

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 27  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 1997*

Article 8

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5-12-1997

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### Recommended Citation

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# The Importance of Maritime Chokepoints

REYNOLDS B. PEELE

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From *Parameters*, Summer 1997, pp. 61-74.

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"Man's natural habitat is land, and land dominates his conscious endeavor--social, economic, political, and military. Yet, almost three quarters of his world is ocean. It is the original source of life for all earth's species; it is the essential means of global transport for man's produce, commerce, and military strength. While the world ocean is beyond sight of much of mankind, its influence is ubiquitous." [1]

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Sir Walter Raleigh once observed, "Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself." [2] Unimpeded sea lines of communication are as important to us today as they were to Raleigh, his peers, and their successors who created a mercantile empire that was sustained by the Royal Navy's control of the sea lines of communication linking England, its colonies, and its trading partners.

More than 80 percent of global trade still moves by sea, and the United States depends on the free and unimpeded movement of its share of that commerce. Further, with its power-projection land forces and seemingly unending international commitments, the United States and its allies depend on access to the seas to ensure their security.

The concept of unimpeded sea lines of communication underpins the very meaning of a national security strategy based on the twin premises of global enlargement and engagement. Yet one must ask whether US strategy adequately addresses the security of the various sea lines of communication and the associated chokepoints so essential to its own economic well-being and that of its principal allies. This article examines some historical and theoretical aspects of maritime chokepoints; assesses current issues and foreign policy concerns regarding their security, and evaluates US strategy as it relates to free access to sea lines of communication. The ability to guarantee an unimpeded flow of seagoing commerce remains for us, as it was for Walter Raleigh, a major geopolitical component of national power.

## Mahan and Seapower

Alfred Thayer Mahan was born in 1840 at West Point, New York, where his father was a professor at the US Military Academy. The future admiral graduated from Annapolis in 1859, served in combat during the Civil War, and in 1885 was assigned to the Naval War College as a lecturer on naval history and strategy. He later was its president (1892-93) and retired from the Navy in 1896. Recalled to active duty in 1898, Mahan served as a member of the Naval War Board and as a delegate to the Hague Peace Conference, retiring a second time in 1906 as a rear admiral. He continued to develop his concepts of naval strategy until his death in 1914.

Mahan's analysis of history convinced him that lines of communication determined the outcome of many battles and campaigns: Napoleon severing enemy supplies at Marengo (1800) and Ulm (1805), and Farragut holding the lines of communication of the forts on the Mississippi, which eventually contributed to their conquest during the Civil War, stood out in his mind. Equally significant was the US Navy's decisive blow to Confederate commerce by seeking out its ships on the high seas shipping lanes and by blockading and closing ports. [3] The essence of Mahan's theory was that a nation could be strong only if it had the means to control the seas against any threat; seapower was the only way to attain that strategic objective.

Mahan identified three attributes relevant to much of the history and policy of nations bordering the sea: "production, with the necessity of exchanging products; shipping, whereby the exchange is carried on; and colonies, which facilitate and enlarge the operations of shipping and tend to protect it by multiplying points of safety." [4] Relationships among

the three were underscored by Mahan's conviction that the United States had to develop a strategy that would allow it to compete with the European powers in the first two categories, if not in the third. While his words are those of 19th-century imperialism and colonialism, there is not a great difference between his conclusions and those that motivate practitioners of enlargement and engagement today.

Mahan's concept of the relationships between commerce and warmaking capacity was expressed in a variety of ways. Commenting on the need for physical presence at specific locations to facilitate trade and ensure the defense of trade routes, he observed:

Thus arose the demand for stations along the road, like the Cape of Good Hope, St. Helena, and Mauritius, not primarily for trade, but for defense and war; the demand for the possession of posts like Gibraltar, Malta, Louisburg, at the entrance of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, posts whose value was chiefly strategic, though not necessarily wholly so. Colonies and colonial posts were sometimes commercial, sometimes military in their character; and it was exceptional that the same position was equally important in both points of view, as New York was.[5]

From that concept it was a short step to the assertion that a mercantile nation would have to hold "in force some vital center (or chokepoint) through which commercial shipping must pass." [6]

Keeping in mind Mahan's conclusion that there are "two classes of powers: those whose communication is by land, and those who depend upon the sea. The sea lines are the most numerous and easy, and they will probably be determinative of the course of trade," [7] one can examine his criteria for sea-going powers when contemplating war.

