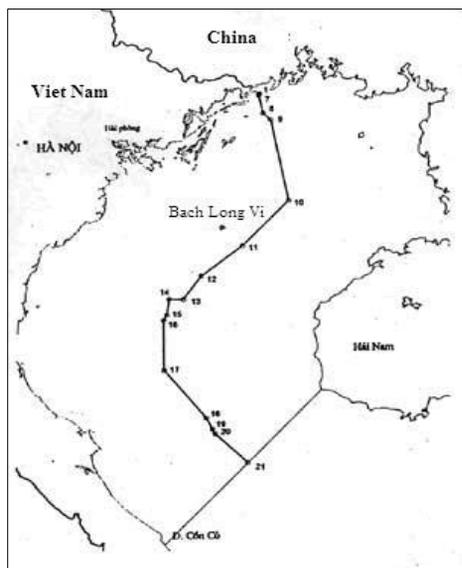
Following times of hostilities and tension in the 1970s and '80s China and Vietnam agreed in 2000 on the delimitation of territorial seas, EEZs and continental shelves in the *Gulf of Tonkin*. As the gulf is not wide enough to accommodate for the 200 nautical miles of EEZ for both countries, a maritime boundary was agreed to divide the zones (Fig. 2).

**Figure 1.** Position of the Gulf of Tonkin



Source: Wikipedia Commons

**Figure 2.** Agreed maritime boundary, 2000



Source: Wikipedia Commons

## 1. The development (etymology) of the name Gulf of Tonkin.

An emperor named Le Loi (1428–33), having recaptured the territory of northern Vietnam from the Chinese Ming Empire, established his seat in the city of Thang Long ('Ascending Dragon', present Ha Noi). The alternative name of this city in Chinese was called 东京 (Pinyin *Dongjing*, eastern capital), that transferred into Vietnamese in present Roman script *Dong Kinh*. Gradually, some 200 years later in European languages the pronounced forms of *Tongking*, *Tongkin*, *Tonquin*, *Tunquin* – and later most often *Tonkin* – came to refer to the northern part of Vietnam. The hydronym denoting the gulf itself and using this proper name gradually also appeared on western maps. Until that time (17th – early 18th century) European maps more often used the name *Gulf of Cochinchina*.



Figure 5. Detail from Jan Jansson's Indiae Orientalis 1636



**Note:** An early example of using the name Gulf of Cochinchina (“Enseada da Cauchinchina”)

**Source:** [www.hjbmaps.com](http://www.hjbmaps.com)

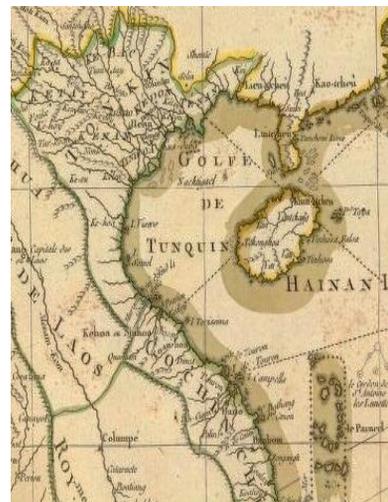
Figure 6. Detail from Herman Moll's 1732 map of East Indies



**Note:** The name Tonquin already denotes a northern part of Vietnam with Cochichina moved further south. The medieval empire of Champa is now pressed to the southernmost areas.

**Source:** [www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)

Figure 7. Detail from Rigobert Bonne's 1771 Indes Orientales



**Note:** Tonkin is a northern region, while the gulf is shown as Golfe de Tunquin.

**Source:** [Wikipedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/)

The name Vietnam literally means 'Viet in the South.' The key proper name *Viet*, and its Chinese (Pinyin) form *Yue* (also *Baiyue*) originally referred to the non-Chinese people who lived in south China and present north Vietnam over 2000 years ago. Following several changes (Nam Viet, Giao Chi, An Nam /Annan/, Dai Viet), the country name of today was first suggested by a by a 16th-century poet named Nguyen Binh Khiem, and used for the country for the first time name by Emperor Gia Long in 1804. Exonyms of Tonkin, Annam and *Cochinchina* for names of the country and for parts of it were used rather inconsequently until the French colonization (1887–1954).

