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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Title: Influence via Alternate Names in the South China Sea

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

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Author: Lieutenant Commander Amy M. Mancl, United States Navy

Thesis: The US Navy's practice of using an alternative name for the SCS, similar to its naming convention for the Persian/Arabian Gulf, would signal a commitment to Southeast Asian partners, capture China's aggressive behavior to an international audience in a strategic narrative advantageous to the US, and further reduce the legitimacy of China's claims in the sea.

Discussion: The name "South China Sea" allows China to claim legitimacy to the disputed waters despite their lack of legal authorities to make such a claim. In the Middle East, the US Navy diverts from the US State Department endorsed name "Persian Gulf" and uses an alternate naming convention—the "Arabian Gulf." The US Navy should adopt an alternative name for the South China Sea, similar to its naming convention for the Persian/Arabian Gulf, to signal a commitment to Southeast Asian partners, capture China's aggressive behavior to an international audience in a strategic narrative advantageous to the US, and further reduce the legitimacy of China's claims in the sea.

Conclusion: The US Navy's use of the name "East Vietnam/West Philippine Sea" appropriately shapes the way information is delivered for international audiences of China as the aggressor while remaining below the threshold for blowback that could impact other US diplomatic efforts.

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Illustrations

Page

Figure 1. Champa Circa 1000-150011

Figure 2. Boundaries of the South China Sea14

Figure 3. Unofficial Boundaries of the Natuna Sea22

Figure 4. Recognizing Alternate Names22

Table of Contents

Page

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	ii
DISCLAIMER.....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	iv
PREFACE	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PERSIAN GULF V ARABIAN GULF.....	2
USING NAMES TO MAKE CLAIMS TO TERRITORY	5
CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF NAMES	7
BACKGROUND ON THE NAME “SOUTH CHINA SEA”	10
FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS	15
ADOPTING NAMES BASED ON PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES	18
THE BEST OPTION-A NAME FROM ASEAN	20
ADAPTING TO ALTERNATE NAMES	21

COUNTERARGUMENT	23
CONCLUSION	24
CITATIONS	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28

Preface

This research was inspired by an informal comment from Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral John Richardson, on how we continue to cede power to China by using the name South China Sea. I am grateful for my mentor, Dr. Jill Goldenziel, for her guidance and insight throughout the process. I also would like to thank my second reader, Dr. Eric Shibuya, for his thoughts, advice, and expertise in the region.

The South China Sea (SCS), rich with natural resources and the throughput for more than half of the world's maritime tonnage,¹ is a flashpoint for potential hostilities between the United States (US) and China. Any disruption to the SCS's vital sea routes linking the Pacific and Indian Ocean would cause a considerable economic impact on the US. Therefore, maintaining freedom of navigation for merchant shipping and naval vessels is a matter of national security. In progressive steps, China has attempted to manipulate the international system to legally claim ownership of incrementally more land and water territory in the SCS using a strategic narrative of "historical rights," which it further justifies by the name of the sea. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Vice-Admiral Yuan Yubai at a defense conference in London said, "the South China Sea, as the name indicates, is a sea area which belongs to China."² The name "South China Sea," introduced by western mapmakers in 1930, does not reflect the name used by all countries that border the sea.³

Names provide countries with legitimacy to claims within the waters despite their legal authorities to make such a claim. The use of an alternate name would negatively highlight China's actions in other states' exclusive economic zones (EEZ) while signaling strategic intent to US partners and allies. The US Navy's naming convention "Arabian Gulf" for the body of water most commonly referred to as the Persian Gulf draws attention to the maritime disputes in the body of water and furthered US partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The US Navy's practice of using an alternative name for the SCS, similar to its naming convention for the Persian/Arabian Gulf, would signal a commitment to Southeast Asian partners, capture China's aggressive behavior to an international audience in a strategic narrative advantageous to the US, and further reduce the legitimacy of China's claims in the sea.

This paper examines the US Navy’s alternative naming of the Persian Gulf to demonstrate an example of the effects of an alternate name on government and people in order to evaluate the benefits and risks of applying a similar practice for the SCS. Following the case study is a discussion of the historical background of names for the SCS and analysis of alternative name choices for the SCS.

Persian Gulf v Arabian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is the name most commonly associated with the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and Iran and extending to the Strait of Hormuz. In the 20th century, Arab countries bordering the Gulf—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—began to call the body of water the Arabian Gulf. The naming dispute manifests itself in tensions regarding government, business, and cultural events. The dispute also provides an example of a country using the international name of a body of water to legitimize the seizure and administration of islands claimed by another littoral state despite international law.

