

TERRUM

Renaming of the Gulf of Mexico:
Legal, Economic, and Diplomatic
Challenges.

By Natalia Deschamps

UNITED STATES
THE BRITISH PROVINCES
MEXICO

TABLE OF DISTANCES			Miles
From New York to Independence	1,760	From Sandy Hook N.Y. to Charleston Bar	624
From Independence Mo. to Sutters Fort	2,691	Savannah	680
New York to Vera Cruz	2,300	Havana Moro	1,200
Vera Cruz to Acapulco	375	Bahize Pr Route	1,771
Gulf of Mexico to Pacific via Tehuantepec (Land 40 Water 90)	130	Havana Chagres	1,048
Tehuantepec to San Francisco	2,300	Chagres	2,308
New Orleans to Havana	625	From Chagres to Panama	50
		by water 30	700
		land 20	2,000
		Acapulco	2,000
		San Diego	2,000

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Renaming the Gulf of Mexico offers a difficult mix of legal, diplomatic, financial, and environmental issues. Although such a shift could seem politically driven or symbolic, the results go far beyond national pride. The legal structure controlling international seas, the international treaties and regulatory organizations impacted, and the major legal and financial consequences of such a name change are presented in this article.

International Legal Framework and Governing Authorities

Renaming an internationally recognized body of water involves several institutions and legal systems guaranteeing geographical names remain consistent and generally acknowledged. Standardizing geographic names across many nations is much aided by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. This body guarantees that names are not arbitrarily changed without great cause and broad support among impacted countries, therefore promoting consistency in official documents, maps, and international debate. This organization would handle assessing the validity and any consequences of a name change.

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The International Hydrographic Organization ("IHO"), which is in charge of standardizing names and marine boundaries on nautical charts used by international shipping companies, also has great power in this regard. The IHO would have to assess the viability of using a new name and updating hydrographic data in line with uniform nomenclature as maritime trade and international navigation rely on same terminology. Such an upgrade would affect legal documents referencing marine rights in the Gulf, navigation systems, and marine traffic control among other areas.

Furthermore, laying the legal basis for maritime governance is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea¹ ("UNCLOS"). Acting as the primary legal framework controlling the Gulf of Mexico, this treaty specifies territorial seas, exclusive economic zones ("EEZs"), and continental shelf claims. Any effort to rename it would probably call for a formal revision of the current agreements among the Gulf-sharing countries—Mexico, the United States, and Cuba. The impacted nations would have to achieve a diplomatic agreement before asking for a name change to the pertinent international organizations since UNCLOS does not directly control the nomenclature of marine areas.

Direct references to the Gulf of Mexico abound in several other international treaties, so ingrain the name into legal documents controlling trade, environmental protection, and regional cooperation. Signed in 1978, the Treaty on Maritime Boundaries Between the United States and Mexico² specifies authority over offshore resources and navigation rights; the 1977 U.S.-Cuba Maritime Boundary Agreement³ similarly specifies territorial limitations between Cuba and the United States. Both treaties would require changes reflecting the new name, which would lead diplomatic discussions with potential renegotiations.

1.-https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

2.- <https://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/TREATIES/MEX-USA1978MB.PDF>

3.- <https://www.congress.gov/118/cdoc/tdoc1/CDOC-118tdoc1.pdf>

In addition to maritime agreements, regional trade agreements like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement⁴ incorporate Gulf references in connection to commercial operations, trade routes, and resource management. Changing these agreements to fit a new name would add legal complications and bureaucratic hold-back. Likewise, environmental conventions as the Cartagena Convention⁵ -which seeks to safeguard the marine habitat in the larger Caribbean- also refer to the Gulf. Changing its name would mean adjustments to environmental protocols and conservation programs, potentially disturbing current efforts to protect marine life.

Any attempt to rename the Gulf of Mexico would need a long process of international approval considering the legal entanglements, administrative obstacles, and diplomatic sensitivity involved. Acknowledging the suggested change globally would depend on the cooperation of several groups, including trade organizations, national governments, and international regulatory authorities. However, the potential for political opposition, economic problems, and disruptions to existing legal frameworks makes such a renaming process highly impractical and contentious.

Economic Impact on Trade, Industry, and Commerce.

1. Shipping and maritime navigation impact.

With major ports in the United States, Mexico, and Cuba handling a great number of products, the Gulf of Mexico is an essential artery for world commerce. With billions of goods flowing through yearly, the ports of Houston, New Orleans, Tampa, Veracruz, and Coatzacoalcas are vital to North American trade. A name change would need modifications to nautical charts, marine navigation tools, insurance records, and shipping agreements. These upgrades would not only be expensive but also cause brief interruptions in freight flow as international transport companies change their documentation policies.

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Major shipping alliances and logistical firms also depend on well-traveled paths referencing the Gulf of Mexico in official documentation. Renaming it could cause uncertainty in international goods logistics and call for great cooperation among regulatory bodies, coast guards, and port authorities. The cost of updating international maritime databases and ensuring uniform recognition of the new name across all affected jurisdictions would be substantial.

2. Effects on the Gas and Oil Sector.

With a significant drilling activity in both U.S. and Mexican seas, the Gulf is among the most prolific offshore oil and gas extraction areas worldwide. Companies such as Pemex, Chevron, Shell, and BP maintain an important infrastructure in the area. Renaming would mean changes to government leasing agreements, environmental compliance reports, and drilling permits, therefore affecting output and adding levels of bureaucratic complexity.

