

The return of geography into geopolitics and the importance of geographical names

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The world order is changing rapidly, the seas are under pressure, and the way we look at them is changing. Climate change, wars and the collapse of coastal states are causing insecurity. Due to all these effects the issue of sea names is becoming even more important and relevant. In the maritime domain, naming has to be considered from a historical perspective and in a developing trend, new and old conflicts are surfacing. The wish and the political will to use these times of change to dispute unacceptable naming is increasing. This can happen in bilateral or multilateral formats. In Europe multilateral formats are well proven and tested, while in Asia bilateral formats are preferred.

For a better appreciation of these developments the understanding of the sea is very helpful. The lack of knowledge about the sea, so-called “sea blindness”, is a global issue, as relevant in the United Kingdom as in Australia, to mention just two examples of nations surrounded by the sea. Whereas China, for a long time seen as an essentially continental power has established a future oriented “sea awareness” that is in accordance with its geopolitical and geographic interests. How are South Korea and Japan reacting to these increasingly ambitious actions at sea?

A brief consideration of geopolitics and its relevance for sea names seems appropriate. The naming of islands and straits presents challenges in many maritime regions. To explain the sea and its geopolitical aspects we have to consider it in four different dimensions: the sea as a habitat, as a resource, as a highway for transport and as a vector for power projection. The United Nations, through the International Maritime Organization, as the guardian of United Nations’ Convention on the Law of the Sea, is a key -actor, as is the European Union, with her strategies for its different sea basins, is involved in naming disputes, ashore and at sea. Another institution dealing with the naming issue is the International Hydrographic Organization, as a global actor for standardization of sea names between different national and regional hydrographic authorities.

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INTRODUCTION

The world order is changing rapidly, the seas are under pressure and the way we look at them is changing. Climate change, wars, piracy, criminal activity and the collapse of coastal states are causing insecurity. Due to all these effects the issue of sea names is becoming even more important and relevant. Language is one of the principal aspects of our identity: independent of facts and figures names tell a story. A good narrative, perhaps a real one based on facts, sometimes wishful thinking, names that have a good narrative reflect wishes, hopes and expectations. Naming is a very important part of our life: our private life as well as our professional life. And names are essential for all of our nations as well. They are a part of our national identity and they can have a strong unifying aspect on one hand and can cause conflict on the other hand. In the maritime world, names stand for history, for specific characteristics, for ownership.

Baptism of ships or the launching ceremony has always been a very serious and celebratory event. It is an old tradition and takes place in most of the Navies and in almost all commercial ships as well. And a ship's name still bears a message, at least as far as state ships or warships are concerned. Geographical names like the name of an Ocean or a Sea, a port or a river can create either a positive effect or the opposite: naval diplomacy is a powerful tool which can be used in order to open or improve relations between nations, regions and societies. Geographical names can represent a demand as well, and keeping the impressive number border disputes ashore and at sea in mind, names are one part of the wish to preserve and encourage peace, justice and a cooperative relation between nations and their peoples.

UNDERSTANDING THE SEA

Before explaining this complex issue, and in order to establish a kind of orientation framework for our topic of Sea Names, I want to refer briefly to the term “Sea Blindness” a term which needs to be explained. It is about the knowledge and understanding of the seas, the ocean and it is about how people deal with the maritime world of life. What does a citizen of a country understand about the sea? Does he perceive the sea as a recreational site, as a dangerous natural force, as an adventure, as a medium for transport? The obvious lack of a maritime awareness is a fact in western societies. Even countries surrounded by the sea like the United Kingdom or Australia, to name but two, are suffering from a lack of recognition of the Sea. This is not the case in the Russian Federation or in China. Alongside the existing sea blindness in the US, there is a sufficient number of discriminating individuals representing Administrations, Universities and the Economy who are able to think in strategic and geopolitical terms.

Looking into the complex issues of geography and geopolitics, it makes sense to keep a very few basic facts in mind, before dealing with some specific cases and their current status.

The global aspect of the sea is very easily to explain: it the 70 – 80 - 90 rule: 70 percent of our planet is covered by sea, 80 percent of the world population is living within 100 km from the sea, the big cities are all port and 90 percent of the world's trade by volume is carried on the highways of the sea.

Here we are challenged with the question why our planet is called “Earth” and not “Ocean”. Naming matters!