In the late 20th century, the US Navy, and to a much more limited extent US Central Command (USCENTCOM), decided to replace the name “Persian Gulf” with the nomenclature “Arabian Gulf” in official documents and speeches. The US Navy’s use of “Arabian Gulf” influences geopolitics and demonstrates a commitment to Arab partners at a lower threshold than an official US decision on a name change from the US State Department, which would necessitate rejecting the international name for the sea. This exercise of influence is important because names for geographic objects, such as a body of water, impact history and culture, government, and geopolitics.⁴

The names for bodies of water demonstrate historical and cultural context, which is important to a government's power and narrative. A name with a long history demonstrates its acceptance through multiple governments and empires. The name "Persian Gulf" is the most frequent name in historical documents and maps over the past 2,500 years. Culturally, the name "Persian Gulf" resonates with Iranians because they regard themselves as descendants and heirs of the Persians who conquered Babylon under Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE.⁵ History does not provide the same historical support for the name Arabian Gulf. Instead, a map from 43 AD uses the name Arabian Gulf to refer to the body of water known today as the Red Sea.⁶ Since the late 1950s, propelled by then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, the use of the name "Arabian Gulf" for the Persian Gulf came to be used by Arab countries.⁷ In the 1960s, the use of the name "Arabian Gulf" by Arabs in the Middle East became a key cultural tie to the Pan-Arab nationalist movement of the late 19th and 20th centuries resulting in a strong sentiment associated with the name.⁸

Governments can assert their cultural and historical as well as geopolitical claims through law. The GCC has banned the use of "Persian Gulf" and also disfavors the term "the Gulf."⁹ Conversely, Iran will not recognize alternate names. Like many countries, the US maintains a geographic naming institute—the State Department's Board on Geographic Names (BGN). In 1917, the BGN recognized the body of water as the Persian Gulf. Today, its official database lists the "Persian Gulf" as the only "conventional" name; it lists fourteen unofficial "variants" including the Arabian Gulf.¹⁰ When US-Iran relations were stronger, assurance of the US's recognition of the name "Persian Gulf" was an issue that escalated all the way to the executive branch. In a 1976 declassified document from Iran's Ambassador, he describes a narrative of President Richard Nixon making a phone call from his vacation to the Iranian Embassy to

express his regrets for the Defense Supply Agency's use of "Arabian Gulf" in a publication.¹¹

Although the US-Iran relationship has deteriorated since this time, this example demonstrates the importance of the name to Iranian leadership and the strategic importance of the issue at the US executive level to reassure a foreign government over a name.

When states cannot reach a consensus over a geographic name, the parties can ask the United Nations (UN) to arbitrate the dispute. The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) is a deciding body for resolving conflicts over named geographical features. The UNGEGN is one of seven standing expert bodies of the UN Economic and Social Council and provides a forum to encourage and promote standardization of national and international geographical names.¹² The UNGEGN coordinates with the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) regarding ocean and sea names.¹³ The IHO uses "Gulf of Iran (Persian Gulf)."¹⁴ While the standardized names are not legally binding, they are the names recognized by the UN. The UNGEGN has not officially met on the issue; however, the UN Secretariat issued two editorial directives in 1994 and 1999. Both of these documents state that the UN would use the name Persian Gulf in all UN documentation¹⁵ with one explicitly speculating that if, "Geographers and specialists were to select a name for this gulf, doubtlessly, they would find no better name than Persian Gulf, because Iran is the largest country adjacent to this water body which possesses the longest coast. Besides, with a population of more than 70 million it is larger than any country located at the south margin of Fars."¹⁶ This provides insight into three factors of consideration—existing name, size of country, and length of coastline—during naming disputes. Although this document is sometimes held as a definitive resolution, statements made in some UN meetings – such as meetings of the UNGEGN in 2007 – indicate an openness to both names: "Any country and any cartographic institution can employ [e]ither,

and preferably both names, to the ‘high’ or international areas of the sea under discussion.”¹⁷

This conflicting guidance emphasizes that the UN editorial directives were for “internal use only” and not definitive UN policy statements. This same “internal use only” document states, “geographical features profiting from a unique historical identity, should not be utilized as political instruments in reaching a political, tribal, and racial objective, or in any clash with national interests and other's values.”¹⁸ This ideal is noble but not universally practiced. Nations seeking to expand their territory can use names to influence and suggest legitimacy to exercise power over disputed territory within the named geographical region.

Using Names to Make Claims to Territory

The only unresolved territorial dispute in the Persian Gulf is over three islands in the Strait of Hormuz: Abu Musa Island, Greater Tunb (Tonb-e Bozorg), and Lesser Tunb (Tonb-e Kuchek). Abu Musa, the only populated island of the three, holds geographic significance as it commands the Strait of Hormuz, is in the vicinity of an oil field, and possesses commercial quantities of ferric oxide as well as pearling and fishing areas.¹⁹ Both the UAE and Iran claim historical sovereignty of the three islands.

The UAE asserts that the islands have belonged to the Qasim tribe since the 18th century. After 1750, Qasimi rulers of the Sharjah and the Ras al-Khaymah Emirates maintained control over the islands from the Arab cities al-Khobar and Sharjah.²⁰ Additionally, the British recognized Arab sovereignty of the islands as early as 1820 and continued through British occupation of the islands from 1921-1971 through the Sharjah Emirate’s administrative authority of the islands.²¹ The UAE believes its rights to the islands were inherited when the existing rulers Sharjah (Abu Musa) and Ras Al-Khaymah (Greater and Lesser Tunbs) emirates united into one country—the UAE—in 1971.²²

