The International Maritime Organization: A Venezuelan Perspective*

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INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As we approach the last turn on our journey toward the twenty-first century, we seem to become progressively more conscious of the notion of judgment and balance in practically all the major activities that we, as mankind, have endeavored to accomplish, whether by trial and error or by dedicated commitment. The sensation wrought by the certain knowledge that within 15 years we should be able to start with the digit "2" for the reckoning of a third millennium anno Domini is by itself a milestone. The last similar occasion we know of is associated with Viking saga in northern Europe, Vladimir's consolidation of Russian power in Kiev, the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, Song dynasty splendor in China, and primeval Inca expansion in Peru, alongside the revival of the new Maya culture in Yucatán, Mexico.

Yet, our encounter with one another, as a huge human family, has barely begun. It is only after the two creative and dynamic centuries of the Industrial Revolution that the potential forces of the distinct cultural and historic units of mankind have felt the attraction to a common course.

Industrial capitalism has brought a common and cosmic sense to universal history, whether it is an end in itself as practiced in the West, or a means to achieve a classless, egalitarian society, as professed by socialism.

When the Industrial Revolution is discussed, we are likely to link it forward to the leaps into the technological, scientific, communication, and space eras that ubiquitously and irreversibly engulf our present. Less frequently do we associate the linkage of the Industrial Revolution back to its maritime past and colonial roots. But the fact remains that the early attempts at introducing the distinct cultures, societies, and economies of humanity to one another were set, by hook or by crook, during the three preceding centuries devoted to discoveries, navigation, maritime trade, colonial exploitation, overseas conquests, and the definitive liquidation of further attempts by the Eurasian

*EDITORS' NOTE.—For an in-depth discussion of the IMO conventions and its history, see Thomas S. Busha, "The IMO Conventions," in this volume.

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horsemen to dominate the West. The establishment of the great maritime bridge across the Atlantic Ocean by the emergent Iberian nations coincided with the retreat of the Arabs from Spain in the west, and with the end of the Tartar threat to Russia from the east, at the expense of the decline of the continental routes so vividly described by Marco Polo. No cultural, political, or economic organization found exclusively in the heartland of the continental masses could ever play a major role in universal history after the great oceanic breakthrough which started in the late fifteenth century.1

More than sheer coincidence, it was indeed the end of the continental age that ushered in the supremacy of a competitive international society, behaving much like a loose confederation of maritime economies and interests and quite often interlocked in continental and overseas wars. The three centuries of colonial international relations prior to, and emerging with, the Industrial Revolution witnessed a continuous trial-and-error process on the road to establishing a worldwide maritime organization.

Evolving from the Grotian principle of the freedom of the seas, a set of maritime rules and codes spread a more uniform version of navigational practices, destined to establish the earliest fields of cooperation among nations. In fact, it was the organization of the uses of the seas that prompted Western men to search for ways and means to support a functional legal order among the political frames they called their nation-states: post-Grotian international relations and law drew on the organization of the maritime and colonial order that followed the oceanic breakthrough in quest of many of the fundamental tenets that shaped international society throughout modern times and that eventually evolved into the UN system.

To be more exact, the beginning of the contemporary universal international system was embedded in maritime practices and custom much earlier than the three colonial centuries that followed the oceanic breakthrough preceding the Industrial Revolution. The Mediterranean twice served as its cradle: the first time, in its Classic age; the second, under the shadows of the

1. Eighty years ago Halford J. Mackinder wrote on the emergence of the "Ocean age": "New Europes were created in the vacant lands discovered in the midst of the waters, and what Britain and Scandinavia were to Europe in the earlier time, that have America and Australia, and in some measures even Trans-Saharan Africa, now become to Euro-Asia. Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan are now a ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce, inaccessible to the landpower of Euro-Asia." H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23 (1904): 421–44. This statement is no longer applicable, since the Soviet Union has emerged as a full-fledged naval and maritime power with reliable research vessels and a huge fishing fleet. This change has been duly observed by the contemporary French investigators Chaliand and Rageau, who not only dedicate their *Strategic Atlas* to Mackinder, Mahan, Ratzel, and Vidal de la Blanche but present a series of maps based on Mackinder's conception of a potential duel between heartland and maritime powers. G. Chaliand and J. P. Rageau, *Atlas stratégique* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).