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Global power protection and the safety of sea Routes

More than any other political or economic issue, people are concerned about security of supply and local, or at most regional, peace.

Since the end of the last World War, geopolitical events have been occurring at an ever-faster rate than in previous centuries.

These events are dominated by two key factors, namely global population growth and the associated decline in global environmental conditions. However, as long as the first two dimensions, namely supply security and peace, are guaranteed in our own region and without repercussions, no threat or obvious degradation will be felt. Problems, on the other hand do occur, but people are all too happy to believe that they will be solved "somehow".

The changes in the global system – politics, economy, environment, wealth distribution and growth – which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and later with 9/11, have taken on a different dimension and dynamic and today present a completely changed picture of the global political and economic situation. However, the realisation that global problems also require global solutions has still not really taken hold and is at best rudimentary and partial when viewed in the most favourable light. This essay addresses the foundations, effects and circumstances of the maritime conditions that are irreplaceable for global trade and thus global prosperity – the free use and security of the sea lanes.

Global "order"

If one follows the history and school of political realism, the cornerstones of that development from Thucydides

to Hobbes, Mackinder to Morgenthau, and then Waltz to Mearsheimer today, must still be taken into account. Rather than being exclusive, this is a clear and fundamental choice for this essay.

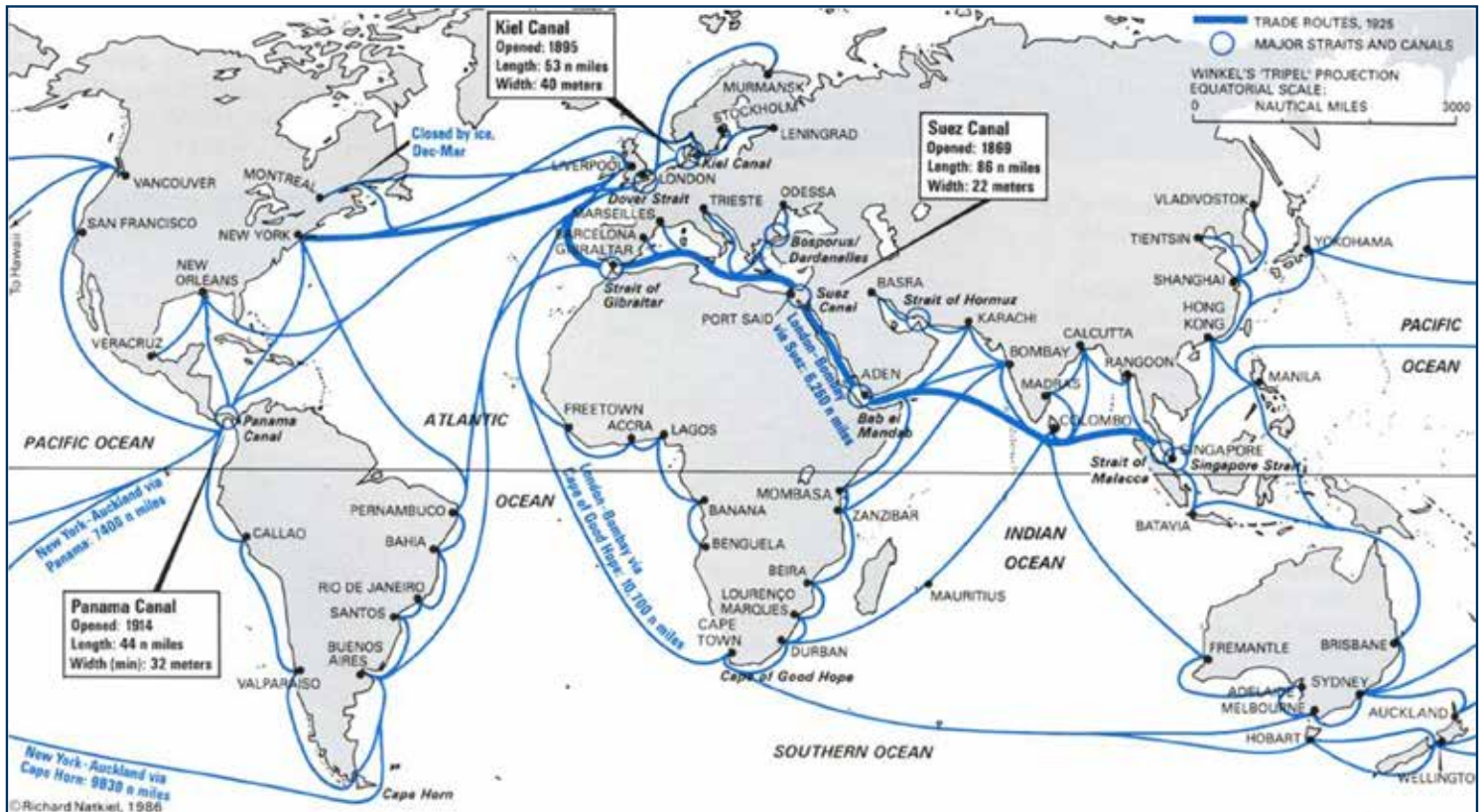
In the harsh world of political-military power, based on the undeniable primacy of the "normative force of the factual" (G. Jellinek) and sole, national interests as the main factor of political thought and action, there are few if any alternatives available as a solid theoretical basis. Problems of global significance must therefore be solved on the still irrefutable basis of Waltz's anarchic state system, without a higher, enforceable order. The contradiction to consensus and reason-orientated thinking and action is obvious and cannot be bridged. All attempts after the failure of the League of Nations (1920–1946) to establish a suitable basis for a peaceful international order from the successor organisation United Nations have clearly failed thus far. And today, after a brief phase of hegemony by the United States (1991–2001), there is no clear dominance recognisable, no

