

The Use of National Names for International Bodies of Water: Critical Perspective

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공해(公海)에 대한 국가지명 사용: 비판적 관점

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Abstract : More than twenty-five major international bodies of water bear the names of particular nations or states. Many of these are not names are widely accepted, but considerable disagreement has developed in some cases. A systematic examination of the level of conflict over the use of national names for international bodies of water indicates that conflict is most likely to develop where shifting power relations among interested states produce concern about the hegemonic ambitions of the state after which the body of water is named. This is the case in the three situations where considerable contention exists over the use of a national name for an international body of water: the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea, the Sea of Japan/East Sea, and the South China Sea/Bien Dong. Cases evidencing little contention are those where either no state has a significant interest in the naming issue, or where the name that is attached to the body of water is that of a state that has not been a historic threat to others in the region. Naming international bodies of water after nations or states is potentially problematic because such appellations can connote ownership or control by a single people or political entity. An understanding of the controversies surrounding these place names requires consideration of the geopolitical context in which they are embedded.

Key Words : international body of water, national name, the Sea of Japan/East Sea

요약 : 세계 25개 이상의 공해의 명칭은 특정 국가나 주(州)의 지명을 따르고 있다. 이러한 명칭들이 널리 받아들여지고 있는 것은 아니지만 몇몇 경우에는 심각한 논쟁을 야기하고 있다. 공해의 국가 지명 사용에 대한 갈등의 수준을 체계적으로 조사해 보면, 이러한 갈등은 공해의 명칭에 사용된 국가의 지배권에 대한 야망을 우려하는 이해 당사자 국가들 사이에 힘의 관계가 변화하는 곳에서 일어나기 쉬움을 알 수 있다. 이는 공해의 국가지명 사용에 대한 상당한 논쟁이 존재하는 다음의 세 상황 - The Persian / Arabian Gulf와 The Sea of Japan / East Sea, 그리고 South China Sea / Bien Dong - 의 경우에도 그러하다. 이러한 논쟁이 거의 나타나지 않는 경우는 그 지역에 어떠한 나라도 지명 문제에 대해서 심각한 이해관계를 가지고 있지 않거나, 혹은 해양과 결합된 명칭이 그 지역의 다른 국가들에게 역사적인 위협을 주지 않는 경우이다. 국가나 주의 이름을 따른 공해의 명칭은 단일 민족이나 정치적 존재에 의한 소유권이나 통제권을 내포하고 있기 때문에, 잠재적으로 분쟁 가능성이 있다. 지명을 둘러싼 이러한 논쟁을 이해하기 위해서는 지정학적 문맥에 대한 고려가 요구된다.

주요어 : 공해(公海), 국가지명, 동해/일본해

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the study of the history of cartography has undergone a significant transformation. Traditionally, maps were treated as objective representations of reality, and studies in the history of cartography emphasized the development of different approaches to rendering

the spatial organization of the world in maps. The mapmaker was treated as someone who was a product of his or her time, of course influenced by available technology and information, and even subject to personal biases and preferences. Yet the basic questions concerned the degree to which cartographic representations corresponded to reality, and the technological and design elements

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related thereto.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, a growing number of commentators argued that a real understanding of maps and mapmaking had to be premised on the recognition that maps are not neutral, value-free representations. Commentators such as Harley (1988) pointed to the importance of looking at maps in terms of the social and political context in which they are produced—leading them to the types of observations set forth in the quotation at the beginning of this article. Such arguments paved the way to whole new research agendas centered on the ideological underpinnings of cartographic undertakings (Belyea, 1992). In the process, maps began to be seen as windows into political and social worlds, revealing the ideas and prejudices of the social contexts out of which they arose.

Efforts to contextualize cartographic representations led scholars to investigate a variety of matters related to the production and construction of maps. Attention was focused on why maps were made of some place by not of others, why certain features of the landscape were singled out for emphasis, and how particular cartographic design elements were used to make specific social and political points (see, e.g., Wood, 1992). Yet for all the attention to different facets of map making, the actual naming of places on maps has received little attention. The index to Denis Wood's (1992) influential book *The Power of Maps* does not contain an entry for place names, and the study of toponyms has been remarkably invisible in the critical cartography literature.