We also need to consider how the oceans and seas got their names.¹ We can study the linguistic origins and we find geographical roots: like the Indian Ocean, the Ocean south of India, why is it not named the African Ocean, the Ocean east of Africa? Or the Pacific Ocean, named after a characteristic, “pacify”, meaning peaceful or better calmness, as it Ferdinand Magellan named on first reaching it in 1520. And the Atlantic Ocean has its name from Atlas a Titan of Greek mythology.

To understand the complexity of this 70 percent of our planet better, I offer you a model, which looks at the Sea from four different aspects:

It is my intention to combine geopolitical and naming aspects for our purpose.

The Sea as a Habitat

- What are the consequences of global climate change and urbanization?
- The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea does not directly reflect geographical names. Two articles, 246 and 200, are related to Marine Scientific Research and Pollution: the coastal State has the lead for naming areas, especially the naming of undersea features, subject to scientific research.
- Is the establishment of artificial islands and the linked claim for extending sovereignty a cause for new names?

The Sea as a Resource

- What is the impact of overfishing and exploiting mineral and energy resources? Are the Seas deposits of toxic waste?
- The Seabed is becoming more important for all maritime nations thanks to developing technology, offshore activities are increasing significantly.
- What kind of balance between economic and environmental interests is required to reach a regional consensus? What is the role of the growing responsibility of the International Seabed Authority in this context? What can be achieved by using naming procedures as political tool?
- Some countries have developed national agendas of geographical names standardization in order to achieve special attention. Indonesia, Iran, Mexico and the Republic of Korea are also considering or implementing the establishment of undersea feature name standardization authorities.

The Sea as a Highway (transport)

- What are the consequences of insecurity in global sea lanes?
- What about attacks on the global subsea cable network that enables the internet? Functional global communication networks are the backbone of globalization.
- What is the power of geographical names in this context?

¹ <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/06/water-water-everywhere-ocean-names/> (Accessed 12.10.2017)

The Sea as a Domain for Power Projection

- How do we achieve good governance at sea?
- Are the huge numbers of actors at sea, often bringing different and controversial views with them, a threat to our security and is naming used as a political tool for solutions or for escalation?
- What are the consequences of UNCLOS violation?
- Who has the authority, the political will, and the means to enforce the law of the Sea?

UNDERSTANDING GEOPOLITICS

The actors are foremost political scientists and analysts, the topic has a very different acceptance and recognition in the global world. It is a science, which is based on a conjunctive approach.

Geopolitical thinking is linked with a deep understanding of geography and geographical names. Both have a strong influence on geopolitical thinking and acting. Geopolitical thinking is linked with strategic thinking and acting as well. In the area of naming the idea of a kind of strategic communication seems relevant as well. Is the sea which separates the Arabian Peninsula from Iran the “Arabian Gulf” or the “Persian Gulf”? The dispute is an old one and we will find in older and newer maps both names. The nearby Gulf of Oman is not questioned by one of the surrounding countries: names have their own power and it can be a political and economic power. And the question why the South China Sea is named so seems today appropriate. This Sea is surrounded by seven countries and the name has been introduced by the European Nations when they began to intensify trade with China. The name could be “West Philippine Sea”? Or as another option: “Sea of Vietnam”?

From an economic standpoint the decision for or against an investment must be consider geopolitics: if not, the risks are higher and failure is a frequent occurrence.

“Geopolitics generally refers to a state’s projection of power abroad by any means or tools of statecraft. This definition encompasses both the active effort to engage in geopolitics in order to project power externally and the passive effort to respond to the geopolitical efforts of others to project power. It also encompasses all aspects of sovereignty and power, regardless of whether the tool or the objective is economic or political. The word “generally” is important because it leaves the door open to external non-state actors that increasingly are both the source of geopolitical pressures on states and the object of geopolitical efforts by states.”² The term “by any means or tools of statecraft” has lost its exclusiveness: non- state actors are using this principle for their aims as well and they are utilizing the power of names which comes mainly from two sources, religion and history.

² www.cfapubs.org/doi/pdf/10.2470/rf.v2015.n1.4 by P Malmgren - 2015 Chapter 2:What is Geopolitics 2015 The CFA institute Research Foundation

UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication³ is taking place in almost all ranges of our life: marketing, technical and, most powerful, in the social media. If we are dealing with naming issues the political and social media dimensions are of great importance. The actors are public servants, politicians and Non – Governmental Groups. They want “to build political consensus or consent on important issues involving the exercise of political power and the allocation of resources in society. This includes efforts to influence voting in elections as well as public policy decisions by lawmakers or administrators. On the international level, this includes communications in support of public diplomacy and military stabilization.”