4.- <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/united-states-mexico-canada-agreement/agreement-between>

5.- https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27875/SPAWSTAC5_2012-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

3. Agriculture and Fishing Impacts.

The Gulf of Mexico is a crucial resource for commercial and subsistence fishing, supporting industries in the United States, Mexico, and Cuba. Many bilateral and international fishing agreements particularly refer to the Gulf of Mexico, thus a name change could call for renegotiations of fishing rights, quotas, and environmental policies.

Under international treaties, fishermen may have delays or legal issues in getting permits, causing financial difficulty for coastal communities depending on the fishing sector. Agricultural exports dependent on Gulf-based shipping routes -such as grain shipments from U.S. ports to Latin America- could also suffer brief interruptions while trade documentation and customs declarations reflect the new name.

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Legal effects of Renaming the Gulf.

1. Impact on International Treaties and Maritime Law.

Renaming the Gulf of Mexico would mean changing innumerable treaties, laws, and agreements controlling its use. Maritime law defines EEZ and territorial seas using standardized nomenclature. Should the name be changed to the Gulf of America, all references in international law would have to be altered as well, therefore generating possible legal disputes and diplomatic consultations between impacted countries.

Such change would have especially complicated legal consequences since treaties often refer to geographic names defining jurisdictional boundaries, resource-sharing agreements, and navigation rights. For instance, Mexico and the United States have several bilateral treaties governing fishing rights, pollution control, and energy exploration in the Gulf. A name change could require renegotiation of these treaties, adding legal uncertainty to cross-border cooperation.

2. Diplomatic Difficulties and Sovereignty Issues.

For Mexico, the Gulf of Mexico is both culturally and historically important. Renaming it either unilaterally or even multilaterally could be seen as an attempt to challenge Mexico's sovereignty. Following an executive order issued by U.S. President Donald Trump, the Mexican government has fiercely protested the change, especially denouncing Google's decision to show the new name on its maps for users based on the United States. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum underlined that the executive order should cover just U.S. territorial waters and not the whole body of water shared with Mexico and Cuba. The change was implemented in response to the U.S. Geographic Names Information System officially updating the name within the United States. Google confirmed that users in Mexico will continue to see "Gulf of Mexico", while those in the U.S. will see "Gulf of America". However, Sheinbaum rejected this explanation, arguing that Google has no right to rename the continental shelves of Mexico and Cuba. "Under no circumstance will Mexico accept the renaming of a Geographic Zone within its own territory and under its jurisdiction," she stated⁶.

The Mexican government has sent a letter to Google requesting for the original term, "Gulf of Mexico", to be restored on its platform⁷. While Google has not committed to reverting the change, it has expressed willingness

6.- <https://www.milenio.com/politica/google-responde-a-sheinbaum-golfo-de-mexico-esto-dice-la-carta>

7.- <https://elpais.com/mexico/2025-01-29/el-gobierno-de-sheinbaum-enviara-una-carta-a-google-para-defender-el-nombre-del-golfo-de-mexico-en-maps.html>

to discuss the matter. President Sheinbaum warned that if Google keep using "Gulf of America," Mexico will take legal action to rectify what it believes to be misleading information⁸.

Meanwhile, the United States has supported the renaming initiative. President Donald Trump signed an executive order⁹ on January 20, 2025, ordering federal agencies to adopt the name "Gulf of America" for the section of the U.S. continental shelf reaching the maritime borders with Mexico and Cuba. This action has been understood as an attempt to strengthen national identity in strategically important geographic areas.

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Is It Worth the Consequences?

Renaming the Gulf of Mexico to Gulf of America is a complicated issue with major legal, financial, and diplomatic effects, far more than a symbolic gesture. Although political considerations may be behind the name change, the pragmatic consequences of such a move go far into international law, world business, and regional relations.

Renaming an internationally known body of water legally is not a straightforward task. It calls for cooperation among the states directly impacted -Mexico, the United States, and Cuba- as well as the approval of several international organizations, including the United Nations and the IHO. A name change would require significant changes to international legal papers given the great volume of treaties, maritime agreements, and regulatory frameworks referencing the Gulf of Mexico, therefore generating needless bureaucratic hurdles and diplomatic problems.

The financial fallout is just as significant. For trade, energy generation, and fishing, the Gulf of Mexico is a major center. Changing its name would cause uncertainty in sectors ranging from fishery to offshore drilling, disturb world shipping, demand expensive modifications to nautical charts and legal contracts. Operating challenges and economic uncertainties might affect thousands of companies and employees depending on Gulf resources.

Diplomatically, the renaming effort is particularly contentious. The Gulf is seen by Mexico and Cuba as essential component of their national character and economic development. Any effort by the United States to adopt a new name, particularly unilaterally, is at risk of being perceived as a violation of their sovereignty.

The tremendous political sensitivity surrounding this subject is shown by the Mexican government's vehement resistance as well as its possible legal action against Google for deciding to include the new name on its maps located on the United States.

Finally, even if renaming the Gulf is meant to be a show of national pride, the expenses much exceed the advantages. The Gulf of Mexico is not merely a name; it is a region that is economically essential and historically significant. Instead than concentrating on rebranding a well-known geographic area, initiatives should be focused on encouraging cooperation, safeguarding of common resources, and strengthening of regional partnerships.

8.- <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/golfo-america-golfo-mexico-respuesta-google-sheinbaum-20250223-747552.html>

9.- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/restoring-names-that-honor-american-greatness/>

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Natalia has over 15 years of experience clients in aviation finance transactions involving Mexican airlines, operators and governmental entities, as well as other providers of air transportation service. She has participated in multiple transactions related to the acquisitions, leasing and financings of private and commercial aircraft, helicopters and engines, representing lenders, lessors and owners, in the structure and implementation of guaranteed schemes and regulatory work before Mexican authorities.

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