

The Gulf of America: Are Unilateral Government Decisions Enforceable?

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On President Trump's first day in office, he signed Executive Order 14172, titled "Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness."¹ Among the order's demands was for the Secretary of the Interior to take all "appropriate actions to rename as the 'Gulf of America' the U.S. Continental Shelf area" and the seaward boundary of Mexico and Cuba, formerly known as the "Gulf of Mexico."² The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), the U.S. agency in charge of making official maps, is also tasked with carrying out this act. Other countries will likely not reciprocate the renaming, with Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum claiming that for the rest of the world, it is still the Gulf of Mexico.³ But can President Trump unilaterally rename a shared location?

Mexico's President believes not. President Sheinbaum cites the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to argue a territorial sovereignty to only extend twelve nautical miles from a country's coastline.⁴ After the first twelve nautical miles from the coastline, the gulf is considered international waters and not within U.S. territory.⁵

Despite this stipulation, it does not prevent the U.S. from renaming the former Gulf of Mexico on official U.S. Maps through the BGN. However, there is no way to compel other countries to also make this change, since there is not an international board like the BGN.⁶ The Gulf of Mexico is not the first area of contentious geography, as there are several name discrepancies of geography around the world due to territorial disputes or geopolitical tensions.⁷ For example, the shared body of water between China, Philippines, and Vietnam, is considered "the South China Sea" by China, the "West Sea" by the Philippines, and the "East Sea" by Vietnam.⁸ The President's reason for renaming the Gulf of Mexico is part of his plan to restore "American pride in the history of American greatness."⁹ However, we cannot legally expect or make other nations do so as well.

¹ Exec. Order No. 14172, 90 C.F.R. 8629 (2025).

² *Id.*

³ Rachel Treisman, *Who will call it the Gulf of America? A look at this and other naming disputes*, NPR (Feb. 11, 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/03/nx-s1-5281985/google-maps-gulf-of-mexico-america>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Innisfree McKinnon, *How Trump's Order to Rename Gulf of Mexico and Denali Works*, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (Jan. 28, 2025), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-trumps-order-to-rename-gulf-of-mexico-and-denali-works/>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Nicole Hassenstab, *What's in a Name? The Geopolitics of Renaming Landmarks*, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY (Feb. 14, 2025), [https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20250214-whats-in-a-name-geopolitics-of-renaming-landmarks.cfm#:~:text=Many%20bodies%20of%20water%20have,the%20East%20Sea%20\(Vietnam\)](https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20250214-whats-in-a-name-geopolitics-of-renaming-landmarks.cfm#:~:text=Many%20bodies%20of%20water%20have,the%20East%20Sea%20(Vietnam)).

⁹ Gustavo Arellano, *The Real Motive Behind Trump Renaming The Gulf Of Mexico To 'Gulf Of America'*, L.A. TIMES (Feb. 19, 2025), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-02-19/donald-trump-gulf-of-mexico-gulf-of-america>.