- . What is the true objective?
- . What are the points upon which it [the navy] should be concentrated?
- . Where are the . . . depots of coal and supplies?
- . How are communications maintained between these depots and the home base?
- . What is the military value of commerce-destroying as a decisive or secondary operation of war?
- . What is the system upon which commerce-destroying can be most efficiently conducted--whether by scattered cruisers or by holding in force some vital center through which commercial shipping must pass? [8]

While technology has rendered moot the issues of coaling stations and by inference the seakeeping capacities of the fleets of Mahan's day, answers to such questions can still define ways and means to exploit sea lines of communication and their chokepoints to meet national security strategy goals.

Strategy based on Mahan's concept of controlling sea lines of communication threatened England during World War II and it ensured Japan's defeat. Submarine attacks and mining operations destroyed Japan's merchant fleet, gradually shutting off the supplies of foodstuffs to her people and of oil and raw materials essential to sustain her wartime production.[9] Today the UN embargo against the ocean shipment of Iraqi oil may remain in place until Saddam Hussein fully complies with the war-ending treaty and recognizes the independence of Kuwait. Elsewhere, the ships of many navies sustained a UN-imposed embargo on Serbia with ships in the Adriatic Sea while police boats patrolled the Rhine.

Mahan's views on seapower were followed closely in Great Britain, Germany, and Japan; [10] they directly affected the Allied victory in World War II, and they sustained those whose concept of seapower contributed to victory in the Cold War. [11] Mahan recognized the geopolitical significance of sea lines of communication and of the chokepoints defined at various places along them. His insights about maintaining sea lines of communication for one's own benefit and preparing to deny them to adversaries are as relevant to strategists today as they were a century ago. One of the objectives of this article, then, is to reflect on how others might apply Mahan's theories against the United States to impede our ability to intervene in regional conflicts.

## **Geography and Strategy**

There is an important link between the land and the sea in considerations on the development of strategy. When properly understood by nation-states, the link can produce grand strategy--geopolitics or strategic geography, in more contemporary terms--which benefits that nation-state in both war and peace. In this regard, Colonel James Toth (USMC Ret.) has written:

Webster defines geography as a science that deals with the earth and its life, especially the description of land, sea, air and the distribution of plant and animal life including man and his industries. This includes the availability and distribution of raw materials, workforce, industries, and the network of man-made infrastructure (railroads, highways, ports, airports, intermodal connections) which link the whole into a useful social, economic, or national defense system. Economics is an overlapping science which deals with the dynamic interaction of these geographic components, particularly as it relates to the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Geopolitics can be defined as the study of the influence of geography, economics, and demography on the politics and especially the foreign policy of state.[12]

While economists, politicians, and geographers may debate the scope (and obvious overlap) of their various disciplines, geography is highlighted in strategic discussions because it helps the participants to visualize strategic relationships and requirements. As Napoleon said, "The policy of a state lies in its geography." [13] That is often more clear through inspection of geographical relationships than examination of statistics of productivity or theories of international order.[14]

Mahan focused his efforts on understanding the boundary between land and ocean as it related to the development of man and the use of strategic power. His belief that a great seapower required strategic reach reflected the strategic and military objectives of several nations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[15]

With regard to geostrategy, Toth wrote: "The primal value in relativity among forces, objects, or states is advantageous position. In the dynamic sense--whether in the political, military, or commercial realm--we can call military positional advantage key terrain, the central position, strategic chokepoints and the like." [16]

These positional advantages--particularly chokepoints--have intranational as well as international implications. Toth suggests:

Intranational refers to the quantitative and qualitative aspects of national raw materials, agriculture, industry, infrastructure, and work force as they relate to one another as sources of national power. The sources of national power (e.g., geographic extent, configuration, and position; population size and characteristics; industrial and technological potential) are not directly employable but serve as the basis for the instruments of national power (e.g., diplomacy, military action, economic action) which are employable.[17]

When strategists examine global issues as they relate to the military instrument of power, it is important to understand that "geography is the fulcrum against which the level of force must be applied." [18] Among other factors, there must be an appreciation of the seas as well as terrain and land forms and their effects on national defense and military action. Positional advantage should always be assessed relative to generating, using, or thwarting military instruments of power. The position or location of friends and adversaries (threats and aggressors) and the geography that is to be traversed by one to get to the other will define objectives and key lines of communication, whether sea lines or overland routes.

## **Mahan Updated**

The inescapable connection between commerce and warmaking continues to shape US policy toward open access to the world's oceans and seas. The economic growth of the United States is closely linked to the world economy as a whole, and most of that trade is carried on and over the world's oceans; [19] seaborne commerce exceeds 3.5 billion

tons annually and accounts for over 80 percent of trade among nations.[20] Virtually every aspect of the daily lives of most people is touched by goods and services that are ultimately connected to free trade by sea.[21] At the same time, sea lines of communication directly affect the US ability to get forces, equipment, and supplies to crisis areas. The issues associated with sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and chokepoints include unimpeded transit on, under, and over these areas. Eight international regions--called the "US Lifelines and Transit Regions" by the Department of Defense--contain chokepoints that require our attention:[22]

- . the Gulf of Mexico-Caribbean Sea with the Panama Canal
- . the North Sea-Baltic Sea with several channels and straits
- . the Mediterranean-Black Sea with the Strait of Gibraltar and access to Middle Eastern areas
- . the Western Indian Ocean with the Suez Canal, Bab el Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and around South Africa to the Mozambique Channel
- . the Southeast Asian Seas with the Malacca and Lombok Straits among others, and SLOCs passing the Spratly Islands
- . the Northeast Asian Seas with SLOCs important for access to Japan, Korea, China, and Russia
- . the Southwest Pacific with important SLOC access to Australia
- . the Arctic Ocean with the Bering Strait

Economic and military issues alike are important in shaping US strategy toward unobstructed passage of these eight major SLOCs and the associated chokepoints. According to the American Petroleum Institute, 1994 marked the first year that more than half the oil used in the United States was imported. The largest supplier, Saudi Arabia, provides 18.5 percent of the United States' petroleum needs. Any Saudi oil reaching the United States has to travel more than 8000 sea miles via the SLOCs in the regions of the Western Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean-Black Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico-Caribbean Sea. Disruption of this movement can affect not only the United States but the global economy as well, as was demonstrated during the 1980-1988 "tanker war" between Iran and Iraq.

US interest during that period of Middle East conflict was to insure the safe passage of non-belligerent ships moving petroleum from the Persian Gulf to Western economies, including the United States. This eight-year conflict produced 543 attacks on ships, with approximately 200 merchant sailors killed. Fifty-three American lives were lost as a result of attacks on US military vessels in the region. It is important to note that most of the ships that were attacked flew flags of nations not associated with the conflict between Iran and Iraq. More than 80 of these ships were sunk or declared a total loss, resulting in more than \$2 billion in direct losses to cargo and hulls. This in turn caused worldwide hull insurance rates to increase 200 percent, which was passed on to consumers in higher prices for petroleum products. Fears that the tanker war would result in serious disruption of available oil supplies helped to push the price of crude oil from approximately \$13 to \$31 per barrel;<sup>[23]</sup> the net cost to the world economy of these price increases has been estimated at more than \$200 billion.<sup>[24]</sup> Heavy US dependence on Persian Gulf oil, currently in the vicinity of 9.8 million barrels per day, may be irreversible. With the odds in favor of that part of the world remaining unstable and potentially volatile, US national security strategy will undoubtedly continue to focus on free access to crude oil from the region.