In 1971, the Shah of Iran took action following the British departure from the region, asserting that the islands belonged to Iran since pre-Islamic times and a historical hierarchy existed over the UAE through the fact that Qasimi tribe was at one point in history led by Persia. With the newly created regional-power vacuum created by the British departure, the Shah acted. Iranian combined forces of air force helicopters, naval forces, and army troops and commandos physically occupied Abu Musa Island in just less than 24 hours after the 1971 departure of British troops, before the Saudi-proposed/Iranian-accepted conference on Gulf issues was scheduled, and before the organization of the seven independent Emirates into the UAE.²³ Defenseless, the Sharjah signed a joint administrative agreement with Iran. The agreement allowed Arab citizens of Sharjah to remain under his administrative rule, Iranian military presence at an agreed upon location on the island, Iranian exploration for oil and other natural resources (profits divided equally with Sharjah), and Iranian financial aid to Sharjah (with explicit aid termination criteria).²⁴

Iran has effectively won the dispute, asserting full control of Abu Musa, which appears to violate the 1971 UAE-Iran agreement. In 1992, Iran expelled UAE security forces, assumed administrative control of visa entry, and subsequently began to increase military presence to include a missile and chemical weapons base.²⁵ The UAE has sought to resolve the dispute through the International Court of Justice (ICJ), but an ICJ referral requires concurrence from both states.²⁶ In 2013-2014, Iran met with the UAE regarding the islands; subsequently, Iran removed some military equipment from the islands.²⁷ The UAE, with more than 350,000 Iranian expatriates and Iran as its largest trading partner, must deal with Iran cautiously.²⁸ The UAE does have GCC support as demonstrated when former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a surprise visit to the disputed island Abu Musa in 2012. In response to the UAE's

outrage, the GCC countries released an official statement of their full support for the UAE's claims. Additionally, the US demonstrated a willingness to back the UAE's call for an arbitrated settlement.²⁹ Despite this, the priority of the disputed islands likely remains low for the US because Iranian presence on Abu Musa has not caused a significant deterrent to US military action in the region nor has it prevented US naval presence in the Persian Gulf.³⁰ With low strategic value to the US and the UAE's small military and large Iranian expatriate community, it seems unlikely that the governance of Abu Musa will change without a significant turn of events. These takeaways from Abu Musa provide indications of just how much, or more accurately, how little political effort the UAE can expend on the naming dispute.

Cultural Influence of Names

Iran is committed to defending the name Persian Gulf exclusively and rejects the alternates—Arabian Gulf or the Gulf—as an attempt to rewrite history. To bring more popularity to the name “Persian Gulf,” Iran proclaimed a “National Persian Gulf Day,” issued a series of stamps honoring the day, and named the Persian Gulf Cup for the top rank of the Iranian soccer league.³¹ To counter alternate names, Iran demands that foreign airlines use the phrase “Persian Gulf” on their in-flight screens or they will not be allowed to enter Iran's airspace.³² In 2010, Iran canceled the Islamic Solidarity Games in Iran when the Arab world and Iran could not agree on the term “Persian Gulf” in logos and medals.³³ In 2012, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ramin Mehmanparast, threatened to sue Google when it discovered there was no name given over the Persian Gulf on Google's online mapping service.³⁴

Iranian calls to governments, agencies, and corporations to cease the use of the name “Arabian Gulf” are sometimes coupled with fervent support from Iranian people residing both in and outside of Iran.³⁵ When the National Geographic Society included “Arabian Gulf” as an

alternate name in a new edition of *The National Geographic Atlas of the World*, online protests resulted.³⁶ By 2005, the number one Google search result for “Arabian Gulf” was a site stating that gulf never existed—a result made possible through a Google bomb¹.³⁷ In 2008, Google faced pressure when it listed both “Persian Gulf” and “Arabian Gulf” on Google Earth resulting in an online petition from Iranians.³⁸ In 2010, Iranians across the world took to the US Navy’s Facebook page protesting the Navy’s use of “Arabian Gulf.”³⁹ The Iranian National American Council posted a petition calling for the US Navy to discontinue the use of “Arabian Gulf.”⁴⁰ Iranians demonstrated a commitment to defending their heritage and called the US Navy’s use of the Arabian Gulf an attempt to rewrite history. While the protest on Facebook did not disrupt communication for long, it does provide another example of how the Iranian diaspora united—which can cause its government to intervene—and illustrates an example of how the US Navy’s use of alternate names is challenged.

The US Navy leadership did not issue a formal statement directing the use of “Arabian Gulf,” but forces operating in the region use the name. This consistency stems from the *US Navy Style Guide*, which directs the use of “Arabian Gulf” for the primary reference and “the Gulf” for secondary references in lieu of “Persian Gulf,” per Commander, Naval Forces Central Command, US 5th Fleet.⁴¹ As directed, the news releases published from US Naval Forces Central Command reflect this direction and consistently use “Arabian Gulf.”⁴² It is no surprise that speeches originating from the region also use the name “Arabian Gulf.”⁴³ The US Navy provides one indication of why it changed the name in a statement on Facebook to Iranian

¹ The New Oxford American dictionary defines Google bomb, “An attempt to make a search term return a website for an unexpected person or organization when entered in a search engine (typically for satirical or humorous purposes) by the creation of numerous links to that website from pages including the search term.”

protesters. The Navy states, “We value and respect the partners with whom we serve around the globe, and mean no harm or insult to any people or country.”⁴⁴ The statement possibly provides insight into a conscious effort to provide strategic backing to partner nations in the common operating area for naval forces.

