

Presidential Use of Force in Defense of Key Shipping Chokepoints: The Suez, the Gulf, and the Future

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the conditions in which the President as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces might deploy US military assets to defend an international shipping choke point. I will contrast two historical examples of United States reaction to threatened choke points in the twentieth century, specifically the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, and the “Tanker Wars” which took place during the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. Through these examples I will develop several themes that may influence a President to take action in defense of a key international shipping choke point. I will then use these themes to analyze the potential for United States intervention in important choke points in the present day world of global shipping in Southeast Asia and the Straits of Malacca.

THE SUEZ CANAL CRISI OF 1956

The long presence of foreign militaries and external governance fostered a deep resentment in the Egyptian people against European influence in their country. This resentment was further strengthened when in 1942 King Farouk of Egypt pushed for a government headed by someone who was suspected of being sympathetic towards the Axis powers. The British immediately ordered King Farouk to appoint someone who would be more sympathetic towards the British government, and through threats of military force was able to bring a leader of their own choosing, Nahas Pasha, into power.¹ Eventually Pasha himself turned against Great Britain and abolished the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty which had provided Great Britain with the legal authority to maintain a military presence in Egypt.² After some struggle, Great Britain withdrew much of its military presence in the country, which was shortly followed by a military coup in Egypt fueled by a larger nationalist movement. Eventually, former military leader Gamal Abdel Nasser gained control of the Egyptian government.³ The military base defending the canal then switched from English to Egyptian control. The English still maintained a controlling share in the company that operated the Suez Canal.

While prior to the coup Great Britain had begun to scale back the level of its control in the Middle East, it still felt that maintaining influence in the region was a national priority.⁴ After World War Two, the English Empire had begun to decline with the loss of political control in India, Palestine, and Egypt.⁵ Efforts on the part of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his successor Prime Minister Anthony Eden to re-negotiate an Anglo-Egyptian treaty were met with resistance by the

Nasser regime.⁶ Great Britain began to feel that Nasser must be met with a strong show of force on the part of Britain to reaffirm that it was still a potent world power.

In the years following the military coup that placed Nasser at the head of the Egyptian government, there was strong external pressure on him to ally himself with either the Soviets or Great Britain and the other Western powers. Indeed, Egypt occupied an awkward position between these two global forces. Nasser had purchased large quantities of arms from the Soviets⁷, however at the same time was pursuing a loan from the United States, Great Britain, and other Western powers to construct a dam across the Nile River.⁸ As arms from the Soviet Union moved into Egypt, many Soviet advisors followed, and the Russian presence in the country began to steadily increase.⁹ This fact, combined with England's inherent distrust of the Egyptian leader, caused the British government to suspect Nasser of falling into the Soviet Union's growing sphere of international influence.¹⁰

Similarly to Great Britain, France was also facing a period of reduced colonial influence across the globe. France was engaged in a struggle to maintain colonial control of Algeria, which much like Egypt was undergoing a period of nationalist rebirth and a desire for political independence from their sovereign master. The Algerian rebels fighting the French turned to the Egyptians for support in their struggle. Egypt had allowed the Algerian rebels fighting the French to establish a headquarters in Cairo, and also purchased arms from Egypt to be used in the struggle in Algeria.¹¹

Another interest the French had in Egypt was its close relationship with the newly created state of Israel. In February 1955, Nasser sponsored guerrilla fighters to operate within Israel.¹² Known as the Fedayeen, their attacks on Israel were a reaction to border tensions between Israel and Egypt. Small raids across the borders of each country throughout the previous year had escalated to the precursors of war, however full scale military action by either side had not yet occurred. The combination of these economic, military, and sympathetic elements left the French poised to take some positive action to solve the problem of Nasser.