Yet the choice of place names is no more an objective feature of a map than is any other decision that goes into its construction. Indeed, place names themselves are deeply embedded in particular historical and geographical contexts, and they are often contested (Room, 1997). Hence, the rendering of place names on maps can be an important way in which political statements are made and ideologies are reproduced. This is particularly true

when there are competing names for an international body of water and the cartographer makes a choice between those names. Such practices have clear political import, and are thus deserving of attention among those concerned with cartographic representations of the world.

In undertaking studies of this phenomenon, one possible approach is to consider the circumstances surrounding the adoption of particular place names on maps. This issue has received considerable attention by participants in past International Seminars on the Naming of Seas held in Seoul since 1995. A second possible approach is to consider the circumstances surrounding a controversy over the naming of a specific body of water, which then finds its way into competing cartographic representations. This too has been addressed in prior seminars. Yet a third approach is to consider more generally the types of naming practices and circumstances that are likely to give rise to controversy. This is the approach adopted in this paper. More specifically, the effort here is to consider the circumstances in which the use of national names for international bodies of water raises problems, and to highlight the changing character of those problems in a few notable cases.

2. Naming international seas after nations or states

There are many different names attached to international bodies of water around the world, and most of these are entirely unproblematic. However, when an international body of water bears the name of a nation or state, the potential for conflict arises. This is because of the extraordinary importance of the modern territorial state system in the perceptual and functional ordering of human affairs. As I have argued elsewhere (Murphy, 1996, 102-103):

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of the

territorial assumptions that have developed in association with the post-World War II political order. In general terms, they have made the territorial state the privileged unit for analyzing most phenomena while discouraging consideration of the nature of the territorial state itself. In the political sphere they have directed overwhelming attention to state government and governmental leaders at the expense of extrastate or substate actors and arrangements. In the economic sphere they have prompted us to frame our most basic theories of development in state terms. In the cultural sphere they have encouraged us to collapse our understandings of diversity into state-based categories; for every reference to the Quechua, Aymara, and Guaran peoples there are thousands to Bolivians. In the environmental sphere they have prompted us to conceptualize issues that do not correspond to state boundaries as “transnational” (read trans-state) or “transboundary” issues, not Upper Rhine or Southeast Asian lowland issues.

Accompanying and reinforcing this situation is the force of nationalism, which defines peoples’ identities in many parts of the world and which operates as a powerful perceptual and functional divider between societies.

Against this backdrop, the idea of attaching the name of a single state or nation to an international common is a potentially problematic practice-for the very use of a state or national appellation usually connotes ownership or control by a single people, not a collective. Yet an examination of the place names used for international bodies of water reveals that this is a relatively widespread practice.

It is difficult to develop a definitive list of international bodies of water bearing the names of states or nations because different sources list different names and because various societies have attached names to bodies of water that have not been widely accepted. Nonetheless, a general sense of the more visible cases in which this occurs can be obtained through an analysis of the place names

used in widely circulated maps and statistical sources. Beginning with a list of major bodies of water in a well known statistical source (Showers, 1973), and supplementing that list with reference to other geographical materials (Cohen, 1998; Espenshade, 1990; Munro, 1988; Rand McNally World Guide, 1973; Webster’s Geographical Dictionary, 1988), I developed a list of twenty-seven prominent cases in which a commonly used name for an international body of water was either (1) the name of a current independent country, (2) the name of the dominant national group in a currently independent country, or (3) the name of a national group/region that has actively sought independence during the latter part of the twentieth century. The list consists of the following cases:

Arabian Sea	Bay of Biscay	Bight of Benin
Bight of Biafra	Denmark Strait	East China Sea
English Channel	Gulf of Finland	Gulf of Guinea
Gulf of Honduras	Gulf of Mexico	Gulf of Oman
Gulf of Panama	Gulf of Thailand	Gulf of Venezuela
Irish Sea	Korea Bay	Korea Strait
Mozambique Channel	Norwegian Sea	Persian Gulf/Arabian Gulf
Philippine Sea	Sea of Japan/East Sea	Singapore Strait
South China Sea/Bien Dong	Taiwan Strait	Timor Sea

As is evident from a review of this list, there are international bodies of water bearing the names of states or nations in many parts of the world. Moreover, there is much diversity in the circumstances surrounding the adoption of those names. Some of the names have been in use for long periods of time (e.g, Persian Gulf), whereas others are relatively recent adoptions (e.g., Sea of Japan). As will become evident, the timing of the naming decision is not of crucial importance. The key point is that the use of any national or state name for an international body of water carries with it a suggestion of exclusive ownership that is arguably at odds with its international legal standing.

