PART THREE

THE OCEAN TRANSPORT OF RADIOACTIVE FUEL AND WASTE
CHAPTER NINE

OCEAN TRANSPORT OF RADIOACTIVE FUEL AND WASTE

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I. The Problem

The shipments of large cargoes of highly radioactive or radiotoxic nuclear materials between Europe and Japan have raised a new challenge to the balance created in the Law of the Sea Convention1 between navigational freedoms and the protection of coastal communities, coastal resources and the marine environment. This new era of ultra-hazardous cargoes is usually said to have begun in November 1992, when Japan shipped 2200 pounds (one metric ton) of plutonium in a refitted freighter called the Akatsuki Maru from France to Japan, going around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and then south of Australia before turning north to traverse the Pacific to Japan.2 In February 1995, the British vessel Pacific Pintail carried twenty-eight canisters of high-level vitrified nuclear waste (HLW) in glass blocks, each weighing one thousand pounds, going around Cape Horn at the tip of South America and then across the Pacific. In early 1997, the British vessel Pacific Teal carried forty such canisters, going around Africa and then up through the Tasman Sea. In January 1998, the British vessel Pacific Swan carried sixty HLW canisters, going through the Caribbean and then through the Panama Canal. The Pacific Swan made a similar voyage in March 1999, carrying forty canisters of HLW through the Mona Passage (between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) and then through the Panama Canal.

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