The American position on the developing Egyptian situation was more complex than that of Great Britain or France. Like the other western European powers, there were concerns about the economic importance of the canal, as well as concern over Soviet influence in the country. Another factor that President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had chosen to consider was a broader question of Middle Eastern stability and regional leadership. Two international policy plans developed along these lines between the United States and Great Britain. Code named ALPHA and OMEGA, each was a separate method of finding a way to promote Middle Eastern peace and stability. ALPHA sought to do this through brokering better relations between Israel and other Middle Eastern

^p The High Aswan Dam was a proposal by Nasser to build a large dam across the Nile River in southern Egypt. The project was extremely expensive and would require significant foreign investment. This requirement for foreign investment was one of the best tools that the West had in influencing Nasser throughout the pre-crisis negotiations with Egypt. Thomas 26-27

nations while at the same time creating a military cooperation similar to NATO.¹³ After determining that ALPHA could not be successful, Secretary of State Dulles proposed a new plan on March 28th 1956. Rather than threatening Nasser with force, Plan OMEGA would deny Egypt access to American arms, economic aid, and prolong negotiations for Nasser's Aswan Dam project as long as Egypt continued to purchase Soviet arms.¹⁴ Not wanting to drive Nasser completely towards the Soviet Union, the United States sought to put economic pressure on Egypt to force them into more friendly relations with the West.

By placing economic pressure on Egypt, the United States and Great Britain caused Nasser to react in an unexpected manner. On the 26th of July 1956, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and Egypt seized control of Suez Canal operation¹⁵. This act infuriated Great Britain and the French, however was not sufficient to warrant military action by either party. Egypt faced intense international scrutiny in the weeks following the nationalization of the canal, but they subsequently proved they were able to competently manage its operation.¹⁶

At approximately 4:00pm on the 29th of October, about 400 Israeli paratroopers landed on the Sinai Peninsula 30 miles west of the Suez Canal. At the same time, Israeli forces captured several military outposts along the Egyptian border.¹⁷ This signaled the beginning of the Israeli assault on Egypt. The next morning, without consulting the United States, Great Britain issued an ultimatum to both Israel and Egypt demanding that all forces withdraw at least ten miles from either side of the Suez Canal and allow a combined British and French force to occupy the enclosed zone to "protect" shipping through the waterway. Israel immediately agreed because it allowed them to proceed with their invasion of the Sinai regardless, and Egypt rejected the ultimatum to protest the Anglo-French seizure of the canal.

Upon receiving Egypt's rejection to their ultimatum, the British began their attack on Egypt by bombing airbases across the country. Nasser, now realizing that the British were not bluffing as he had previously assumed, reacted by sinking forty-seven ships loaded with concrete in the Suez Canal itself. Ironically, the British and French plan to occupy the Canal to prevent a disruption in the flow of trade had caused the opposite to occur.¹⁸

As the Anglo-French occupation of the Suez Canal progressed southward from Port Said,¹⁹ Great Britain was faced with an unexpected financial crisis. The invasion of Egypt had diminished British treasury holdings to a dangerously low level and reduced the value of its currency internationally. In order to prevent a large economic crisis, they were forced to go to the United States and ask for a loan through the International Monetary Fund.²⁰ Furious over the whole affair, President Eisenhower denied the loan to Great Britain while they occupied the canal. This forced an immediate halt to the advancement of French and British troops. In a letter to the British Prime Minister on November 5th, President Eisenhower expressed his deep sadness that Great Britain and France had decided on such a course of action without informing the United States, stating "It [the invasion of

Egypt] cannot fail to have some harmful effect upon our joint efforts as we pursue the great objective of world peace.”²¹ Bowing to American financial pressure, Great Britain announced on December 3rd that they would withdraw from the Suez Canal.²² Since the Anglo-French forces were under British command, this meant that the combined occupation of the Suez Canal by Great Britain and France was over.

“TANKER WARS” AND THE PERSIAN GULF

The Iraqi invasion of Iran in September of 1980 marked the beginning of a conflict that would last almost eight years and involved several Persian Gulf nations. Tensions between the two nations stemmed mostly from territorial disputes, specifically over oil-rich areas in Iranian possession and land in the Arvandrud/Shatt al-Arab waterway connecting Iraq to the Persian Gulf.²³ Iraq was supported by other Arab nations in the Gulf, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who supplied both financial aid and arms from the Soviet Union.²⁴