Measured by the sheer volume of merchant shipping transiting it, the region that includes the Southeast Asian Seas and the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok is the most prominent of all the eight regions. The region also encompasses the SLOC in the South China Sea past the Spratly Islands. These sea lanes carry almost half the world's merchant shipping and large percentages of Asian trade through a few key straits. In 1993, over half the world's merchant fleet capacity and more than one-third of the world's ships sailed through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, or Lombok, or sailed past the Spratly Islands.<sup>[25]</sup> Shipping traffic through Malacca is several times greater than the traffic through either the Suez or Panama canals.<sup>[26]</sup>

The aggregate numbers portray the significance of this region to ocean-borne commerce. More than one-half trillion

dollars (\$568 billion) of long haul interregional seaborne shipments passed through these chokepoints in 1993,[27] representing over 15 percent of all the world's cross-border trade, excluding trade within the region. More than 40 percent of the trade from Japan, Australia, and the nations of Southeast Asia, as well as one quarter of the imports of the Newly Industrialized Economies of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, pass through these chokepoints.[28] The economic strength of these countries and their trading partners depends on unimpeded passage in the region. In 1993, the United States was third in terms of owned "capacity ships" passing through the Strait of Malacca, behind Japan and Greece in the number of such ships transiting the region. The volume of merchant shipping in the area and the associated significance of these SLOCs can be summarized as follows:

Over half of all interregional tonnage passing through Malacca is either coming from or going to the Arab Gulf (Western Indian Ocean Region). About half of interregional tonnage through Malacca is either coming from or going to Southeast Asia. Over a third of [the] tonnage is going to or coming from Japan, and next in shipping volume are the Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs) of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea.[29]

In 1993, US maritime exports--valued at \$15 billion and exceeding 11 million tons--represented 3.3 percent of the tonnage that traversed the SLOCs in this region.[30]

The region is not without security concerns that may affect the SLOCs. Several nations claim part or all of the Spratly Islands and, by extension, rights over the waters adjacent to the islands.[31] China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have garrisons on some of the atolls and have claimed sovereignty over the adjacent waters. Indonesia is one of 17 states declaring sovereignty over the waters and SLOCs which are enclosed within its archipelagic state; it has considered seeking control of shipping among its islands under a doctrine of "archipelagic sea lines." The straits in the Indonesian Archipelago are important for direct and cost-effective maritime activity, as they link the Pacific and Indian oceans. Finally, because of oil spills associated with accidents in the Strait of Malacca, the international community has considered regulating shipping for environmental concerns and maritime safety.[32] There is no way to separate commerce from the defense of US interests in the South China Sea and nearby waters.

Recent events in North Korea, Haiti, Rwanda, Iraq, and the Balkans remind us how dangerous and uncertain it can be to consider trade apart from national security strategy. In *National Security and the Convention on the Law of the Sea*, the US Department of Defense identifies the following post-Cold War threats to US interests and world order relative to these countries:[33]

- . Ethnic rivalry and separatist violence within and without national borders
- . Regional tensions in areas such as the Middle East and Northeast Asia
- . Humanitarian crises of natural or other origin resulting in starvation, strife, or mass migration patterns
- . Conflict over mineral and living resources including those that straddle territorial or maritime zones
- . Terrorist attacks and piracy against US persons, property, or shipping overseas or on the high seas

The end of the Cold War did not alter the fact that the United States remains a maritime nation with global security concerns. These concerns oblige the United States to maintain the capacity to project and sustain its forces throughout the world in defense of its own interests and those of its allies. US responses to threats must be unobstructed and rapid; our 1994 deployment of troops and equipment in response to saber-rattling by Iraq is but one example of the need to be able to deploy efficiently in response to such threats. Other examples in the DOD document include:[34]