Iranian protesters also accuse USCENTCOM of using the name “Arabian Gulf”; however, USCENTCOM’s use of the name is not consistent. A review of USCENTCOM’s official statements shows a preference to use “the Gulf,” perhaps as an attempt to express a neutral position.⁴⁵ USCENTCOM’s posture statement uses the phrase “the Gulf” three times to specifically refer to the Persian Gulf.⁴⁶ In October 2018, both Secretary of Defense James Mattis and USCENTCOM Commander General Vogel used “the Gulf” during official remarks.⁴⁷ USCENTCOM’s command history uses “Persian Gulf” rather than “the Gulf”; however, this is inconsistent with all other statements and releases and may be to provide clarification to which gulf is being referred to in the overview page.⁴⁸ Additionally, over the past two years of USCENTCOM press releases, only one referred to maritime operations and the body of water was called “Arabian Gulf”; the article came from US Naval Forces Central Command/US 5th Fleet Public Affairs.⁴⁹

The US Navy’s use of “Arabian Gulf” for a body of water that contains contested geographical features provides an avenue, outside of the legal constraints that bind a country, to reassure partners while expressing the willingness to challenge claims on disputed territory without force. While it is unclear if this is the US Navy’s true intent, its use by the US Navy sends a strategic message to both Iran and Arab partners by consistently selecting a side in the naming dispute. It demonstrates an allegiance toward the GCC countries and rejects Iran’s ambition of the regional leader of the Middle East. The US Navy is the best suited military

organization to challenge territorial claims in the Persian Gulf because of its operations within the geographical entity and with the nations challenging the claim.

The use of “Arabian Gulf” by the US State Department, without a shift from the UN, would signify a departure from the international norm. It would provide cause to unite the Iranian diaspora against the US as well as dismiss the substantial historical claims of Iran and the messaged sentiment of the UNGEGN. The US Navy’s use of “Arabian Gulf” signals US recognition of competing regional powers and subtly demonstrates which side the US supports without violating international norms.

Background on the Name “South China Sea”

The body of water commonly known as the “South China Sea” is arguably the most geopolitically contentious body of water of the current day, potentially threatening freedom of navigation and impacting territorial claims of all countries bordering the SCS as well as

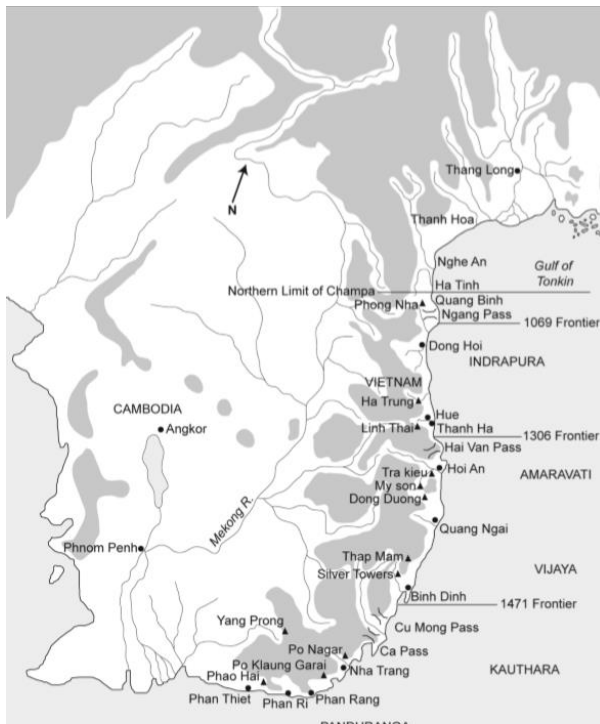


Figure 1: Champa Circa 1000–1500 (Hall 2013)

Indonesia. However, the sea has not always gone by the name “South China Sea.” For centuries, navigators throughout Asia knew these waters as the Sea of Cham or Champa Sea, named for an empire that controlled all of central Vietnam.⁵⁰ The Cham Dynasty, ruling from the 7th into the 19th century, was a Hindu dynasty, which acquired its wealth through trade.⁵¹ Early maps depict and archaeological sites in Asia demonstrate the importance of locations downstream rivers and along coastal

ports of present-day Vietnam for sea trade.⁵² The “orient” which Christopher Columbus sought to find on his fourth and final voyage was actually the Cham Dynasty.⁵³ The Cham are the descendants of the Sa Huynh, who occupied the same area from about 1000 BC into the 2nd century AD, when the Cham culture started to flourish.⁵⁴ Archaeologists identified Sa Huynh artifacts on the islands of Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines indicating frequent sail and trade in the Champa Sea during this period. Additionally, Cham shipwrecks off the coast of the Philippines prove the Cham were seafaring participants.⁵⁵ A 12th century drawing depicts the Cham navy as unrivaled but the army suffering many losses.⁵⁶ In 1832, Emperor of Vietnam Minh Mang ended Cham autonomy and today the Cham are a non-influential ethnic group in Vietnam, China, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia.⁵⁷ The history of the Champa Empire is important in challenging the historical rights claimed by China by illustrating one example of an alternate name and other seafarers prominent in the South China Sea.