While the Iraqi forces initially had success against the Iranian military, they were eventually pushed back to the Iraqi border, where the conflict stagnated into a war of attrition based on relatively stable lines. Shortly after the outbreak of war, Iran and Iraq began to attack commercial shipping and infrastructure within the Persian Gulf as a means of limiting trade revenue that funded the conflict on both sides. These attacks were not only limited to ships belonging to the two nations, and included vessels of neutral nations involved in Persian Gulf commerce with either country. Iraqi attacks on the Iranian oil facilities on Kharg island in the spring of 1984 sparked retaliatory attacks by Iran on many Arab ships transporting goods in the Persian Gulf. Iran targeted tankers under Kuwaiti and Saudi Arabian flags because of their support of Iraq.²⁵ Iraq then also engaged in attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf. These attacks escalated as the conflict ensued. In 1986 Iraq attacked sixty-six ships in the region and Iran forty-one.²⁶

In an attempt to protect its assets in the Persian Gulf trade, Kuwait petitioned the international community for protection by transferring the registry of its ships to any military power that could defend them (mainly the United States and the USSR).²⁷ After the overthrow of the Shah in Iran and the ascendance of the Islamic Revolutionary government, President Jimmy Carter had crafted what has subsequently been called the Carter Doctrine. The Carter Doctrine states that the importance of commerce in the Persian Gulf with the rest of the world is of great enough importance to the United States’ national interests and security that it will take all measures necessary to protect it, including military force. The United States, not wanting to allow a significant Soviet naval presence into the Persian Gulf, agreed on March 10th, 1987 to re-flag many Kuwaiti vessels as American and provide for their defense.²⁸ The ensuing United States military actions in the region beginning 24 July 1987 and lasting until after the eventual ceasefire between Iran and Iraq in the fall of 1988 became known as Operation Earnest Will.²⁹

In July of 1987, the commander of the U.S. Middle East Force sent a request back to the United States for additional naval support.³⁰ This launched two more military actions in the Gulf, Operation Praying Mantis and Operation Prime Chance. Both of these military initiatives were directed towards eliminating both Iraq and Iran's ability to endanger shipping through the Persian Gulf. This was achieved through both the use of naval surface vessel operations as well as clandestine air and sea attacks on Iranian naval vessels via barge based helicopters and smaller Navy SEAL units.³¹

In analyzing these two temporally and spatially separate events, it is important to filter out factors which are specific to each situation and evaluate the more general currents that shape them on a large scale. By expanding the scope of observation beyond the traditional factors influencing each of these decisions to use force, and then narrowing the focus again through an international shipping lens, the lessons of Cold War intervention can be disassembled and reformed in a contemporary context. It is with this in mind that I will develop three themes from these two events which influenced military deployment to defend international shipping chokepoints.

THEMES

One of the most obvious themes to consider in this question is the economic value of the sea lane in question. In the past an important sub-part to this question of value was to whom it was important. During the Cold War, one could argue the economic importance of certain chokepoints to the West when they did not necessarily impact its economic relationships. Trade routes internal to another economic system (the Soviet Union) would not have similar repercussions in the event of a destabilization.

The United States relied heavily on commerce through the Suez Canal in 1956. Around 20% of American oil imports came through the canal, as well as large quantities of manganese for steel production and a significant quantity of imported rubber.³² In a more strategic sense, the United States counted on oil shipments through the canal to support the economies of Western Europe, such as Holland which imported 63% of its oil through the canal in 1955.³³ The Suez Canal was also an important short cut for oil leaving the Middle East on its way to Great Britain, without which the price of oil would become too burdensome for the British economy to sustain. In 1955, 70% of all imported oil coming into Great Britain passed through the Suez Canal. Also, over 28% of all shipping that passed through the canal was British.³⁴ The Suez Canal was also of economic importance to the French, with 47% of its total oil imports (12,148,000 tons) passing through the waterway.³⁵ While still not as significant a volume as British imports through the canal, the transportation of oil in this region represented a vital national security interest. Long term disruptions in the oil traffic through the canal could have spelled significant economic and military consequences for France.

Even more key to the international oil trade than the Suez, the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz represent the jugular of Middle Eastern oil trade. All tanker-bound crude oil leaving fields in the Gulf region must pass through the Straits of Hormuz, representing a crucial shipping chokepoint. Disturbances in the flow of ships through this waterway had the potential to cause significant disturbances in the global oil market.