system, either bi- or multipolar, even a struggle for system and leadership between several major powers as the only constant of the international "order". These are extremely difficult conditions for efficiently solving the imminent global problems.

It is also clear that the role of US leadership in the international system is being openly questioned by China (PRC/Thucydides' trap). The agreement of the so-called Global South (an informal group of developing and emerging countries) against the democracies of the West (G7, an equally informal organisation with Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Canada and the United States; the European Union is represented at all meetings), which only exists on paper, does not fit into any scheme, let alone an institutional order. Anarchy, i.e., global disorder, is and remains the structure of the international system.

Geography and sea power

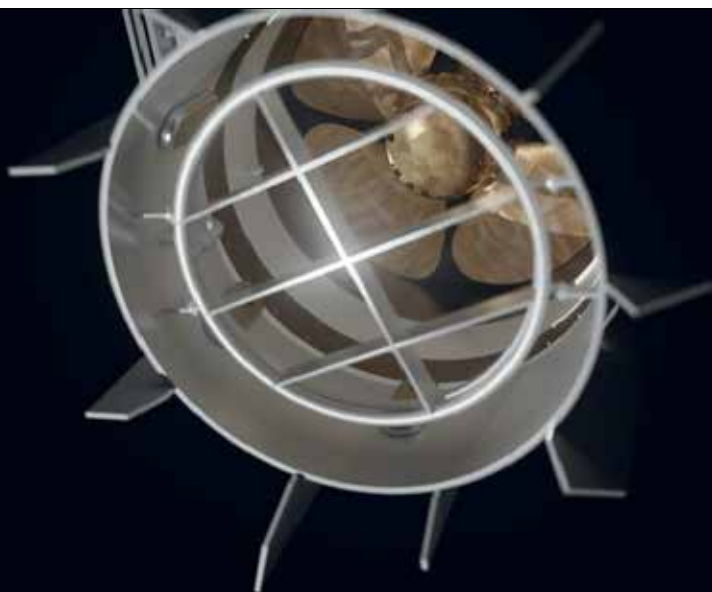
70-80-90: these three figures provide a quick and easy introduction to the importance of geographical facts. A total of 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by water, 80% of global trade (goods, raw materials, food, etc.) is conducted via the oceans and 90% of humanity lives in a belt that extends from the coastlines inland, i.e., with very close contact to the seashore. The resultant importance of the



