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**United Nations Group of Experts On
Geographical Names**

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Item 7 (a) of the provisional agenda*

**Names collection, office treatment, national authorities,
features beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation**

**A Way Forward for the Agenda Item *Features beyond a single
sovereignty***

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Summary

The agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty* was adopted at the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967 and continued throughout all eleven Conferences up to 2017. Twenty-three working papers were submitted under this agenda item and eight resolutions were adopted. Facing the beginning of the new UNGEGN, this paper highlights the history of the activities extended under this agenda item and suggests a way forward for developing discussion in order to contribute to the standardization of geographical names. A few further topics to be discussed are suggested, including the definition of relevant terms, cooperation between neighboring countries concerning the names of features beyond a single sovereignty, operating and supplementing the relevant resolution, and management of databases and gazetteers of names of features beyond a single sovereignty.

A Way Forward for the Agenda Item *Features beyond a single sovereignty*¹

History of the agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty*

The agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty* was adopted at the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967 and continued throughout all eleven Conferences up to 2017. At the First Conference when just 13 agenda items were adopted, it was one of the 7 sub-items listed under *International Co-operation*. As the number of agenda items increased from the Second Conference, however, it became one of the main agenda items and maintained its status up to the Eleventh Conference in 2017.

Although the concept *Features beyond a single sovereignty* always occupied the core description of the agenda item, it was normally understood to include the intrinsic element of cooperation between countries; “policies, procedures and co-operative arrangements” as a preceding concept (3rd and 4th Conferences) or a sub-item (5th to 9th Conference) and “international cooperation” as a subsequent concept (10th and 11th Conference). “Features common to two or more nations” was always included as a sub-item while maritime features and undersea features were included in the 2nd to the 6th Conference and extraterrestrial features in the 2nd to the 5th Conference. “Bilateral/multilateral agreements” was adopted as a sub-item in the 10th and the 11th Conference. At the First session of the new UNGEGN, the agenda occupies a part of the sub-item (a) *Names collection, office treatment, national authorities, features beyond a single sovereignty and international cooperation* under item 7, National and international standardization of geographical names.

The history of the agenda reveals the following points:

- The fact that the agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty* has been adopted throughout the history of the UNCSGN signifies that there has been continued interest in this issue and that there exists a need for further discussion.

¹ This working paper pertains to the UNCSGN resolutions I/8 (Treatment of names of features beyond a single sovereignty), II/24 (Standardization of names beyond a single sovereignty), II/26 (Standardization of names of undersea features beyond a single sovereignty), II/34 (International standardization of names beyond a single sovereignty), and III/20 (Names of features beyond a single sovereignty).

- The agenda item has always carried the notion of international cooperation and agreement. This means that names of features beyond a single sovereignty have a steady ground to be treated in cooperation with countries concerned.
- Names of maritime features were noted as a part of the names beyond a single sovereignty.

Working papers submitted under the agenda item

A total of 23 working papers have been submitted under the agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty* from the 2nd to 10th Conferences. When excluding the 12 working papers which dealt with specific names of the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan (four by the Republic of Korea, five by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and three by Japan), 11 working papers were submitted by various countries, as well as by a Division and a Technical Committee.

Working papers in the earlier stages suggested some principles which should be applied to features under the sovereignty of more than one country or divided by two or more countries (1972, jointly by Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland; 1972, by Norway; 1977, by the Technical Committee III) or to features situated outside a single sovereignty, e.g., oceans, Antarctica, bodies of the solar system (1972, by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), or reported on each country's practice of naming features beyond a single sovereignty (1972, by the Federal Republic of Germany for maritime features; 1977, by the German Democratic Republic for maritime and land features).

At the Sixth Conference in 1992, the United States-Canada Division reported on the Document of Understanding approved in 1989 concerning the treatment of names of features shared by the two countries. This document included principles of coordination, name-change policy, terminology, and procedures of implementation.

Discussions under this agenda item highlighted the importance of terminology and data management. A working paper submitted by Israel at the 9th Conference (2007) raised the need to consider new terms other than exonyms or endonyms for the names of water bodies which did not belong to any national jurisdiction but were contested by two or more nations. At the same conference, Turkey suggested that in the cases of bilateral or multilateral disputes, complete, consistent and correct geo-information coverage should be adopted which would give no priority to any of the geo-political representations but depict the real world as much as possible.