Who is telling the story, the narrative about the sea, about a specific sea? Here naming comes into the play. The example of big and small Sea Battles are in our memory, many of them are named after geographical designations. "Trafalgar" (1805) stands for a Sea Battle which had changed the world for almost 100 years, the Sea Battle of Skagerrak or, as named by the British, the Battle of Jutland, which has had no relevant political impact, had a prominent place in Germany's collective memory for a long time, due to a very successful information campaign. This shows one of the cases where naming was used to declare a kind of ownership. These are examples for the importance of names in a geographical and geopolitical context. And the impact of history: a heritage, a commitment and a challenge.

To illustrate the impact of history some very brief case examples are adjuvant. The names of the explorers and conquerors are still familiar to us: Christopher Columbus, although now known not to be the first explorer, who discovered America, is still in our common memory as the discoverer.

Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese Seafarer and Vice King of India, Fernão de Magalhães, known under the name Magellan, another Portuguese Seafarer, the “Strait of Magellan” is one of the most impressive narrow passages, James Cook, the British Seafarer, explorer and scientist, Ronald Amundsen the Norwegian Polar Explorer and Scientist, Adam John von Krusenstern, the Russian Admiral explorer and scientist and to conclude this very personal selection: Alexander von Humboldt, the German Explorer and Naturalist: they stand for certain sea regions, for islands, for narrow passages, for sea currents: for sea related topics. Even when they disappear from our memory for a certain time, even for generations, they continue to exist and from time to time it needs only a minor event to bring them back into the forefront of our memories. The same is true even for sailors such as the Korean Yi Sun Sin, who is honored by a very impressive statue in Seoul, an Admiral and national hero, who invented the Turtle Battleships and is to be seen in a row with Nelson, de Ruyter and Tegetthoff. Or the Chinese Cheng Ho, who commanded one of the most modern fleets of his time in the 14th century: they also wrote maritime history primarily in the context of the maritime development of Asia.

³ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cesar_Garcia24/publication/254312907_Using_Strategic_Communicati_on Accessed 12.10.2017

Admiral Cheng Ho established the first global economic network: he explored the Highways of the Sea and linked China with Africa and even further North.

Comparing this mercantile network with the very famous Hanseatic League, similarities and differences are obvious.

North Germany's and North European merchants founded this League, which connected approximately 200 cities, linking the Baltic Sea with the North Sea and the North Atlantic for almost four hundred years. The Hanseatic League played a major role by influencing economy, trade, culture and politics developments: a powerful community. Established and kept functional by loose memoranda of understanding, by trust and confidence: often by a handshake.

Based on agreements, but keeping as many individual rights as possible in force. Names and the right to be a Hanseatic City was an issue. And the League was wise in spreading their role into the country as well. This is an issue even today: immediately after German Unification, the cities, which had not been allowed to call themselves Hanseatic Cities during communism, once more were able to call themselves a Hanseatic City.

Creating a "New Hanseatic League in 1980, and celebrating Hanseatic Days after the collapse of the Soviet Union, old traditions together with old names and a new, the old aim was reborn: to bring closer together economic, cultural, social and national ideas and to strengthen the ties between the bordering countries. From this example the question of the relevance of international organizations must be tackled.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The most important international institution concerning all safety and some security aspects at sea is the "International Maritime Organization"⁴, IMO, it is a UN specialized agency, located in London, UK. The IMO is an influential administration, which has with great expertise and patience achieved the drafting of a group of "Maritime Codes of Conduct" for different regions. Naming of certain parts of the sea constituted a sensitive and critical issue during these negotiations. Together with the International Hydrographic Organization, IHO and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, IOC, these organizations are involved in toponymy activities.

An organization, which must be mentioned, is the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). The intention of the founders of this group was to encourage countries to recognize the need for the standardization of names. Several United Nations Conferences have been held to facilitate this. They do not have and do not claim decision making authority and they are not umpires for name disputes. Their role is to look for solutions.