Sea Lanes of Communications/Slocs and Choke Points (© Richard Natkiel)

sea and the ways in which it can be utilised is thus sufficiently defined. All the consequences to be drawn from this are therefore of significant importance for humanity, regardless of political, economic or social systems. Since 10 September 1982, with the deposit of the 60th

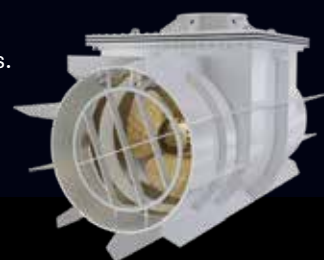
ratification agreement (today over 160 states), the safety of sea routes has been regulated by the UNCLOS treaty system for international maritime law. The decisive factor is that the national, geographical-terrestrial rights are defined and accepted with the 12 nautical mile zone – with



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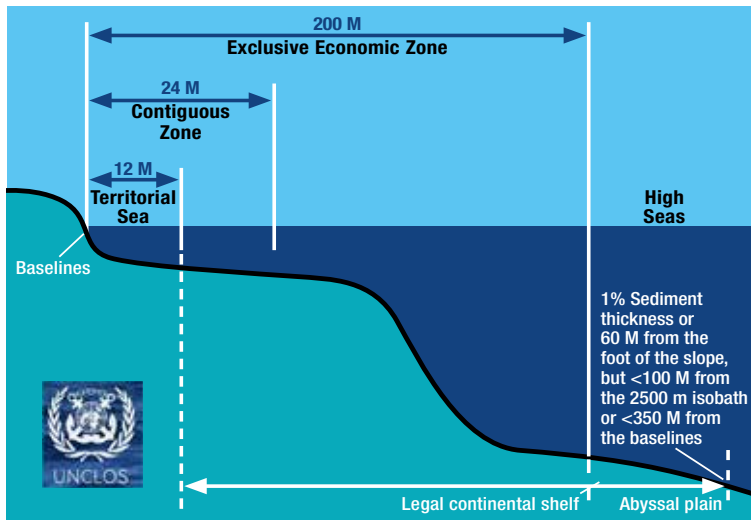
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UNCLOS Maritime Zones

one exception: although China co-negotiated and ratified UNCLOS, it rejected its judgement regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea following a lawsuit brought by the Philippines before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Hamburg (ISGH/2016) and declared both the tribunal and the judgement "null and void". The difficulties arising in this area, on the northern border of which lies Taiwan, one of the major neuralgic points in terms of safe sea lanes, have been a cause for sincere concern ever since and are a prime example of international disorder. China simply does not recognise an international ruling, thus creating an example for many states with similar political systems (authoritarian to totalitarian) and a similar understanding of the law that is unfortunately worthy of emulating. Maritime power must therefore recognise and secure international trade and the use of sea lanes based on a recognised principle of order (UNCLOS). The actors in the international system of states that are politically and militarily capable of doing so must in turn be able to realise their rights with regard to the system, either as partners or individually. Either diplomatically and peacefully or, in the opposite case, militarily.

The rules of realism for behaviour in the international anarchic state system demand that precautions must be taken, especially by states with a claim to leadership and corresponding military potential. To this end strategic planning and corresponding military potential must be created and kept ready in addition to an assessment of the geographical conditions. This is not possible at this level without a grand strategy – too many components, precautions, foundations and technological and industrial capabilities need to be defined, developed and centralised in order to

provide the necessary instruments and keep them operational: a military blue navy with global projection capability. This navy must have aircraft carriers, organised into battle groups, with all the necessary subsystems for combat on, above and below the water and into near space. The general mission requires the equipment and ability to carry out tasks on the oceans: patrolling, supplied locally from its own national bases, equipped, and led accordingly. From friendly visits to conducting aid missions during natural disasters to combat missions of various depths, all on a global scale and, if necessary, at several crisis points simultaneously. Only carrier strike groups (CSGs) are capable of this, and to put it clearly and directly, only the US Navy (USN) is currently militarily strong enough to do this, and this is foreseeable for one to two decades to come.