Like the Cham Sea, previous names for the South China Sea—such as the South Sea, China Sea, or Indian Seas—never held the tight boundaries as currently defined by the IHO. China’s state-regulated mariner culture takes root in the Ming dynasty of the early 15th century, which ended in the late Ming dynasty due to anti-maritime policies.⁵⁸ Private Chinese merchants, as well as many other merchants like the Cham, were active in these waters and islands far before the 15th century. However, in an attempt to provide evidence to historical claims, Chinese scholars point to a classic poetry book from 475–221 BC as the earliest use of the characters associated with the pinyin words “Nan Hai,”⁵⁹ but the validity is somewhat nebulous given its vague and directional name, which translates simply to “South Sea” and does not provide proof of a proper name. Prior to the 1800s, the West referred to these waters more vastly as the Indian seas.⁶⁰ Westerners began using “China Sea” in about 1800, and in 1930

western mapmakers made the change in an attempt to bring clarity to the East China Sea. Mapmakers then added “China” to the East Sea and when doing so added “South” to the China Sea for clarification.⁶¹ The name “South China Sea” came into use in the West in 1930; prior to this, several other names existed and still exist for the body of water. The official name of the IMO, “South China Sea (Nan Hai),” and boundaries recognized by the international community are printed in the 1957 publication titled, “Limits of Oceans and Seas.” However, this name is an invention, originated by western mapmakers in 1930 in an attempt for clarification.

In December 1947, the first depiction of the nine-dash line appeared on a Chinese map with eleven dotted lines.⁶² Since its creation, China has incrementally introduced laws and expanded its claims using the justification of historical rights. On September 4, 1958, China introduced “China's Declaration on the Territorial Sea,” which served as a foundation for the nine-dash line. In the declaration, China added the 12nm territorial sea lines to the breadth of its claims, though many are disputed, off-lying islands. China established the Hainan Administrative Region on Yong Xing Island in 1959. In 1992, the United Nations 24th meeting of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress approved China’s “Law of the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone.”⁶³ Article 2 of this document states the 12nm territorial sea is extended to the offshore islands—each listed by name.⁶⁴ On May 15, 1996, China issued a statement announcing territorial base points for measuring its territorial sea. The statement included the Xisha Islands—not listed in the UN-approved “Law of the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone.”⁶⁵ On June 26, 1998, the UN’s third session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People’s Congress adopted China's “Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf Act.” Article 14 of this document states that the “Act shall not affect the historical rights” of China.⁶⁶ Despite these attempts to justify its aggressive claims, on July 12,

2016, The Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that while “Chinese navigators and fishermen, as well as those of other States, had historically made use of the islands in the South China Sea, there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the waters or their resources.”⁶⁷ The Tribunal concluded that China did not have a legal basis to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the ‘nine-dash line,’ but China will not acknowledge the ruling, alleging the Tribunal does not have the authority to decide.



Figure 2: Boundaries of the South China Sea (IHO 2002)

The geographic limits of the SCS, depicted in Figure 2, are defined by the IHO as the waters between Southeast Asia mainland and Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo and connected with the East China Sea by the Taiwan Strait and with the Pacific Ocean by the Luzon Strait. The gulfs of Tonkin and Thailand are its chief embayments. The southwest part of the sea from the Gulf of Thailand to the Java Sea is an enormous submerged plain called the Sunda

Platform; water is generally shallow (less than 200 ft/61 m) throughout this vast area. In contrast, the NE part of the sea is a deep basin, reaching depths of up to c.18,000 ft/5,486 m.⁶⁸

the SCS.⁷² Six years later, following the announcement of the “North Natuna Sea,” China’s Foreign Ministry sent a note to the Indonesian Embassy in Beijing expressing opposition to Jakarta’s decision to rename its portion of the SCS.⁷³

Findings and Implications for the SCS

The US Navy’s use of the “Arabian Gulf” proves it can and has used an alternate name to the official name for a body of water, and that it is never too late to make this change. The US Navy’s use of an alternate name is a gray zone operation rather than a formal statement through the federal government or State Department. The US Navy can use gray zone² actions to combat other countries also operating in this zone and seeking to undermine international norms. A military service is a more appropriate organization for gray zone activity than the State Department because of the inherent aggressive nature and its personnel, trained and equipped to conduct information operations and handle potential fallout from operations. The US Navy also is a more appropriate organization than other services to declare an alternate name for a sea because of its access and operations in the sea. The “Arabian Gulf” nomenclature provides precedent for how the US Navy has effectively changed the name of a sea within its organization by enforcing a style guide. Not only is the US Navy the part of the US government best suited to implement an alternate name for a sea, but the change also benefits US Navy operations.

An alternate name for the SCS would influence how the international community views the US and coalition naval operations in the disputed waters. Headlines from international news agencies unintentionally support China’s revisionist “historical rights” narrative by making the

² The gray zone is characterized as “intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war.” by General Votel in “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone.” *Joint Force Quarterly* 80, no 1 (January 2016).

US and coalition navies appear as aggressors. While the articles' content explains why the navies are operating in the SCS, the name "China" gives the perception that these waters are much closer to China instead of, more accurately, the other littoral states. The takeaway is that US and coalition navies are operating aggressively in China's waters. For example, if "West Philippine Sea" was used in the two headlines listed below in place of "South China Sea" then the connotation of US naval operations changes from provocative to protective toward partners and allies:

"US Navy warships sail in South China Sea near contested manmade island"⁷⁴

"US Navy sails past contested islands in South China Sea amid U.S.-China tensions"⁷⁵

The change to "West Philippine Sea" makes China the aggressor for building islands in foreign seas and objecting to passageway in parts of a sea far from its own shores.

