



Note de recherche – 15 mars 2016

### The Sea As a Strategic Domain

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The 21st century is a maritime century. The sea is more important than ever for global and local transports, for its resources, for its vital importance on our climate, and because of its illegal use by organised crime including pirates and terrorists. Consequently, maritime strategy is also more essential than ever. Discussions on maritime strategy, however, do not too often discuss the object of maritime strategy, the sea. This is the aim of the present article.

#### What is the sea ?

« How inappropriate to call this planet Earth when it is quite clearly Ocean »

There are many ways of describing the sea. For those who do not have at their disposal the necessary means – at least a boat – nor the necessary knowledge, the sea is an obstacle. This is probably the reasoning behind the old adage : “The tears have a taste of salt in order to remind fallen sovereigns about the sea that they have neglected.” To others, the sea links together continents, countries,

cultures, and their peoples as well as ideas, industries, and markets. The sea is a necessary precondition for the globalisation and its importance is partly proportional to the magnitude of globalisation. Put in another way, with globalisation follows a maritimisation of world politics. Maritimisation, in turn, consists of four main themes : transports, exploitation of resources from the sea, the illegal use of the sea, and, as a corollary, the increased importance of maritime forces. To this list one can add the increased understanding of the importance of the sea for our climate.

The sea covers 70 % of the globe's surface. Half of the world's population lives less than 80 km from a coast where also two thirds of the world's wealth is produced. One could, hence, talk about a littoralisation of the world's economy.

As a comparison, the range of an embarked cruise missile, such as the U.S. Tomahawk, is between 1,250 and 2,500 kms depending on the model. The majority of the world's

population is, therefore, within reach of a cruise missile launched from the sea. The first U.S. attack against Kabul in 2001 is said to have been launched from a submarine.

The ocean occupies the main part of the sea. For practical reasons, the ocean is usually divided into five parts : the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian oceans as well as the two extremes : the glacial Arctic and the Antarctic. In reality, these oceans are linked to each other. Close to the coasts, there are the pericontinental, or narrow, seas such as the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, and the Chinese Sea, etc. These are linked to the oceans by more or less wide straits. As a consequence, all maritime activities have a global aspect.

The maritime passages between the pericontinental seas and the oceans are generally of strategic importance as illustrated by the Malacca Straits, a real spider in the global web of transports. There is a long list of such straits as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Baltic Approaches, the English Channel, and the Bosphorus, which

are the principal European junctions. The importance of the Suez and the Panama canals can hardly be overestimated.

Naturally, the main part of human activities is concentrated close to the shore. This is true for fishing but also for other resources like oil and gas.

The harbours with their infrastructure constitute the passage between sea and land. It is from there that cargo is transported further inland and vice versa. Consequently, they play a vital strategic role in the transport system. Its safety and security is, therefore, of vital importance – an often forgotten fact in strategic discussions.

In a modern, intermodal transport system the harbour is the pivot as the speed of transport is dependent on quick and safe change of mode of transport between ships and various inland transport systems like railways, waterways, and roads.

The military and strategic conditions at sea are different from those on land. The sea cannot be occupied in the military sense of the word ; there are no frontlines and defence cannot be based on fortifications in the same way as on land.

### **Strategic missions**

The maritime forces of a country need to carry out a broad range of activities. Some of them are primarily constabulary while others are more military in scope ; this is what makes them 'dual'.

A basic mission is intelligence and surveillance ; to know what happens at sea. But this mission also includes the long term quest for knowledge about the sea and those who use it.

Prevention is to a large extent a diplomatic mission. The goal is to create a benign strategic environment. Common exercises, exchange of personnel, naval visits, and of course, presence at sea are activities within this mission. Prevention is also an important mission regarding the safety of all users of the sea and its environment as well.

Deterrence is not only a mission for submarines with ballistic missiles but it is also a conventional mission. The purpose is to make a potential adversary understand that an attack would not be 'cost-effective'. This is done by being at sea with modern ships manned by well-trained personnel, thereby demonstrating capability.

Protection is a wide ranging mission which covers both safety and security of all legal activities at sea in peace, crisis, and war.

Intervention, finally, could be the projection of power in war and crisis but also the active pursuit of criminals at sea, and, generally, to engage the forces of disorder at sea – criminals, terrorists, adversaries, as well as (potential) enemies.

The common denominator of these missions is the importance of presence at sea with maritime forces that radiates respect.

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This is an excerpt of longer article that can be accessed here : <http://wedinstrateg.fr/the-sea-as-a-strategic-domain/#more-231>.

Lars Wedin, « The Sea As a Strategic Domain », *note de recherche de l'Institut français d'analyse stratégique (IFAS)*, 15 mars 2016. <http://www.strato-analyse.org/fr/spip.php?article297>

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