Apart from the basic elements necessary for the security of the CSG itself on, under and above the water, the composition is determined by the deploying fleet. USN fleets are not maritime combat units per se as in the past, but an organisational command; for example, this is the case in the Indo-Pacific region with the US Indo-Pacific Command's the 5th and 7th Fleets. These then assemble the elements required to fulfil a mission in accordance with the assignment (US Navy Command) and integrate them into a CSG – for example amphibious capabilities, corresponding drone systems (observation-reconnaissance-combat elements) and special equipment/operational units. In addition to USN elements, USMC (US Marine Corps) resources are also taken into account. This form of organisation adapts to the task and corresponds to a flexible distribution and preservation of the resources available to the USN – for decades. However, the prerequisite is to have the hardware, software and trained manpower available and ready for deployment at all times and in the appropriate quantity and quality.

A secure supply depends primarily on free and open sea routes on two main axes: the transatlantic New York to the European west coast, and the Indo-Pacific via the Straits of Malacca, Babel-Mandeb, Suez Canal, Straits of Gibraltar and also primarily to the harbours on the European west coast. This applies both to certain raw materials, but above all to goods and commodities from the Indo-Pacific region to Europe and also, albeit to a lesser extent, to European exports in the opposite direction. While the use of the sea lane of communication (SLOC) is legally secured by the UNCLOS agreement of the United Nations in times of peace and can therefore be assumed to be de facto free and secure, this does not apply in times of tension or

armed conflict. These can also affect the so-called choke points, “geographical sore points“ of globalised world trade and the method of organised supply chains, which require production, transport and timely delivery as a sine qua non. The case of a freighter that ran aground in the Suez Canal quickly and clearly demonstrated the negative consequences of any “peaceful“ technical problem or even human error in a canal or in the vicinity of choke points.

On the other hand, the crisis in the Red Sea during the Israeli–Palestinian conflict demonstrated the skilful use of a choke point by a neighbouring state in disintegration (Yemen, civil war) at the military level: with cheap drones and smaller missiles, mainly supplied to the Houthi rebels by Iran, traffic through the Red Sea was severely disrupted. Only military-maritime forces could be deployed here. And even that, albeit primarily for political reasons, was only at the lower end of the possible deployment spectrum. As was to be expected, the focus was on the United States, which deployed the aircraft carrier battle group CSG 2/ Eisenhower to the Red Sea on 23 November 2023.

The players and their potential

Of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (with veto power), all have aircraft carriers CV/CVN (carrier vessel/carrier vessel nuclear) and CSG, with profoundly different strengths and capabilities. Even with a drastic catch-up programme (China, maritime), Beijing is well aware that no real global power projection can be achieved from now until around 2035/40. Accordingly, China must measure its ambitions for world leadership, which is not necessarily only sought through military action, against this lack of potential. Strict procedures and money alone will not be sufficient to establish the required military system. The world has now also recognised the true intention of the One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR), which Beijing presented from the outset as a purely economic action linked to aid programmes. Although enormous resources were used, the lack of naval power and protection of Chinese maritime interests on the high seas were only partially compensated for by a significant development of local bases, particularly harbours on vital sea routes and choke points for China. Two European powers (though not the Union) have one CVN/France and two CVs/United Kingdom, i.e., one and two CSGs, respectively. According to the old carrier rule “one is none, two/three are one etc.“, projection tasks are therefore only feasible to a very limited extent. The only Russian carrier is barely operational due to its age and technology, and Russia is clearly categorised

as a land power; from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, only hunter-killer and ballistic missile submarines are operationally available, but can in no way replace an ocean-going fleet.