There are risks to changing the name of a sea, as demonstrated in the US Navy's shift to "Arabian Gulf." The US Navy would challenge the internationally accepted name through the use of an alternate name, impacting the government and the populace of the country whose name is in contest. The use of "Arabian Gulf" caused reactions by Iran's government and people. The most evident reaction directed at the US Navy was through the protests on the US Navy's official Facebook page. The US Navy redirected the protests in a short timeframe through the assertion of supporting US partners' naming conventions for ease of operations. However, the protests are important because they demonstrated that the name for the sea extends beyond government-to-government relations. Iranians across the globe voiced that the US Navy's alignment to an alternate name was "rewriting history,"⁷⁶ a personal threat because it challenged their ethnic history. The government of China will notice the US Navy using a different name than "SCS." However, in the past, it has rejected claims and publicly dismissed name changes stating that

names do not change territory claims.⁷⁷ This indicates that the change, if made at the US Navy level rather than the federal government, would irk China but not cross any lines. On the other hand, if the US made a policy change to use names other than the SCS this would likely cause a greater diplomatic response and hamper other US-China negotiations between the two states. Additionally, it would make the US appear as a hypocrite to condemn China for not accepting international law while rejecting the UN-accepted name for the sea.

The parallels between the naming disputes over the Persian Gulf and SCS demonstrate that a name change would be feasible but leave the question of whether it is worth the risk. China has naval dominance in the region – no other littoral state compares to its naval strength. In order to stand against its aggressive claims in the SCS these littoral states need to hold their ground but are increasingly reluctant to challenge China. The use of an alternate name for the SCS would provide three strategic end states. First, it provides an additional strategic message to China that the US does not recognize China’s nine-dash line or “historical rights” claim and condemns its aggression in the SCS. Second, it is a concrete demonstration of that message to partners and allies in the region. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an alternate name influences how the international community views the US Navy’s presence in the SCS. Ultimately, action to contest China in the SCS will fall to the international community as littoral states seek omni-embodiment with China and the US, making them unlikely to overtly challenge maritime claims. The US Navy’s use of an alternate name can shape how the international community views hostile actions between ships in the sea.

Adopting Names Based on Alliances and Partnerships

Unlike the case of the Persian Gulf, where the US Navy could select an alternate name used by all littoral states except Iran, no such name exists for the entire SCS. The Philippines, Vietnam,

and Indonesia each provide available alternate names for the SCS, but they are country specific and not recognized by one another. The other SCS littoral states—namely Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore—use “South China Sea” as their preferred nomenclature. A deeper understanding of existing treaties and agreements with SCS littoral state provides the broader context necessary to demonstrate the dilemma the US Navy would face in selecting one of the existing names for the SCS based on US foreign relations.

Two defense treaties between the US and Southeast Asian countries exist—the Philippine Agreement and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Treaty.⁷⁸ The Philippine agreement is a US-Philippine bilateral treaty signed in 1951, which agrees in the event of an armed attack against the US or Philippines in the Pacific area that each country will act to meet the common dangers according to its constitutional processes.⁷⁹ It is worth noting that on March 1, 2019, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged the US would hold true to this treaty, the statement stirred fear in the Philippines where China-Philippines relations have improved significantly under President Duterte. The Southeast Asia Treaty, signed September 1954, was an agreement between the US, Australia, France, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom where each country agrees to recognize an armed attack in the treaty area against any of the treaty members as a danger to its own peace and safety, and to meet the common danger in accordance with relevant constitutional processes.⁸⁰ With the exception of Thailand, the SEATO treaty is now superseded by other defense treaties; however, it remains a justification for the close US-Thailand relationship. With these two treaties, the Philippines and Thailand are held to a closer defense relationship than any other SCS littoral states. If the US Navy were to select one name based on existing defense relationships, it would probably select the “West Philippine Sea” but this would have a ripple effect on other partnerships in the region.

Additionally, the West Philippine Sea only covers a portion of the SCS, which would complicate reporting and planning naval operations by adding an additional boundary in the middle of the sea.

The “East Sea” is the only existing name that covers the entirety of the SCS; however, the present-day US-Vietnam partnership is immature in comparison to the Philippines and Indonesia. The US now recognizes Vietnam as a key strategic partner in the Pacific. However, the bilateral relationship suffered a 19-year trade embargo following the Vietnam War and will take time to develop.⁸¹ When compared with the other littoral states, at this time, the partnership provides the least promise toward a bilateral defense relationship based on existing treaties. Vietnam’s capability and credibility are still developing toward a hopeful end state where it would be able to assume the role of full and responsible defense partner with the US.⁸² The US continues to make important steps toward a defense partnership with a stated goal of Vietnam’s “cooperation in multilateral diplomatic forums to uphold international legal principles in and around the East Sea including freedom of navigation, and maintaining if not expanding US influence in Southeast Asia.”⁸³ The goal indicates the US’ desire for Vietnam to play a more influential role in the SCS.

