



CHANNELS AND STRAITS : STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In June 1967 Israel occupied the Sinai and Egypt took the decision to close the Suez Canal. For eight years, no ship would reach the passage, which significantly affected the flow of “black gold” to the West. Today, if such a scenario were to occur on a channel or a major strait, the entire global economy would be weakened or paralysed, because it depends so much on sea transport.

AT THE HEART OF STRATEGIC ISSUES

Straits and channels are narrow sea passages between two lands, allowing communication between two maritime areas. Focusing local and transit flows, they are sensitive links in the maritime routes. They carry familiar names: Pas de Calais, Gibraltar, Malacca, Bosphorus, Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, as well as Panama and Suez. They are both an asset and a vulnerability for trade via the sea.

They are first an economic asset because transport over the oceans is at the heart of globalization. Bear in mind that over 90% of goods produced and consumed worldwide transit on the seas. However, going through these points can significantly reduce the travel and therefore delivery time. A shortcut through the Suez Canal enables a container ship from Asia heading to Europe to cut seven days from the circumnavigation of Africa by the Cape of Good Hope. Ditto for Malacca, avoiding a detour through the Sunda Strait or the Celebes Sea.

But they also represent a strategic vulnerability, as these inlets are the preferred conduits for the transport of raw materials or hydrocarbons, essential for our societies. Today, about 20% of Europe's oil needs and 80% of those of Japan and China are routed through the ocean. But traffic also applies to spare parts and electronic components required for automotive and aerospace industries.

OBVIOUS TARGETS

In local conflicts, these channels and straits are strategic locations; they in fact represent a prime target for those who want to paralyse the economies that depend on them.

These strategic bottlenecks are easily controlled by coastal states wishing to exercise their political power: in spring 2015, Iran arrested many merchant ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz, to pressure the international community about its strategic interests in military operations in Yemen. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles are also affected by tensions between Moscow and Ankara. According to the Montreux Convention, which governs the rights of passage through the Turkish Straits, Turkey can restrict access in time of war. It is however through these inlets that oil and gas resources drawn from the Black Sea transit, as well as the logistics supply of Russian troops deployed in Syria.

The jihadists have also understood that these passages represent an interesting target. In 2014, the Al-Qaeda group, aware of the dependence of Western powers to energy flows across the sea, called for striking oil and gas tankers in the straits.

Piracy finally represents another threat. Malacca, one of the world's major shipping routes, is the perfect example: despite the coordination of measures implemented by the regional navies, it remains a hotbed of piracy in Southeast Asia. The many ships passing through the strait - one every ten minutes - represent a true gold mine for the attackers.

ENSURING SAFETY AND SECURITY

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea has developed a legal framework on straits used for international navigation. It is based on the principle of the right of transit passage without hindrance. But these measures do not prevent local tensions that threaten the proper delivery of essential products to the development of some economies. Parts of the world such as Europe thus remain vulnerable in their trade with the East. America is not as dependent on the straits and canals, and therefore mainly focuses its attention on Panama.

Although the presence of great naval powers defending their interests on the edge of the strait remains the main obstacle to threats, many states are considering limiting their dependence on these passages. This is true for shipping companies as well because access to the channels is often very expensive, tolls and insurance premiums included. Thus, the Cape of Good Hope is increasingly preferred to the Suez Canal, allowing savings of up to several hundred thousand euros each way. We can now understand the renewed interest in such passages as the Northern Highway, which opens a new path in the summer.



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