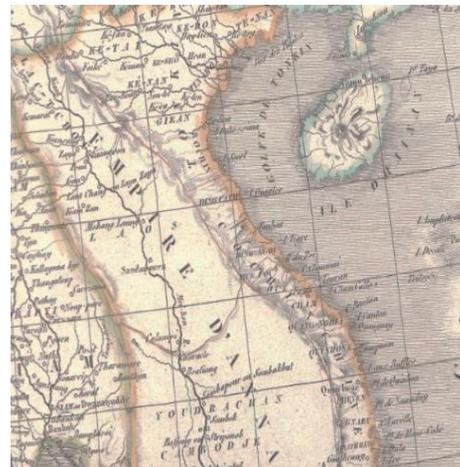
**Figure 8.** Detail of map of East India 1806, Weimar Geogr. Institut



**Note:** The gulf is still denoted as Meerbusen von Cochinchina

**Source:** [www.raremaps.com](http://www.raremaps.com)

**Figure 9.** Detail of Lapie's Atlas Universel, 1829



**Note:** The gulf is Tonkin, but present Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are under the name Empire d'Annan

**Source:** [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/)

Figure 10. French Indochina in 1930



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Figure 11. Map of northern Vietnam today



Source: [www.hoangviettravel.vn](http://www.hoangviettravel.vn)

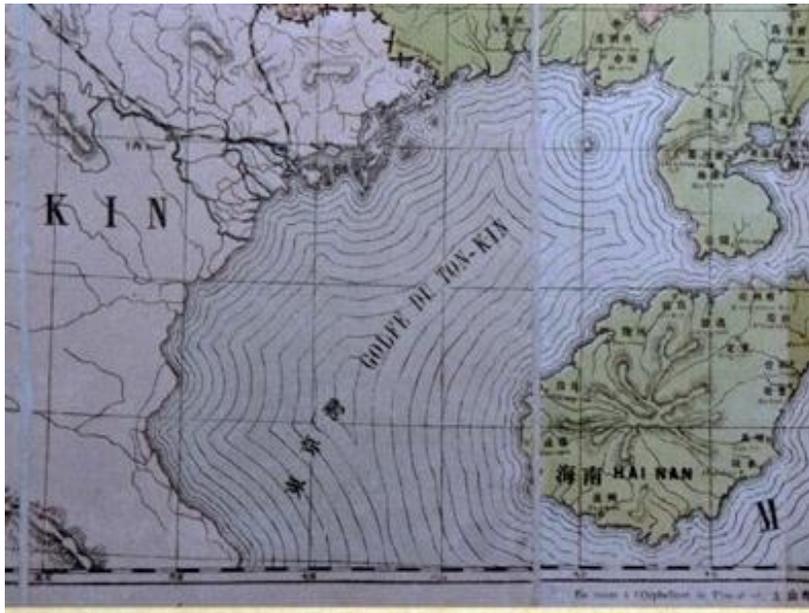
### 3. Local names of the gulf

Vietnamese Vinh Bac Bo and Chinese (Pinyin) Beibu Wan officially replaced the previously used names in 1975. Both names mean 'bay of the northern part'. The toponym Vinh Bac Bo already appeared on maps of the 1960s. The former Chinese name for the gulf (in Pinyin) was Dongjing Wan, actually a homonym with the pronounced Chinese form of Tokyo Bay (literally 'bay of the eastern capital').

The form Vinh Dong Kinh was apparently not used in Vietnamese, and the phrase raises resentment in the country for both its colonial context and Chinese origin.

Sources suggest that alternative local names like Vinh Bac Phan (golf of the north coast) and Vinh Bac Viet (golf of north Viet) had been used before, but further investigations would be needed for linguistic and cartographic evidence.

Figure 12. Detail of 1904 map by 'Shanghai Publishing Company'



Source: [www.tinmoi.vn](http://www.tinmoi.vn)

Figure 13. Pergamon World Atlas 1967 /Polish Army Topography Service



Source: [www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)

#### 4. Exonyms of solidarity?

In the 1960s some Eastern European countries experimented with names other than Tonkin, based on the local name. The reason was probably a show of solidarity with North Vietnam during the war of 1965–75. An East German atlas (Haack Hausatlas, 1965, Gotha, East Germany) displayed the name 'Nordvietnamische Bucht', while Hungarian maps started to use the name 'Vietnami-öböl' (Gulf of Vietnam) as they still do today.

The accepted forms for the feature in English, French, Spanish languages are Gulf of Tonkin, Golfe du Tonkin, Golfo del Tonkín respectively. They are the standard forms in these languages in international documents.

#### 5. Cooperation in the Gulf of Tonkin

We may be interested to note that apart from other areas of tension of the South China Sea the Gulf of Tonkin is experiencing an atmosphere of peace and cooperation. It is all the more remarkable as China and Vietnam even fought a short border war in 1979, and relations only improved significantly after 1990. The 2000 agreement on maritime boundaries also called for cooperation in fishing. Such initiatives as the recent high-level agreements on the Gulf of Tonkin (Beibu) Economic Belt aim at cooperation in investment, trade, exploitation of natural resources and tourism.

The two countries have a valid agreement on joint exploration for oil and gas in the gulf until 2016.

Tourism also holds good prospects for package tours to places like Vietnam's Ha Long Bay or Wuzhi Mountain on Hainan Island.

It may be just speculation but deciding on equivalent Chinese and Vietnamese endonyms for the feature in the 1970s was an encouragement for cooperation and understanding in the area.

**Figure 14.** Ha Long Bay



Source: Wikimedia Commons

**Figure 15.** Wuzhi Shan (Hainan Island)



Source: <http://unsignedworks.blogspot.com>

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