As the SCS littoral state with a population and GDP second only to China, Indonesia plays an important role in influencing the region. Additionally, it is the only SCS littoral state, besides China, that is a member of G-20. The US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, signed in 2010, is a long-term commitment to elevate bilateral relations to include efforts on regional security cooperation and a commitment to the June 2010 Defense Framework Arrangement.⁸⁴ A “Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Cooperation” between the two countries commits an effort, among others, toward maritime security and the maritime economy.⁸⁵ These

arrangements demonstrate a growing US-Indonesia relationship that includes a focus on SCS matters. The US would like to further this partnership, but like the “West Philippine Sea,” adopting the name “North Natuna Sea” only covers a portion of the SCS and does not completely resolve an effort to rename the sea.

The US would not desire to diminish any of these relations by choosing a name for a body of water at the expense of another. With the trend toward omni-enmeshment, even US allied littoral states—the Philippines and Thailand—likely would not want the US to overemphasize US ties. It also serves US interests to further develop all alliances and partnerships in the region and not risk upsetting one country at the expense of another. The Comprehensive Partnerships between US-Indonesia and US-Malaysia developed in the last two decades and indicate maturing foreign relations. In addition to US foreign relations, selecting the boundaries of the West Philippine Sea only cover a portion of the SCS. Using the name “West Philippine Sea” for the entire SCS would be taking the name out of its intended context and an insult to Vietnam. Given the ally status of the Philippines, calling the SCS the “East [Vietnam] Sea” also would not work. The historical name, Cham Sea, is politically sensitive in current internal Vietnamese politics. The North Natuna Sea only covers a small portion of the SCS and therefore does not make sense. Further, it is unknown how Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei would react to a shift toward favoring one littoral state’s alternate name for the SCS.

Best Option – A Name From ASEAN

A neutral name, proposed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), would be the best option for the US Navy because it would offer a neutral name, originated in the region, and agreed upon by the affected parties. The current names for the SCS are directional names (South Sea, East Sea, West Philippine Sea), which signal a preference to one country over

another. The creation of a new neutral name by the US Navy, such as the “Southeast Asia Sea,” is too imposing. It would fuel narratives of the US as a revisionist or colonialist power. However, the US Navy could readily use the same name introduced by ASEAN without negative connotation or the risk of offending other Southeast Asian nations. In 2011, when the Philippines unveiled the name “West Philippine Sea,” it emphasized the name change was a deliberate attempt to remove the name China to make the point that the sea does not belong to China. After the announcement, a large proponent of the idea, Walden Bello, expressed in an interview an openness toward changing the sea’s name to other alternates like “Southeast Asian Sea” or “ASEAN Sea.”⁸⁶ ASEAN nations working together to determine an agreed upon name provides the best option; however, this might be difficult given their own unresolved territorial disputes in the sea.

Adapting to Alternate Names

Absent a name agreed upon by some or all of ASEAN, the next best option is to take existing names for different parts of the SCS. Figure 4 depicts the new geographic boundaries in the SCS by accepting the boundaries of the North Natuna Sea and merging the names West Philippine Sea and East [Vietnam] Sea to account for the remainder of the SCS. The merging of the names “West Philippine Sea” and “East Sea” provides several benefits. The “East Sea” allows the name to cover the entirety of the SCS, aside from the North Natuna Sea, whereas the “West Philippine Sea” only would cover the Philippines’ western EEZ. The addition of the word “Vietnam” in “East Sea” provides acknowledgement of Vietnam’s historical seagoing past and possession of the largest coastline of all the littoral states in the SCS. The combination of the