Having already mentioned the International Hydrographic Organization, it is worth to draw our attention to another international institution, the Joint IHO – IOC Guiding Committee for the general Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans (GEBCO). The key words

⁴ <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/ihr/article/viewFile/20752/23913> by Trent Palmer, 2006
International Hydrographic Review Vol 7 No 1(New Series) April 2006

for our purpose are: “Guiding Committee and Charts”. GEBCO’s subcommittee on Undersea Feature Names⁵ has a number of objectives:

- select undersea feature names and define when appropriate the extent of named features;
- provide advice to individuals and appropriate authorities on the selection of undersea feature names in international waters and, on request, in waters under national jurisdiction
- encourage the establishment of national boards of geographical names and undersea features, and when such a board does not exist for a given coastal state, co-operate in the naming of seafloor features related to those national waters;
- prepare and maintain internationally agreed guidelines for the standardization of undersea feature names and encourage their use;
- maintain close liaison with the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names and international or national authorities concerned with the naming of undersea features.
- These objectives are a selection taken from the original document. They demonstrate the goal and the intent of GEBCO and its subcommittee.

The still 28 Member States of the European Union are located on a peninsula. Geography is a determining factor and the shape of this peninsula makes Europe a Union with a strong maritime focus. It took the Union some time to recognize this fact and to act in accordance with the consequences. “Sea Blindness” is still an issue. And names of this maritime part of the Union are an issue which is not limited to its own territorial waters. The Exclusive Economic Zones, up to 200 nautical miles from the coast into the sea, the existing overlaps and the disputes about “Sea Borders” are a global challenge. In the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, the disputes over names of islands, of straits and special parts of the sea are still a serious concern.

One way to solve this topic, quasi the European solution, is drafting “Sea Basin” strategies which respect the different conditions of the seas and the differences in economy, culture, language and most of all, history, are reflected by this approach. “Blue Growth”, especially fishery and environmental protection as well as maritime surveillance, have been the driving factors for the engagement of the European Commission in close coordination with the Parliament and the Council.

Naming disputes are not mentioned explicitly in the Sea Basin Strategies, but respecting the language was an issue: for the Celtic Sea, for example, we can find five different names, depending on who is talking about it.

There are other examples, one is the English Channel, a part of the Atlantic Ocean, surrounded by United Kingdom and France, not to forget Guernsey and Jersey, named by the French “La Manche” and by the Germans, not a surrounding country, “Ärmelkanal”. In fact, all Seafarers call it today “The Channel” and everybody knows what channel is mentioned.

⁵ https://www.iho.int/srv1/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=443&Itemid=747&lang=en (Accessed 12.10.2017)

Staying into this region the Irish Sea, a part of the Atlantic Ocean as well, is called by the United Kingdom and Ireland the Irish Sea. Will Brexit have an impact on long accepted and agreed upon names? There is a connection to the Celtic Sea which was mentioned before.

Recall the need for standardization of names for scientists, for Sea Farers and the economy! For our topic the focus should be on three of the eight Sea Basin strategies:

- Sea Basin Strategy: Adriatic and Ionian Seas⁶
- Sea Basin Strategy: Black Sea⁷
- Sea Basin Strategy: Baltic Sea⁸

This course of action not only respects the diversity of the European regions, but encompasses non-EU - countries as well. Conferences and the use of existing structures and cooperation links made this approach a success.

Another modus operandi of the European Union is “The week of Regions and Cities”.⁹

“The European Week of Regions and Cities is a four-day event during which officials from regions and cities’ administrations, as well as experts and academics, can exchange good practices and know-how in the field of regional and urban development. It is also an acknowledged platform for political communication in relation to the development of EU Cohesion Policy, raising the awareness of decision-makers about the fact that regions and cities matter in EU policy-making. The European Week of Regions and Cities is the biggest European public event of its kind.

CONCLUSIONS

Sea Names represent a long lasting influence by those who are able to keep or establish them. Sea Names have a long history and with them countries are able to demonstrate a political message and a political will. Sea Names have a special acceptance in the world of all Seafarers and traditional names can be revitalized under certain conditions, which are not foreseen and which have little to do with facts and figures but much to do with feelings and emotions. Strategic Communication is a precondition when it comes to naming or emphasizing special names which are of great value for a country, a region or community. International Institutions are useful when it comes to the administrative aspect of naming. Standardization is vital for scientists and academics, for Seafarers as well. Establishing networks, frequent conferences and special events for dealing with all aspects of the complexity of the Sea provides unique opportunities to deal with Sea Names as well. Think globally but act regionally and sometimes even locally when it comes to maritime matters and Sea Names are a maritime matter of great leverage.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/sea_basins/adriatic_ionian_en (Accessed 12.10.2017)

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/sea_basins/black_sea_en (Accessed 12.10.2017)

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/sea_basins/baltic_sea_en (Accessed 12.10.2017)

⁹ Schroeder 2013, p. 150.

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