- . Before and during the Persian Gulf War, the United States and other coalition naval and air forces traversed the straits of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb, both key chokepoints. In preparation for Operation Desert Storm, 3.4 million tons of dry cargo and 6.6 million tons of fuel had to be transported to US and allied forces in the Gulf. Ninety-five percent of the cargo moved by ship through the straits.
- . If prevented from passing the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malacca Straits, a naval battle group

transiting from Yokosuka, Japan, to Bahrain would have to reroute around Australia. Assuming an average speed of 15 knots, the six-ship battle group (all consuming conventional fuel) would require an additional 15 days to transit an additional 5800 nautical miles. Additional fuel cost would be approximately \$7 million.

The United States considers it important that SLOCs remain open, not merely because passage is essential for implementing the national security strategy, but as a matter of international right.[35] The United States does not want to see passage through the SLOCs become contingent upon approval by coastal or island nations.[36] Such impediments to global mobility through key chokepoints could delay response in crises; transit time from the US east coast to the Persian Gulf is 20 days via the Suez Canal, 26 days via South Africa. The United States can ill afford a strategy that fails to ensure unobstructed passage over, under, and through key SLOCs. The examples also suggest that costs associated with the loss of access to key chokepoints--time, fuel, and opportunity costs--could be unacceptable. These are matters that must be attended to; they cannot be allowed to accumulate until a crisis forces their resolution.

## **Regional Threats**

There are presently six significant regional economic and military concerns that require constant strategic focus on free access to sea lines of communication.

- . In the Middle East, Saddam Hussein's hegemonic activities remain a threat to regional economic and political stability. State-sponsored terrorism originating in Libya and Iran contributes to concerns about regional, as well as European, stability.
- . In Northeast Asia, North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear capability exacerbates regional tension. For nearly 50 years, the United States has been committed to the defense of South Korea, helping to maintain the balance of power and stability on the Korean peninsula. Also, the growth of Asia as a trading partner requires the United States to discourage prospective regional hegemon.[37]
- . Stability within the Western Hemisphere is an enduring concern. Examples include the need for stable democracies in Haiti and Cuba, while stability remains important if El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are to emerge from recent insurgencies with reasonable prospects for economic growth. Problems posed by the international drug trade are addressed below.
- . Unrest in Bosnia and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia continues to disrupt regional stability. The United States remains committed to ongoing peacekeeping operations in the search for peace in the Balkans.
- . Interventions in Africa to prevent or end genocide (Rwanda and Somalia), support of UN efforts to reduce tensions between warring states (Angola and Mozambique), and efforts to calm civil strife (South Africa and Namibia) can preclude second- or third-order effects of massive population shifts that have plagued the region for nearly a decade. SLOCs are important if the United States is to shape favorable outcomes in such circumstances.
- . The United States remains concerned about the regional dispute over the Spratly Islands. While it seems unlikely at present that a direct threat to free access to the regional SLOCs will emerge, the statistics above demonstrate the importance of the South China Sea to our own trade as well as that of our allies and trading partners.

The foregoing list of US security and economic foreign policy interests is neither exhaustive nor prioritized. The underpinning in each statement is an immediate or potential requirement to deploy and sustain substantial military force in the interest of free access to SLOCs or in response to threats to US interests or those of its allies. The effects of disruptions within the associated SLOCs range from significant in the Middle East and Southeast Asia to minimal around the coastal areas of Africa. However, all six would likely require the movement of land or naval forces and equipment to crisis areas along key SLOCs to ensure that US security and economic interests can be protected.

## **Transnational Threat: Drug Trafficking**

Most readers are well aware of the illicit trade in drugs among South American producers, transshipment states such as Mexico, and purchasers in the United States. Much less attention has been devoted to Burma (Myanmar), a primary source of heroin in the Pacific Basin, although an article in *The Washington Post* late in 1996 identified that country as the source of more than half of the world supply of heroin. The article highlighted the degree to which narcodollars have penetrated Burma's economy, at least half of which is unaccounted for and probably extralegal. Since the mid-1980s, the import and consumption of Burmese heroin is estimated to have doubled within the United States, and officials estimate that fully 60 percent of the heroin seized in this country is of Burmese origin. The amount of the drug from all sources sold in New York City has quadrupled.

