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## MARITIME SECURITY: GROWING PROBLEMS ON THE SEVEN SEAS

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With U.S. President Barack Obama in the midst of discussions about the future U.S. and NATO approach toward Afghanistan, and with attention focused on a host of other problems from Iran to the Middle East peace process, it is perhaps surprising to consider that the challenges and risks within the maritime environment are probably greater than at any time in the recent past.

Similarly, while security strategists around the world are now fond of emphasizing a growing interdependence resulting from ongoing globalization and, of course, the rising threat from terrorism, it is crucial to bear in mind that all of the current and projected challenges have a significant maritime dimension.

The oceans remain a major passageway for the vast majority of international trade, with 90 percent by volume and 70 percent by value passing through the various sea lanes in 2006. Without such trade, many countries would be unable to sustain themselves and would quickly collapse into anarchy. Globalization has ensured that the entire international economic system is now dependent on the free movement of goods by sea.

### **Growing dependence on the sea**

This dependence seems set to increase further. The changes being implemented in logistics are leading to a movement away from the maintenance of major stock holdings “in country” and instead toward an increasing dependency on “just-in-time” supply. This effectively means that the reserve stocks are those that are in fact still in transit to the distribution warehouses. Any disruption to trade would therefore very rapidly have a knock-on effect.

For example, in 2006, a number of supermarkets in the United Kingdom suffered from empty shelves when their distribution network failed to meet the demands from their various stores. The result was a drop in revenue and customers either seeking alternative supplies and/or beginning to panic buy. Similarly, when the 2000 fuel protests led to the blockading of the majority of the United Kingdom’s fuel depots, it took then-Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government just two weeks to start considering using the army to break the blockade. The country had started grinding to a halt. Major disruption to the sea lanes would, without question, provoke a global economic crisis.

### **Somali pirates create new headaches**

The vulnerability of trading routes has been highlighted by the much-discussed rise in piracy, particularly in the area off the Somali coast. In April 2009, the U.S.-operated container ship Maersk Alabama was seized in the Indian Ocean about 400 miles east of the Somali capital Mogadishu. It temporarily joined a number of other ships held by pirates until the situation was resolved.

Fears grew that ships would have to start bypassing the Suez Canal and take the longer journey around the Cape of Good Hope. In response, an international task force has been deployed to try and counter the pirates. This has had mixed results and has led to an increase in insurance premiums for those ships still using the old route. The problem the international community has is that the majority of these sea lanes also have relatively small “choke points” such as the Malacca Straits, the Suez Canal, and the Persian Gulf. Such choke points could be targeted by both state and non-state actors. The mining of the Suez Canal by the ferry Ghat in 1984

led to its temporary closure and the dispatch of mine clearing ships from a number of countries.

### **From sea to land**

Lest we overlook the obvious, the sea also provides access to land. Over 95 percent of the world's population lives within 100 miles of a coast. Given that international rights exist over most of the world's waterways, they provide a readily accessible route to heavily populated areas. National territorial waters represent a very small percentage of the world's sea area.

It is also easy to overlook the importance of the sea to conflicts that look as they are confined well inland. On first appearances, for example, the Afghan conflict looks to be an air-land one given the distance of Afghanistan from the sea. However, the issue of access has ensured that the conflict has continued to have a significant maritime dimension over and above the provision of U.S. marines to support the land campaign. Many of the initial air strikes launched by the United States were from their aircraft carriers and the majority of supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan are dependent on vulnerable overland routes that begin at key ports in the region.

### **Resource wars**

At the state level there is a growing body of literature that is looking at the idea of so-called "resource wars" stemming from energy scarcity and the possible impact of climate change.

Consider, by way of illustration, that until August 2007 few had even heard of the Lomonosov Ridge in the Arctic. And then, to worldwide surprise, the Russian navy planted a flag on the seabed to claim the area. It made headlines all over the world.

Consider also that the Canadian navy has announced plans to build a new class of eight Arctic patrol ships to enforce its territorial claims. This includes the Northwest Passage, which will potentially open as a result of melting ice. This could bring it into a direct clash with the United States, which has intimated that such waters should be viewed as constituting an international passageway.

For its part, the Chinese government put out a defense white paper in 2008 suggesting that, "World peace and development are faced with multiple difficulties and challenges. Struggles for strategic resources, strategic locations and strategic dominance have intensified."

The language of the statement was reminiscent of that used during the Cold War and serves as a reminder that while much of the focus of the West's attention has been on the threat posed by terrorism, there remains the real prospect of interstate warfare over access to resources. The Russian government has already used "pipeline politics" to exercise its influence over its immediate neighbors, and Europe more widely highlights the dangers of resource dependence.

For the United Kingdom, the rapidly diminishing supply of gas from the North Sea is resulting in a move toward the import of gas, which this winter will amount to half of its overall gas needs. Much of this is now provided via tankers delivering gas from the Middle East, all delivered by sea and passing through important sea choke points on the way.

Europe is not alone in this dependency. The rapidly growing economies of India, China, and others all require more fossil fuels than they are able to provide from domestic sources. Competition for and guaranteed access to such resources is fundamental to a state's survival.

There is equal tension over the provision of other resources, most notably water. In 2005, former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali warned of the potential for "water wars" in Africa and the Middle East. The problem is that the world's population continues to rise and is not concentrated in those areas where there is spare water capacity. This will potentially lead to two outcomes—wars over water supply and/or mass migration as individuals move in search of water and an alternative to their existing choices.

### **Terror and the waterways**

The fear of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has been of increasing concern since the end of the Cold War. Such weapons, of course, offer potential "rogue states" and terrorist groups the ability to use asymmetric warfare against the states of the Western world. President Obama's recent decision to abandon his predecessor's plans to station elements of an anti-ballistic missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic was seen by many as a wise conciliatory measure toward Russia. At the same time, he announced that an alternative sea-based option would be implemented using the United States' existing Aegis-equipped warships. Such a move has been viewed as being far less confrontational with Russia while providing a potential counter to the developing Iranian capability. Such offshore basing is generally politically less sensitive and has been effectively

adopted by the Japanese over the last few years with the stationing of Kongo-class Aegis destroyers off the western coast as a counter to the North Korean nuclear capability.

Fears over terrorism have also had a major impact on the way ports are secured across the globe. Ports provide both an entry point for terrorists and their materials, and also constitute potential targets for terrorists in and of themselves.

It should be clear even from this brief sketch that issues related to maritime security remain at the heart of the current international system and the conundrums involved in securing it. The seas give us

tremendous opportunities, not least in international trade. But those opportunities carry with them vulnerabilities that states across the world must continue to address.

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