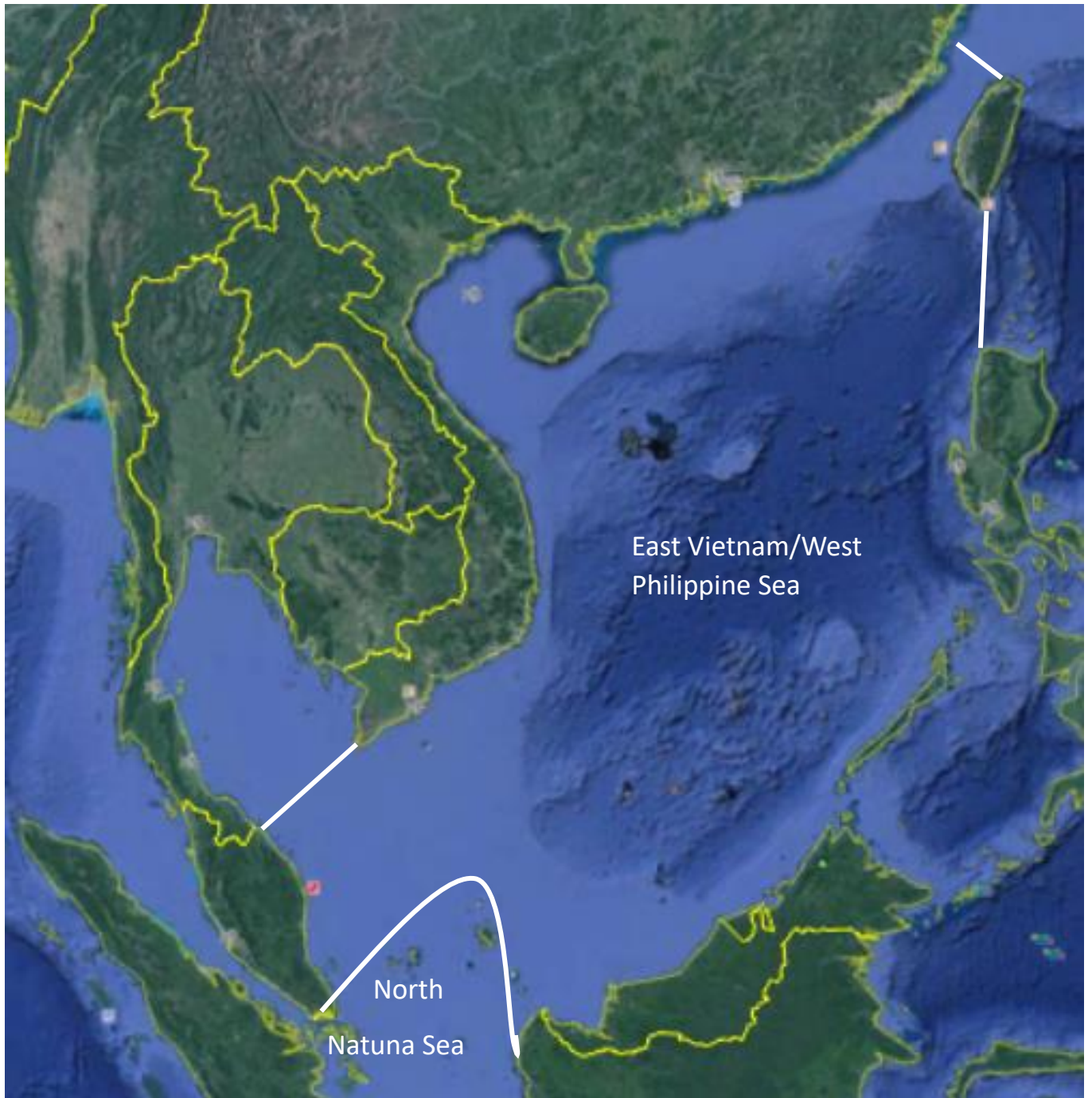


Figure 4: Recognizing Alternate Names

name allows the US Navy to remove itself from the unresolved issue that the “West Philippine Sea” contains a small disputed area between the Philippines and Vietnam. Additionally, it provides less confusion than an east/west line through the middle of the sea when determining which sea vessels are located in during incidents or transits. Using “East Vietnam/West

Philippine Sea” as the new nomenclature removes the need to use the name “SCS” completely. Most importantly, it removes the name “China” from the sea. By accepting the name “North Natuna Sea,” the US Navy does not risk offending any existing stakeholders that have a declared name. If Brunei or Malaysia were offended by exclusion from the name, they may be more likely to push for an ASEAN name to the sea; a great option that could be readily used in place of “East Vietnam/West Philippine Sea.” Adoption of this nomenclature would eliminate the name “South China Sea” from 7th fleet publications, speeches, and press releases.

Counterargument

It might be argued that more harm than good would be caused by the US Navy using an alternate name. The case study of the Persian Gulf illustrates how people of a culture could be united when the name for a body of water is changed. The Iranian diaspora unites against what they believe is a rewrite of history and is critical toward US use of an alternate name. To them, this is an example of the US meddling in other countries affairs. However, the US Navy uses “Arabian Gulf” because their partners in the region are calling the waters by that name. The same can be said for alternate names in the SCS. The names are not inventions of the US, unless the US were to create a new name, but affirmations of US support to littoral states of the SCS that are using alternate names. The use of alternate names will likely cause China to protest but is unlikely to cause the People’s Liberation Army Navy or its subordinated units to act more aggressively than the current state. China could address the international audience like when it responded negatively about the diversion from an internationally accepted name after the announcement of the North Natuna Sea by publicly dismissing the name.⁸⁷ However, the attention China draws to an alternate name will be linked to why countries elected to change the name—because of China’s illegitimate claims on their EEZs. The US has demonstrated a willingness to use

alternate names as demonstrated by former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis using “North Natuna Sea” while in Indonesia.⁸⁸ This indicates the use of an alternate name is a step the US is willing to take and a name change by a single service would mitigate potential political risk.

Conclusion

The US Navy’s use of an alternate name for the SCS builds upon freedom of navigation operations by continuing the effort to challenge excessive maritime claims, demonstrate US noncompliance toward China’s deviation from international law, and reassure allies and partners without the use of military force. By switching to names that already exist, or using a name introduced by ASEAN, the US Navy through 7th Fleet publications, press statements, and speeches can push back at China’s revisionist claims to ownership of the SCS, better posture international audiences to acknowledge China’s military build-up in the waters and prepare them if military intervention was deemed the best solution, and reaffirm, but not pressure, members of ASEAN. Countering China’s expansion in the SCS, politically or militarily, will take a multi-national coalition with the support of the international community. The US Navy’s use of the name “East Vietnam/West Philippine Sea” appropriately shapes the way information is delivered for international audiences of China as the aggressor while remaining below the threshold for blowback that could impact other US diplomatic efforts.

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