Secure sea routes are of crucial importance for all powers/major powers, as today’s global economy is governed by different rules than in the past. Availability via scheduled production chains, delivery on demand and production on demand require free sea routes and punctual deliveries – for all parties involved. A crisis in the South China waters, in which commerce is threatened or perhaps halted, would create immediate challenges for all users of this sea route that could not be quickly resolved.

The United States alone (with the help of its allies) is still in a position to protect global sea routes or influence maritime

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trade through blockades. The reason for this is simply the availability/deployability of the necessary military, logistical and, in terms of operational capability, maritime resources. China must continue to make enormous efforts in this sector if it wants to claim global leadership and be able to prove it militarily. However, the United States has no intention of reducing the existing gap through its own inactivity. There is no doubt when it comes to assessing the major region defining the era – the Indo-Pacific region. Economically, politically and in terms of all statistical parameters, this is the current global focus and will remain so well into the rest of the century. All players need to accept this. For China, the challenging power, the fundamental question arises regarding the approach: based on political experience, regional leadership must first be achieved before global leadership can be considered. This requires not only a clear and existing confrontation with the United States, which remains the dominant nation, at least militarily, but also consideration of the three other major players – India, Russia and, at least economically, the European Union. Although in some areas, cooperation partners, following the age-old formula “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” and seeking and finding selective political alliances and mutual support, the question of how to deal with Indian and Russian ambitions remains unanswered, either in addition to, or before achieving world leadership. Permanently embroiled in petty warfare with India along their common border, with Russia in the Ussuri border region, where “border difficulties” also had to be settled militarily in divisions ... no clear line is yet recognisable here. The United States, on the other hand, must be clear about its role with its partners in the region and would be severely weakened by a lack of commitment or even neglect of partnership obligations due to the loss of face that counts so much in Asia. In this context, the role of the European Union must be briefly addressed. A strong economic union has failed to take the required steps toward political unity after economic unification in a timely and purposeful manner. The Union’s current global position is that of a vassal, almost totally dependent on American security guarantees, unable to organise and guarantee its own security. The current international naval situation, Russia’s war of aggression in the east of the Union and the difficulties with migration flows, the renewed flare-up of war in the Middle East, Iran’s regional naval ambitions and the counter-coastal problem with a steadily growing African continent producing ever increasing migration raise fears about the worst-case scenario for Europe’s security. Only France, the Union’s only remaining nuclear power, is

constantly striving to work on European security in concert with Germany – though so far in vain.

Epilogue

The connection between production and supply security and free, global sea routes can neither be denied nor ignored. Neither should the connection between security, political will and the creation, readiness and timely deployment of military potential be necessary. Looking at and assessing the current global situation, the shifts and ongoing changes in decisive issues such as population growth, climatic changes, positions of power and disrespect for international law, mean that further uncertain times lie ahead. In addition, ever larger state groups are acting exclusively in their own interests, rendering solutions and even sensible approaches increasingly difficult. Historical examples, especially from the last two centuries, have taught us that wars were very often the only answer. Again, history has taught us that the remedy of “war”, seemingly the last resort after endless, exhausted attempts has only ever led to new, more terrible wars and is therefore not an option. And history also teaches us that giving in and giving up one’s own position and strength for the sake of peace has only ever served the opposing position of insisting on injustice. The United States and its democratic allies must take these circumstances into account and seek and apply solutions by utilising and applying their own strengths – within the framework of the law. To do so, as democratic states, they require the consensus of their citizens. Informing them correctly and having them realise that this policy alone can guarantee their freedom- and self-determination is and has always been the greatest and most challenging task of democracy. Holding up signs that read: “We have values” is no meaningful response to an attack. Our true freedom and self-determination begins and ends with the unhindered and free use of global sea routes.

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Scholik is a Doctor of Political-Sciences serves since many years as Senior Adviser and board-member at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Studies, AIES, Vienna. His main research areas of interest are Political Theory, International Relations, Maritime Strategy, the European Union and the geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific Region.