The second theme is how the United States views the ability of the nations where the chokepoints are located to deal with threats. In other words, how capable is the nation with sovereignty over the chokepoint in maintaining the flow of goods? If there is a high level of confidence, then the likelihood of military intervention will surely be different. The threats to shipping are not restricted to external forces on the nation. Indeed the more likely threat may come from the nation itself through capitalization on its control over the chokepoint to further its own national goals.

In the case of the Suez Canal Crisis, the sentiments on how Nasser would handle control of the Suez Canal were pessimistic on the part of the United States and the West. Great Britain and France both felt that Egypt was incapable of administering the operation of the waterway in an effective manner. This feeling grew out of a combination of factors, including a perceived Soviet influence on the Egyptian leader as well as the lack of experience in regulating a complex waterway such as the Canal.³⁶ These concerns were tested immediately after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. Unlike the predictions of Great Britain and others, however, the Egyptians proved they could manage the Canal efficiently and without the interruptions in trade feared by the West.

In contrast, the threat to the free flow of ships through the Persian Gulf from Iranian actions in the region represented a fundamentally different threat to the Western economy. During the Iran-Iraq war, Iran was facing an enemy bolstered by the support of other nations in the region. The one commonality between its foes was their reliance on shipping in the Persian Gulf. By utilizing their geographic proximity to the key shipping lanes through this region, the Iranians sought to restrict seaborne communication as a means of weakening its enemies. Whereas Egypt had financial incentives to keep the Suez Canal open, Iran had incentives to restrict trade through the Gulf.

A third theme to consider is the potential for another rival power to capitalize on trade disruptions through the chokepoint in question. In both the Suez Canal Crisis and the Tanker Wars, there was a genuine concern that the Soviet Union would use threats to trade and freedom of international waterways as an excuse to increase its control over said waterway. Nasser's connection to the Soviet Union as a provider of arms meant that a relationship between the Egyptian dictator and the United States primary rival was already established. After the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt following the Israeli offensive, the Soviet Union brought the matter before the United Nations and campaigned for an international force composed of Soviet and American forces to restore peace to the region.³⁷

Likewise, when the Kuwaitis petitioned the Soviets and the United States to protect its merchant marine against Iraqi or Iranian aggression in the Gulf, there was initial Soviet agreement to provide for this protection. This prompted the United States to commit completely to defending the Kuwaiti ships in order to prevent the Soviets from gaining a foothold in the region.³⁸

APPLICATION

The Straits of Malacca are a narrow waterway which passes between the nations of Indonesia and Malaysia, and represent one of the busiest sea lanes in Southeast Asia. Without access to the Straits of Malacca, ships bound for the Pacific Ocean from the Indian Ocean (and vice versa) would have to transit around the Australian continent if they intended to stay in international waters. At its narrowest point in the Singapore Strait, the shipping lanes narrow to a width of less than two miles.³⁹

The economic importance of the Straits of Malacca is global in nature, affecting all nations engaged in trade on the sea. It is estimated that a closure of this vital sea lane could divert up to fifty percent of the world's merchant fleet, causing a drastic rise in shipping costs. This is especially true for crude oil and dry bulk goods like coal.⁴⁰ An interruption in traffic through this region would have significant global impacts.

In regards to how local governments in the region can handle threats to shipping, recent developments in the Southeast Asian community have altered the nature of the likely threat response. In the 1990s, China took a very hard-line stance towards maritime security, being opposed to international collaboration to defend against threats. Indeed, this has been a result of many competing claims over islands in the South China Sea and competition over natural resources in the region. More recently however, China has become more of a collaborator in the realm of securing international shipping through the region. Other nations have also begun to take a cooperative approach to dealing with threats in the Straits of Malacca, such as trilateral patrols by Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.⁴¹

The issue of capitalization on a disturbance in the region by a rival power is significant. Where as in the past the rival power was another nation, as in the Soviet Union in the Suez Canal and in the Persian Gulf, a new type of rivalry is threatening the Straits of Malacca. Regional and international terrorist organizations could use the vulnerability of the straits as a means of furthering their anti-American goals. Indeed, there have already been attempts globally to influence international shipping by terrorist organizations, including attacks on tankers in the Arabian Sea as well as attacks on ferries transporting people in Southeast Asia.⁴²

This threat the most significant challenge for security in the Straits for the foreseeable future.

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