Drugs are arriving in the United States through the Pacific trafficking lanes; countries of origin include Pakistan and other parts of Asia as well as Burma and South America.[38] This particular sea line of communication has become a major route for drug shipments because it has no natural chokepoints to facilitate identification, interdiction, and search of ships for contraband. Instead, the open sea lanes of the Pacific allow ships transporting heroin to avoid authorities and reach western ports of Mexico for subsequent distribution throughout the United States. Problems of drug interdiction in the eastern Pacific are exacerbated by the fact that the United States has few bilateral agreements with Pacific Coast nations for law enforcement cooperation such as those it has developed throughout the Caribbean.[39] The United States may have to develop new means to monitor traffic through a major SLOC, but not because of its natural chokepoints. Instead, the eastern Pacific shipping lanes are dangerous because they afford no easy way to monitor ocean shipping in the hunt for illicit drugs.

## **Strategy and Sea Lines of Communication**

The Freedom of Navigation program has provided the basis for US responses to excessive maritime claims since 1979. Such claims include various attempts to control oceans to a distance of 200 nautical miles from coastal boundaries. More recently, US national security strategy for ensuring unobstructed transit through chokepoints and sea lines of communication is reflected in the international Convention on the Law of the Sea. And although the issue of seabed mining remains the bar to US ratification of the treaty--it is under consideration in the Congress--we have agreed to apply the treaty provisionally. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry described the Administration's position: "We support the Convention because it confirms traditional high seas freedoms of navigation and overflight; it details passage rights through international straits (chokepoints); and it reduces prospects for disagreements with coastal states during operations." [40<P255BJ0>

The Law of the Sea treaty supports uniform standards and the means for resolving conflict, replacing traditional diplomatic and operational crisis management approaches to disputes. Provisions of the treaty:[41]

- . Preserve freedom of navigation and overflight on the high seas.
- . Maintain these high-seas freedoms in the 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zones of coastal states (e.g. Vietnam).
- . Guarantee freedom of navigation and overflight through international straits (most crucial are Gibraltar, Hormuz, and Malacca).
- . Establish the regime of archipelagic sea lanes passage for transit through strategically located archipelagoes, such as Indonesia and the Philippines.
- . Guarantee passage through foreign territorial seas along with a clear delineation of coastal state regulatory authority.
- . Limit the width of the territorial sea to 12 nautical miles.
- . Establish more objective rules for drawing baselines for measuring maritime zones (which restrains coastal states from extending their jurisdictional reach seaward).

- . Preserve the sovereign immune status of our warships and other public vessels and aircraft.

The three essential components of the US National Security Strategy--peacetime engagement, deterrence and conflict prevention, and fighting and winning the nation's wars--all assume that we can deploy forces to any region of the world in a timely and effective manner. Forward-deployed maritime forces--the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard-- ensure that SLOCs remain open in order to carry out this strategy. Navy and Marine forces are strategically located in regions of special interest to the United States; their inherent mobility ensures our ability to deploy from forward locations to potential crisis areas. However, several forces are reshaping US security interests in the seas and the corresponding naval strategy.[42]

First, the post-Cold War US military strategy has adjusted to address multiple regional interests and challenges. US maritime forces redefined their focus to emphasize power projection, initially described in the 1992 Navy and Marine Corps white paper, . . . *From the Sea*, and later in *Forward . . . From the Sea* in 1994. The missions projected in both documents included traditional roles such as presence, strategic deterrence, sea control (SLOC passage), crisis response, power projection, and sealift. Embargoes, counternarcotics, and humanitarian operations define the peacetime roles.