Two working papers addressed the issue of boundary toponymy. Chile reported in 2007 on the completion of the list of names in the Chilean territory bordering Argentina, which was facilitated by establishing a joint commission between them. Indonesia, at the 11th Conference (2017), pointed out that names of features delimiting international boundaries had variations in spelling and pronunciation, and proposed for cooperation and agreement between neighboring countries to manage this problem.

The following points could be taken from the review of working papers.

- Discussion under the agenda item *Features beyond a single sovereignty* has been extended to accommodate two tracks of 'single' and 'beyond sovereignty.' The former included discussion on the names of features common to two or more nations, e.g., those common to neighboring countries in Europe, North America, Indonesia and its adjacent countries, while the latter focused

on the names of features located outside of national jurisdiction, e.g., maritime or undersea features belonging to international waters, Antarctica and extraterrestrial features.

- Names of both land and maritime features have been covered by the agenda item. Interests in the earlier Conferences were centered on maritime features beyond a single sovereignty. Examples cited included Skagerrak, East Sea/Sea of Japan and Persian Gulf/Arabian Gulf.
- Working papers on such topics as toponymic terminology, data management and gazetteer compiling in the border regions, cooperation and agreement on the trans-border features demonstrated that this agenda could be developed in both its academic and practical spheres.

Resolutions adopted under the agenda item

In the compendium of 211 resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, eight resolutions are sorted under the subject “Names of features beyond a single sovereignty.” All of them were adopted from the 1st to the 4th Conference. The 2nd Conference produced more than half, as many as five resolutions, reflecting one of the activated topics that time which accompanied four working papers.

A half of these eight resolutions, I/8, II/24, II/34 and III/20, generally concern the names of features beyond a single sovereignty while the other half, II/22, II/23, II/26 and IV/12, specify the names of maritime, undersea or Antarctic features. This confirms that maritime features have been a noticeable component of features beyond a single sovereignty.

The most substantial resolution which provides guidelines for dealing with the names of features beyond a single sovereignty is III/20. This resolution recommends that countries sharing a given geographical feature under different names should endeavor to reach agreement on fixing a single name, and that when countries 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. It is still expected to function as a valid guideline for various issues concerning the names of features beyond a single sovereignty

A way forward: topics for further discussion

The UNCSGN resolution II/34 reads as follows:

The Conference,

Having discussed the problems of the international standardization of geographical names,

Having agreed that its field of application extends to the establishment of standardized names of geographical entities lying beyond a single sovereignty,

Recommends that the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical names continue to study this wider aspect.

Be it ever so old as almost 50 years, the idea of this resolution is expected to still be effective and attract attention in the new UNGEGN. If this resolution is to be confirmed, then what can be studied further, shared and discussed by member states and experts under the agenda item *Features beyond a single*

sovereignty?

One of the basic elements of study will be discussions on the key concepts concerning the agenda *Features beyond a single sovereignty*. Even if a great part of the terminology relating to this agenda would belong to the sphere of international law, and thus have its definitions determined within this sphere, discussion on the concepts and applicable cases should continue, and, if feasible, cover definitions specifically adapted to the domain of geographical names.

Items that should be discussed or interpreted include the nature and scope of the relevant features: i.e. features under the sovereignty of more than one country; features shared or divided by two or more countries; features common to two or more nations. Discussion on these items may also invite a review on the relations of the aforementioned concepts with other legal concepts such as sovereign rights and jurisdiction, as provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Practices of dealing with the names of features beyond a single sovereignty by each member state or jointly by two or more neighboring countries will compose a useful portion of discussion under the agenda item. The efforts of Canada and the United States for coordinating the names of shared features between them are a good example. As dual naming is regarded as one of the feasible solutions for the controversial cases as recommended by the second part of the resolution III/20, suggesting practical ways of implementing dual naming will lead to a useful discussion. This focus, however, should be preceded by an agreed interpretation of the sentence “the name used by each of the countries concerned will be accepted.”

As far as the resolution III/20 is concerned, the new UNGEGN may also re-evaluate the significance of the resolution in standardizing geographical names, especially in light of current trends and contextual changes. Such discussion can also include a review on the history of the implementation of the resolution since its adoption in 1977 and the challenges posed by recent development of relevant geographical and legal concepts.

Sharing experiences of collecting geographical names, establishing toponymic databases, and compiling gazetteers supported the basic *raison d'etre* of the former Conferences and sessions of UNGEGN, and it will continue to do so in the new UNGEGN. Hence the new UNGEGN should serve as a forum where a vibrant exchange of diverse experiences in dealing with, and cooperating on geographical names for features beyond a single sovereignty, shared by or common to two or more nations, or located in the border regions, including both land and maritime features can continue to take place.