

Strategic Straits

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As conflict zones with potential for escalation—such as Taiwan, Ukraine, and the Middle East—continue to attract attention, vital maritime routes play a crucial role in ensuring the security of global maritime trade.

Many historians agree that the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, was a mistake. The sanctions imposed on Germany left it economically depleted, fostering a desire for revenge that culminated in World War II. After the war, the United States, empowered by its victory, sought to establish a new world order. The Marshall Plan was instrumental in reintegrating Germany and Japan economically into this framework. The United States also supported the creation of international institutions such as the UN to promote peace and human rights, and the World Trade Organization to encourage free trade.

With its military might, particularly its fleet of aircraft carriers, the United States ensured the security of maritime routes, fostering economic prosperity for many nations. This strength was critical in countering the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990, the United States, at the height of its power, ventured into Iraq and Afghanistan with mixed outcomes. Nonetheless, several Eastern European countries joined NATO, drawn by the protection offered by American military dominance.

The Era of Globalization

Economically, globalization improved living conditions in many developing countries and significantly boosted the manufacturing economies of China and India. Chinese President Xi Jinping praised the virtues of free trade. However, it became evident that China aimed to be more than a mere partner to the United States. Its Belt and Road Initiative has led to massive investments in developing countries while granting China strategic control over several ports. Additionally, China claims sovereignty over the entire

South China Sea, despite the presence of six other coastal nations. Chinese media frequently highlight the West's exploitation of China during the Opium Wars.

Meanwhile, Russia invaded Ukraine despite the Minsk Agreement recognizing Ukraine's borders. This invasion shocked Europe, which believed large-scale wars were relics of the past. In response, economic sanctions on Russia deprived Europe of its energy resources, now replaced by supplies from the Middle East and the United States. Germany, having downsized its military, launched an ambitious rearmament program, while historically neutral countries like Sweden and Finland sought NATO membership. Under pressure from President Trump, European countries have increased military spending to 2% of their GDP.

New Alliances

Today, a new geopolitical confrontation pits Europe and North America against an alliance comprising China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. To counter this bloc, the United States relies on NATO, the Quad (comprising the US, Japan, India, and Australia), and the I2U2 forum (India, Israel, the US, and the UAE). The Abraham Accords also aim to limit Chinese influence. India adopts a balanced strategy, engaging with multiple fronts while seeking alliances with third-world countries.

Maritime Route Vulnerabilities

Approximately 95% of global trade travels by sea, but these routes are vulnerable at strategic chokepoints. The Strait of Malacca handles a third of trade between Southeast Asia and the West, as well as two-thirds of Chinese trade and a third of Japan's. Eighty percent of China's and Japan's oil needs pass through it, making China susceptible to a naval blockade. The Strait of Hormuz is equally critical, with 30% of global oil passing through its 39-kilometer width, as is the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea, through which 10% of global maritime trade flows.

Control of the Bosphorus remains a significant geopolitical issue due to its strategic position connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Under

the 1936 Montreux Convention, Turkey can restrict or block access during wartime, as seen in the context of the Ukraine conflict.

These zones represent significant vulnerabilities for international trade amid geopolitical tensions. China has established seven military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea. Iran threatens to block the Strait of Hormuz during conflicts, while Yemen's Houthis impose ransoms on ships transiting Bab el-Mandeb. Although the Panama Canal is less critical than other chokepoints, it remains vital for trade between the Atlantic and Pacific. China plans to open a canal in Nicaragua, wider than the Panama Canal, and to acquire Blanquilla Island in Venezuela. Venezuela has also developed territorial ambitions in Guyana following significant oil discoveries there.

Moreover, several suspicious incidents have occurred in the Baltic Sea: the explosion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline connecting Russia to Germany in September 2022, damage to telecommunications cables between Finland and Germany, as well as between Sweden and Lithuania in November 2024, and finally, a disruption of the electrical interconnection between Estonia and Finland in December 2024.

The competition for control of maritime routes and chokepoints remains a major factor in global trade and international stability.

The strategic importance of straits is underscored by Chinese President Xi Jinping's declarations promising to integrate Taiwan by 2030 and US Navy Admiral Lisa Franchetti's preparations for a conflict with China by 2027.