3. factors affecting contentiousness

Despite the potential volatility of using national names for international bodies of water, there is little evidence of serious controversy surrounding many of the names on the list. The challenge, then, is to consider why some cases are more contentious than others. To address this matter, I consulted a variety of internet and newspaper indexing sources to see if there was reported evidence of controversy over the names used for the bodies of water on the list. Based on the results of this analysis, I divided the cases up into the following degree of contentiousness categories:

High Degree of Contention (Active Efforts to Oppose Current Naming Practices)

Persian Gulf Sea of Japan/East Sea
South China Sea

Moderate Degree of Contention (Different Renderings on National Maps but Little Active Effort to Oppose Current Naming Practices)

Bay of Biscay English Channel
Gulf of Thailand

Low Degree of Contention (Little Evidence of Concern over Current Naming Practices)

Bight of Benin Bight of Biafra
Denmark Strait East China Sea
Gulf of Finland Gulf of Guinea
Gulf of Honduras Gulf of Mexico
Gulf of Oman Gulf of Panama
Irish Sea Korea Bay
Korea Strait Mozambique Channel
Norwegian Sea Philippine Sea
Singapore Strait Taiwan Strait
Timor Sea

Insufficient Evidence to Assess (Sources not currently available to the author to allow a systematic assessment of the case)

Arabian Sea

Gulf of Venezuela

Although there is some inevitable subjectivity in the grouping of cases into these categories, they provide a useful starting point for considering the circumstances that may produce differing levels of confrontation over the use of national names for international bodies of water. In looking for factors affecting the level of controversy, I first developed a list of states with direct interests in the naming of particular bodies of water—essentially those states bordering those bodies of water (Table 1). I then looked at the presence or absence of historical/geopolitical commonalities in the relations among states involved in cases where similar levels of contentiousness are present—leaving aside the two cases I was unable to assess because of insufficient available evidence. Based on this analysis, the following circumstances appeared to be of particular relevance:

A. Circumstances present in highly contentious cases

1. A name commonly used for the body of water is the name of a state with a recent history of political or economic hegemony in the region.
 - a. Persian/Arabian Gulf
 - b. Sea of Japan/East Sea
 - c. South China Sea/Bien Dong

B. Circumstances present in moderately contentious cases

1. There is a long history of conflict between two of the states bordering the sea
 - a. English Channel
 - b. Gulf of Thailand
2. The name of the sea raises issues that concern the territorial integrity of interested states
 - a. Bay of Biscay

C. Circumstances present in relatively non-contentious cases

Table 1. Body of water and states with potential for involvement

Arabian Sea	India, Iran, Oman, Pakistan, Yemen
Bay or Biscay	France, Spain
Bight of Benin	Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial, Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo
Bight of Biafra	Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea
Denmark Strait	Denmark
East China Sea	China, Japan, South Korea
English Channel	France, United Kingdom
Gulf of Finland	Estonia, Finland
Gulf of Guinea	Benin, Cameroon, Cote d' Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo
Gulf of Honduras	Belize, Guatemala, Honduras
Gulf of Mexico	Cuba, Mexico, United States
Gulf of Oman	Iran, Oman, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates
Gulf of Panama	Panama
Gulf of Thailand	Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand
Gulf of Venezuela	Colombia, Venezuela
Irish Sea	Ireland, United Kingdom
Korea Bay	China, North Korea, South Korea
Korea Strait	Japan, South Korea
Mozambique Channel	Madagascar, Mozambique
Norwegian Sea	Iceland, Norway
Persian Gulf	Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates
Philippine Sea	Philippines
Sea of Japan/ East Sea	China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea
Singapore Strait	Malaysia, Singapore
South China Sea	China, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam
Taiwan Strait	China, Taiwan
Timor Sea	Australia, Indonesia

1. Only one state has a significant border on the sea
 - a. Denmark Strait
 - b. Gulf of Panama
 - c. Philippine Sea
 - d. Norwegian Sea
2. The sea bears the name of a nation with no hegemonic potential in the region
 - a. Bight of Benin
 - b. Bight of Biafra
 - c. Gulf of Guinea
 - d. Gulf of Oman
 - e. Irish Sea
 - f. Timor Sea
3. The sea bears the name of a state with no history of hegemonic dominance in the region
 - a. Gulf of Honduras
 - b. Gulf of Mexico
 - c. Korea Bay
 - d. Korea Strait
 - e. Mozambique Channel
 - f. Singapore Strait
4. There are special geopolitical considerations at play that militate against controversy
 - a. Gulf of Finland - Estonia's historic ethno-cultural ties to Finland and its need for Finnish support
 - b. East China Sea - Japan and Korea's concern not to upset power balances and undermine a name reflecting the United Kingdom's presence in Hong Kong
 - c. Taiwan Strait - China's concern to show that Taiwan is not an independent country

As the foregoing enumeration of circumstances suggests, there are strong geopolitical and geo-historical correlates to levels of controversy over the use of national names for international bodies of water. Most obviously, every one of the highly contentious cases shares a geopolitical commonality arising out of differential power relations, and the moderately contentious cases seem to occur where at least some historical territorial issues can be identified. The latter is clearest in the case of the English Channel-referred to as La Manche on French maps-which relatively few French people see as a major issue, but which arguably registers as an annoyance to many French given the history of territorial conflict between England and France. The most speculative case is that of the Bay of Biscay-a name referring to the Basque people. The Spanish use the term Cantabrico to refer to this body of water, whereas the French use the term Gascogne. The roots of this naming controversy are not entirely clear, but may well be tied to concerns among both Spanish and French over what an independent Basque state might mean for the territorial integrity of their respective states. Additional research on this matter might help clarify its geopolitical parameters.

Turning to the cases that are essentially not contested, most of these arise in circumstances where either no other state has a significant interest in the naming issue or where the name that is attached to the international body of water is that of a state that has not been a historic threat to others in the region-and is unlikely to become such a threat. The only cases not explained by these factors are those of the Gulf of Finland, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. Yet in each of these cases, special geopolitical circumstances are present that militate against controversy. The identification of these is somewhat speculative-particularly as they relate to the case of the East China Sea but there are clearly special dynamics at work in the case of the relationship between Finland and Estonia and

between China and Taiwan that must be taken into consideration. China cannot object to the use of Taiwan's name for the Taiwan Strait without seeming to undermine its argument that Taiwan is merely a part of China, and Estonia is not about to raise a controversy with a country with which it shares strong historical and ethno-cultural ties and which is in the process of providing significant help to Estonia in its transition from communist rule.

4. Implications for current and prospective controversies

It is clear from the foregoing that geopolitical and geo-historical circumstances are of great relevance to the development of controversies surrounding the use of national names for international bodies of water. Perhaps the clearest implication of this insight concerns the prospective development of controversies. Controversies over place names can develop and change over time, and just because a place name is not contested now does not mean that it will not be contested in the future. The foregoing analysis suggests that the cases where such contests are most likely to develop are in situations where shifting power relations among interested states produce concerns about the hegemonic ambitions of the state after which the international body of water is named. To use an example for illustrative purposes only (i.e., to present a hypothetical example that is not meant to suggest an actual development), if Mozambique were interested in, and able to, assert a growing level of economic and political dominance over Madagascar, the currently benign situation surrounding the naming of the Mozambique Channel might well change.

A more complicated set of implications must be considered in the case of currently active controversies. As we have seen, each of these arises in a situation where unequal power relations have

been at play for some time-and this state of affairs provides fundamental insight into the existence of the conflict itself. Yet once a controversy has developed, the visibility of that controversy does not appear to be strongly tied to an increasing level of hegemony by the state whose name is used for the international body of water. Instead, visibility seems to be tied to the growing ability of states objecting to current naming practices to assert their influence in the international community. An examination of the three more highly contentious cases noted above suggests the importance of this point.

1) The Persian /Arabian Gulf

The Persian Gulf may be the oldest toponym for a body of water (Munro, 1988). The historical influence of the Persian Empire helps explain the persistence of the name, as does the lack of a competing well organized political power in the region until recently (Hourani, 1991; Malmirian, 1998). In the Ottoman Empire most of the peninsular region was at the periphery, literally and figuratively, of the Sultanate, and throughout the colonial period the economies of the region were subsistence based-largely based on fishing and pearl diving. It is probable that the *Persian Gulf* toponym went unchallenged for so long because of the relatively recent political organization of Arab nation(s) surrounding the gulf.

It is unclear exactly when and where the Arabian Gulf name came into use, but it is likely that the term was first coined in the neighboring *Arab Gulf* states after independence and the discovery of oil. Outside of the Arabian Peninsula the toponym was not commonly used before the late 1970s. Some Saudi Arabian maps made as early as 1968 mark the body of water as the *Al-Khalij al-Arabi* (lit. The Arabian Gulf), and English-language maps published in the region during the 1970s use the *Arabian Gulf* designation.

Nonetheless, maps produced by the United States government, including those written in Arabic, continue to use the term *Al-Khalij al-Farsi* (lit. The Persian Gulf). Moreover, Iranian maps written in Farsi also use the Persian Gulf designation (*Al-Khalij-i-Fars*). The State Department of the United States officially recognizes the body of water as *The Persian Gulf*, although State Department officials sometimes refer to it as the Arabian Gulf in press conferences and interviews. Indeed, in an apparent effort not to take sides since the end of Operation Desert Shield/Storm, the area is often referred to as *The Gulf* by United States government agencies and by the United States military.

The term *Arabian Gulf* is slowly gaining international attention, even though *Persian Gulf* is far more common. A search of world news service wires on Lexis-Nexis showed no incidents of the *Arabian Gulf* toponym being used by the world media until 1977, when the Xinhua News Agency (China) used the term. The frequency of the toponym has increased rather steadily since, with 14 incidences found in 1980, 25 in 1990, and 109 in 1998. Interestingly, the frequency of use of the term *Arabian Gulf* in the international media loosely correlates with the growing international influence of the Arab states of the region in the wake of the war over Kuwait and the emergence of greater cohesion within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

The foregoing suggests that as the Arab states bordering the Gulf have grown in power and influence, they have been increasingly successful in promoting their views of the naming issue. In the early 1990s, for example, a university was founded in Bahrain under the name Arabian Gulf University to serve, among other things, as a symbol of solidarity among the Arab Gulf states (Gulf Daily News, 1993). Growing success in promoting the *Arabian Gulf* name through initiatives of this sort seems to confirm the proposition that agitation over naming is tied to

levels of international influence. Yet the case must not be overstated. The term *Persian Gulf* is still by far the most commonly used, and Iran can use its economic and political power to sustain that state of affairs. This became evident in 1997, for example, when the publisher of an English-language archaeology book *The Archaeology of the Arabian Gulf* apologized to the Iranian government and pledged to change the title of the book in future editions after the leaders of Payam-i-Noor University in Tehran refused to allow the book to be used in classes (Compass Newswire, 1997).

2) East Sea / The Sea of Japan

The historical background to the controversy over the naming the Sea of Japan/East Sea has been the focus of attention in prior International Seminars on the Naming of Seas and need not be repeated here (e.g., International Seminar, 1998). As with the Persian/Arabian Gulf case, the controversy is centered on different approaches to the naming of the body of water that lies between Korea and Japan—with much of the international community still using the relatively recently derived *Sea of Japan* designation, and Korea encouraging the use of the East Sea designation. For present purposes, the particularly interesting issue to note is the recent trajectory of the controversy.

