Choke Points of the World Ocean: A Geographic and Military Assessment

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Naval strategists are properly concerned with control of the sea, both to protect the merchant and naval vessels of their own countries and to prevent enemies from freely using various areas of the oceans.¹ When shipping routes pass through restricted passages, often referred to as *strategic straits* or *choke points*,² control can often be readily exercised by coastal states with limited naval forces (fig. 1).³ Hence, the concept of choke points and the critical nature of some of them in restricting freedom of navigation under various circumstances is worthy of examination.

The use of the term "choke points" implies that at such localities there is the opportunity for closure, or at least restriction, of the flow of ocean-borne traffic or overflight critical to the well-being of a particular state or group of states. No official listing of these phenomena exists, yet the term, as a generic concept, is readily acceptable. This article seeks to assess some of the parameters of choke points.

There appear to be three basic criteria for defining choke points. One is that there are no readily available alternative maritime routes to use. Second, these areas are significant to the interests of particular states in terms of the nature and volume of commercial and military traffic, including aircraft, which they handle. Third, passage through these choke points must be capable of being effectively blocked by one or more countries. These three criteria will be considered in more detail shortly.

Various listings of choke points appear from time to time. Most analysts

tend to agree on the basic nine: the Danish straits, Dover, Gibraltar, Bab el Mandeb, Hormuz, Malacca-Singapore, Lombok (and/or Sunda), and the Suez and Panama canals. Other frequent candidates are the Turkish straits, Magellan, Bering, Korea, Formosa, and Windward and Mona passages.4

VARIATIONS AMONG CHOKE POINTS

One of the principal differences among choke points is that some represent narrow international waters, and others are oceanic in nature. Narrow waterways include canals and straits. There are only three important international canals—Suez, Panama, and Kiel, of which Kiel is of regional concern only. But there are over 250 international straits; that is, straits connecting two parts of the high seas, or of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), with one another and used for international navigation.5 Most of these, however, would not, at this time, qualify as choke points.

Oceanic choke points include, first, offshore areas where navigation routes (or as some call them, Strategic Lines of Communication [SLOCS])