Second, US naval forces are adjusting to the realities of budget cuts and their consequences for naval operations. The Navy is reducing personnel and operating expenses by one-third from the Base Force established in 1990; the drawdown will leave a Navy of about 330 ships, a little more than half of the nearly 600-ship force of 1988. Integration of naval forces with other services, interoperability with allied forces, and redesign of fundamental operations are being emphasized to offset this decline.

Sea lines of communication are essential geopolitical considerations for economic and military strategy. Mahan understood their importance; have his intellectual successors developed a comparable strategic perspective? An affirmative answer can be found in *National Security and the Convention of the Law of the Sea*:

National security interests in having a stable oceans regime are, if anything, even more important today than in 1982, when the world had a roughly bipolar political dimension and the US had more abundant forces to project power to wherever it was needed. . . . Without international respect for the freedoms of navigation and overflight set forth in the [Law of the Sea] Convention, exercise of our forces' mobility rights would be jeopardized. Disputes with littoral states could delay action and be resolved only by protracted political discussions. The response time for US and allied/coalition forces based away from potential areas of conflict could lengthen. . . . Forces may arrive on the scene too late to make a difference, affecting our ability to influence the course of events consistent with our interest and treaty obligations.[43]

US maritime forces will remain flexible in preparing for current missions, including the guarantee of unhindered SLOC passage, and in adapting to new ones. Our naval forces could find themselves stretched thin were several crises to require near-simultaneous responses by a small fleet scattered in sensitive regions around the globe. Nevertheless, the importance of secure SLOCs is a constant feature of peacetime naval engagement in support of the National Military Strategy.

## **Conclusions**

The political, economic, and military importance of the sea lines of communication has remained fundamentally unchanged since Mahan shaped the issue more than a century ago. The United States clearly understands their importance and is actively pursuing policies that will ensure the right to unimpeded access for military and commercial vessels. Securing this assurance rests with Congress through the ratification of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (already ratified by the required 60 countries).

History has demonstrated, however, that the world is not entirely populated with rational actors for whom a piece of paper compels adherence. Some states will remain outside the Law of the Sea Convention; those with aspirations of regional hegemony in the Middle East continue to challenge common borders and free access to important SLOCs.

Current tensions over the Spratlys in the South China Sea do not inspire confidence for continued calm in the key sea lines of communication and major chokepoints in that region. Therefore a national security strategy based on enlargement and engagement must rest on a national military strategy that provides the means required to attain its strategic ends. Current indications of a continued decline in defense budgets are inconsistent with the challenge faced daily by naval and other forces widely deployed in response to regional crises.

Deterrence through forward presence will determine whether the US need for unimpeded access to sea lines of communication and the associated chokepoints can be maintained. If the military can be accused of being slow to modify its Cold War mindset, perhaps others need to examine the premises on which their post-Cold War euphoria still rests. A so-called peace dividend, crafted at the expense of those who remain responsible for ensuring the success of strategic concepts such as enlargement and engagement, has left US forces undermanned for the tempo of peace operations and forward deployments. Deterrence and power projection missions have altered the calculus by which the costs of such matters were estimated a decade ago. Irrational actors--hegemony, religious zealots, and nationalists--and possible second- and third-order effects of their misguided policies should not be overlooked when assessing the safety of key sea lines of communication. Miscalculation in reexamining this most important geopolitical issue has the potential for significant disruption of US political, economic, and military policies around the world.

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Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds B. Peele, USMC, is a member of the USAWC class of 1997. After enlisted service in the Marine Corps, he attended Morgan State University, Baltimore, and was commissioned through the Marine Corps Platoon Leaders Course program. He has served in virtually every infantry leadership billet, recently completing a tour as Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, 3d Marine Division, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. He had a combat tour in Vietnam in 1969 with Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, 3d Marine Division, as a pointman and fire-team leader. From August 1990 to August 1991, he was operations officer for 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, deployed in the Western Pacific. He spent nine months in G-5, Marine Forces Pacific, working with various joint and strategic issues, including sea lines of communication and chokepoints.

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Reviewed 9 May 1997. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil)