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**Features beyond a single sovereignty**

**Representation of Geo-Political Disputes in Geo-names  
supported Information Systems**

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## Summary

Naming geographical features within national boundaries is a right of sovereignty. The use of exonyms is either based on cultural or historical reasons or cross-border geographical features. In some cases, an exonym for a politically sensitive feature becomes an international problem between countries bilaterally or within the context of international organizations. Using an exonym with political connotations may create misunderstandings.

Since the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967, several resolutions have been adopted on reducing the use of exonyms.

The need for complete, consistent and correct geo-information coverage (thematic and spatial) forces project designers to handle dispute cases without giving any priority to any of the geo-political representations but depict the real world as much as possible regarding concerns of each party.

### 1.1 Features Beyond a Single Sovereignty

Naming geographical features within national boundaries is a right of sovereignty. The use of exonyms is either based on cultural or historical reasons or cross-border geographical features. In some cases, an exonym for a politically sensitive feature becomes an international problem between countries bilaterally or within the context of international organizations. Using an exonym with political connotations may create misunderstandings.

Using exonyms in digital databases, on maps and in information systems is a current problem in a decentralized web environment.

Since the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967, several resolutions have been adopted on reducing the use of exonyms.

Regarding exonyms which may lead to political problems, a new recommendation was made that " ... notwithstanding the general goal of limiting the use of exonyms, ...recognizing that ... the formulation of guidelines ensuring a politically sensitive use of exonyms would help in the reduction of the number of exonyms," a working group be established to create suitable measures in the use of exonyms (from the 2002 UN Conference, resolution VIII/4).

### 1.2 Politically Sensitive Exonyms

Exonyms make up the most problematic area within the context of UNGEGN. They are open to misuse.

Starting from United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967, the following resolutions have been adopted on reducing the use of exonyms:

- (1) on reaching agreement on fixing a single name / maximum possible uniformity: Resolutions I/8, II/24, II/25, II/31, II/34 and III/20.
- (2) on naming undersea features beyond a single sovereignty: Resolutions II/23 and II/26.
- (3) on reducing the use of exonyms: Resolutions V/13.
- (4) on maintaining geographical names of cultural and historical heritage: Resolutions VI/9.

### 1.3 Geo-Political Disputes in Geo-names supported Information Systems

Currently, the number of international projects to create global or regional geographic data for environment and security is increasing within the geo-information society. However, there are many bilateral or multilateral dispute cases among nations which are not resolved yet. These are either sovereignty of a land or a water body, or boundary disagreements. The need for complete, consistent and correct geo-information coverage (thematic and spatial) forces project designers to handle dispute cases without giving any priority to any of the geo-political representations but depict the real world as much as possible regarding concerns of each party.

A number of data and services have been established in order to facilitate the discovery, visualization, access and distribution of geo-names data.

Usually a pragmatic approach towards the harmonization of existing national geo-names databases according to a common data model up to a certain point with national variations is expressed in data and model specifications.

If the data model and specifications of current projects would comprise national variations beyond the common data specifications which is being employed in many international projects, geographical incompleteness will not be a deficiency for these services.

In case of a dispute, preference of any of the representations which is included in the complete coverage of the product is one of the difficult technical problems, though multiple representations can be done by several spatial databases today. In case of a bi-lateral dispute, there are three possibilities to represent the mini-world in the database:

- (1) Depicting two data sets at separate layers where complete coverage does not contain any of the data provided by two parties.
- (2) Presenting one of the data sets with complete coverage without any preference, and the latter at a separate layer.
- (3) Presenting one of the data sets and discarding the other due political preferences.

The first two can be implemented through today's technology and will depict a realistic picture of the world. The third method cannot depict an accurate and complete model of the real world. Solution (1) can be designed and implemented for feature based disputes provided that a link may be stored to relevant feature based on will of the data provider. However, solution (2) -layer based representation- might be useful in case of complete discrepancy between data providers.