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President's Message

Law of the Sea Convention is Essential to U.S. Naval Power

The sea services of our nation must maintain their leading role in shaping global rules and policies that affect our freedom of navigation and maritime mobility, two essential elements of U.S. naval power. That is why it is now time for Congress to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention and thereby strengthen our national security.

The Convention codifies access and transit rights for our ships and enhances the nation's prosecution of the global war on terrorism. Our nation has much to gain and nothing to lose by becoming a party to the Convention, which is a comprehensive international legal framework governing the world's oceans. The United States should now join 145 nations that use the Convention as a means to assure access to the oceans. In November, the Convention will be opened for amendment. As a party to the Convention, the United States would have a major role in shaping changes to come.

The Law of the Sea Convention is a complex document that touches on wide range of U.S. maritime concerns. Since it was finalized in 1982, a primary U.S. interest in the Convention has been to preserve essential navigational freedoms and thereby enhance the mobility of U.S. naval power. That is why every chief of naval operations (CNO), the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of Defense have consistently and strongly supported U.S. ratification.

Our current CNO, Adm. Vern Clark, said in a March 18 letter to Sen. Richard G. Lugar, R-Ind., chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, that accession to the Convention will support "our ability to operate around the globe, anytime, anywhere, allowing the Navy to project power where and when needed."

The Convention guarantees, for example, that ships and aircraft may transit straits that otherwise may have been closed by the territorial claims of nearby states. More than 135 straits are affected, including the Strait of Hormuz, entryway to the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Malacca, the main sea route between the Indian and Pacific oceans.

In fact, the United States' interest as a global naval power was behind its initial participation in talks on the Convention as the United Nations conducted negotiations from 1973 to 1982. Our policy makers were concerned that transit and access rights of U.S. warships could be restricted by the rising number of claims from other nations over territorial seas, fishing zones and offshore high seas areas. Today, Adm. Clark wants the United States to join because, he said, "the Law of the Sea Convention helps assure access to the largest maneuver space on the planet — the sea — under authority of widely recognized and accepted law and not the threat of force."

Much of our government's initial delay in ratification was linked to objections by many industrialized countries to sections related to deep seabed mining. However, changes to the Convention in 1994 remedied each of the U.S. objections.

Despite its advantages, the Law of the Sea Convention remains controversial because of widespread — and erroneous — belief that it would adversely affect U.S. sovereignty, inhibit our intelligence gathering activities or hamper the U.S. Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) through which our forces seek to interdict shipments of weapons of mass destruction.

Critics point to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, created to settle disputes, as a threat to U.S. sovereignty. However, parties to the Convention are free to agree on any method of dispute settlement they desire — and the U.S. will not select the Tribunal.

Fears that ratification would diminish our collection of intelligence are linked to a section of the Convention containing a list of activities that would deprive a vessel of the right of innocent passage through territorial seas. These activities include the collection of certain types of information and the requirement that submarines navigate on the surface. However, such activity is not a violation of the Convention. Intelligence-gathering activities are not prohibited nor adversely affected by the Convention.

The Bush Administration's PSI — potentially a major weapon in the global war on terrorism — seeks the support of all nations in international efforts to board and search vessels suspected of transporting weapons of mass destruction. Adm. Michael G. Mullen, vice chief of naval operations, told Lugar's committee that being party to the Convention "would greatly strengthen" the Navy's ability to support the PSI by reinforcing freedom of navigation rights on which the service depends for its operational mobility.

We learned in Iraq that even allies sometimes will block access to key battle areas. Our freedom of navigation cannot be contingent on the approval of nations along global sea lanes. A legal regimen for the world's oceans will help guarantee worldwide mobility for our military.

The Law of the Sea Convention is good for our sea services. It strengthens our country. The time for ratification is at hand.

Sheila M. McNeill, National President

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