A search of world news service wires on Lexis-Nexis (comparable to the one conducted for Persian/Arabian Gulf) showed a somewhat irregular pattern of use of the term *East Sea* or *East Sea of Korea* during the period 1988-1998. Yet the overall trend was toward increasing use of the term. This trend is arguably a reflection of an expanding effort by Koreans and others to attract attention to this issue at a time when Korea itself is emerging as an increasingly significant member of the international community and when Japan's regional dominance has arguably suffered a setback in the wake of Japan's economic woes throughout much

of the 1990s. Emblematic of Korea's growing assertiveness on the place name issue was the organization of a symposium in Pyongyang in July 1993 that brought together Korean historians and geographers to discuss the use of the terms *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan*. The participants in the symposium argued that East Sea was the appropriate name for the body of water between Korea and Japan, submitting that Koreans were the first to explore and use the sea and that the use of the term *Sea of Japan* validated Japanese imperialism in the region (British Broadcasting Corporation Wire Service, 1993).

In the aftermath of this symposium, the South Korean government set up a task force in October 1994 to study the controversy with Japan (Xinhua News Agency, 1994b). The group, which consisted of government officials and professors, sought to enhance international recognition of the name *East Sea* by promoting it at the United Nations and at other international meetings. Moreover, the Korean government decided to boycott international meetings using the name *Sea of Japan* in reference to the body of water between Korea and Japan (Xinhua News Agency, 1994a). More recently, the Agence France Presse reported that several South Korean civic groups threatened to boycott the U.S. weekly magazine *Time* if it did not apologize for using the term *Sea of Japan* in a July 7, 1997, article entitled *China Now* (Agence France Presse, 1997). Collectively, such efforts have served to promote the visibility of the place name controversy at a time when Korea itself is attracting more international attention.

3) South China Sea / Bien Dong

The controversy over the term South China Sea is less well documented than the two previous cases, and it is thus difficult to assess its precise dimensions. Recent maps produced by the Vietnamese government show that the Vietnamese are increasingly using the name *Bien Dong* (East

Sea), rather than the Chinese name *Nan Hai* (South [China] Sea) (Quy Nho'n, 1989). The Vietnamese take the position that *Bien Dong* is the traditional name for the body of water off the eastern coast of Vietnam, and recent visitors to Vietnam have confirmed the presence of a movement promoting the use of *Bien Dong* (e.g., Fox, 1999).

The Vietnamese effort to promote the *Bien Dong* designation is of relatively recent origin. In 1972, the South Vietnamese government officially recognized the use of the South China Sea toponym. This is seen in *An Annotated Atlas of the Republic of Vietnam* (Nguyèn, 1972), compiled in conjunction with the staff of the Information Section of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C. That naming practice led to the continuing use of the *South China Sea* designation on Vietnamese maps into the 1980s. By the late 1980s, however, Vietnamese maps began to appear with *Bien Dong* as the name for the sea off the Vietnamese coast. At present, most provincial maps of Vietnam produced by the Vietnamese government no longer recognize *South China Sea*, whereas Chinese maps do not acknowledge an alternative toponym.

Vietnam is arguably not in a strong position to push this issue very far. Yet the gradually increasing visibility of the issue seems to coincide with Vietnam's emergence from a more isolated position and its concomitant assumption of a higher international profile. This, in turn, has apparently opened the door to at least modest initiatives to raise the naming issue. An example may be the recent formation of the *Bien Dong* shipping company in Vietnam. The choice of name arguably signals Vietnam's growing assertiveness on this issue. The emergence of such initiatives in recent years further supports the proposition that contentious issues are likely to become more visible when the states objecting to current naming practices are themselves gaining international visibility.

5. Conclusion

The use of national names for international bodies of water has not led to controversies in many cases. However, by suggesting that a body of water belongs more to one state than another, the potential for controversy is always present, and in some cases controversies have emerged with considerable force. Differential power relations are clearly a critical element to the rise of such controversies, suggesting that naming international bodies of water after nations or states is particularly problematic practice where power differences exist now, or have existed in the recent past. Moving beyond such controversies is clearly difficult, as both sides are likely to see the issue as one that touches on national self-determination. Yet it is impossible to confront controversies if the concerns of the involved parties are not acknowledged. This suggests that, in cases where a commonly used national name is in use, mapmakers, academics, and policy makers should be attune to the potential for controversy and should be open to the use of alternative names in cases where the name in use carries with it hegemonic overtones.

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