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The geopolitical dimension of maritime security

Basil Germond *

Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, LA1 5XE, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the geopolitical dimension of maritime security, which has been neglected by scholars despite the growing number of studies devoted to a variety of aspects related to maritime security. The first step consists in clarifying the definitions of the two concepts; 'geopolitics' and 'maritime security'. Then the article introduces the geopolitical dimension of maritime security from a conceptual perspective, and then analyses three practical examples of maritime security geo-strategies released in 2014. The results demonstrate that states' and international institutions' maritime security objectives and interests are indirectly and directly influenced by geographical and geopolitical considerations, although this link is only tacitly acknowledged in official documents. Scholars and practitioners interested in maritime security are encouraged to further engage with this dimension.

1. Introduction

Maritime security is a fairly recent expression, which has become a buzzword in the past decade [2], especially within the maritime community. Maritime security can be understood as a *concept* referring to the security of the maritime domain or as a *set of policies, regulations, measures and operations* to secure the maritime domain. In academia, the term 'maritime security' was almost absent from the debates about the security of the maritime domain until the beginning of the 2000's. Since 2002, the number of references to maritime security in the academic literature has increased linearly (c.f. Fig. 1). This increase in academic literature on maritime security can be explained by the conjunction of the three following factors: 1) the impacts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (notably the launch of counter-terrorist operations at sea), 2) the occurrence of three high visibility terrorist acts against ships (USS Cole in 2001, French tanker Limburg in 2002 and Filipino passenger ship SuperFerry 14 in 2004), and 3) the rise of piratical attacks in the Strait of Malacca at the beginning of the century. Then the surge of piracy at the Horn of Africa between 2007 and 2012 largely contributed to generating academic debates beyond strategic and security studies, with scholars from various disciplines discussing the legal, criminal, cultural, economic, military, environmental and energy dimensions of piracy in particular and maritime security in general.

Between 1989 and 2014, Google Scholars lists more than 16,000 references comprising the exact phrase 'maritime security' compared to only 218 between 1914 and 1988 (Google Scholar Search, [13]).

However, despite this academic interest, the geopolitical dimension of maritime security has been overlooked by practitioners and scholars alike. Only a handful of scholars have started to discuss the link between maritime security and geopolitics, mainly focusing on the Indian Ocean, the European Union (EU) or both (e.g. [12,14,17,18,20]). The aim of this article is to shed light on this overlooked dimension and to propose ways to integrate it within the emergent field of maritime security studies. The first step consists in clarifying the definitions of the two concepts; 'geopolitics' and 'maritime security', since both of them are open to various, often divergent and modular, interpretations. Then the article introduces the geopolitical dimension of maritime security from a conceptual perspective and analyses three practical examples of maritime security geo-strategies released in 2014, which demonstrate the importance of geographical and geopolitical considerations for maritime security studies.

2. Definitions

The term 'geopolitics' has been employed indiscriminately by both practitioners and scholars in reference to states' zones of interest or influence and how they clash with each other's. This meaning is both vague and limited; it does not account for the full significance of the term, and even bears a negative connotation due to the emphasis on power politics. After all, Nazi Germany's expansionist foreign policy goals were justified using 'geopolitical' arguments based on simplistic (and erroneous) geographical naturalisations. In the 21st century, geopolitics as an academic discipline has lost its prescriptive nature. It actually aims at explaining how geography somewhat constrains politics, how states try to bypass those constraints, and (in the case of

* Tel.: +441524594252.
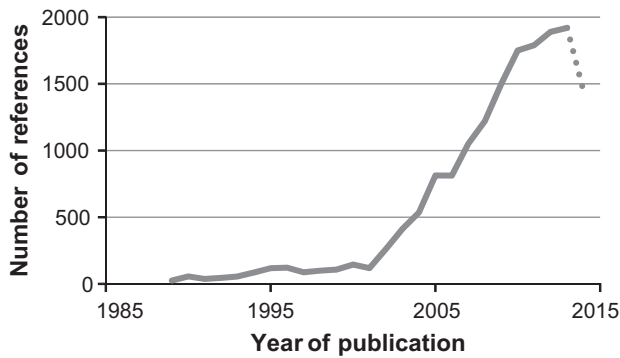E-mail address: b.germond@lancaster.ac.uk

Fig. 1. Evolution between 1989 and 2014 of the number of academic publications mentioning 'maritime security' listed by Google Scholars.
Source: Google Scholars search [13]

critical geopolitics) how they try to use geography to their advantage, including in discourses through series of geo-informed representations. In practice states and other international actors take into account the constraining impacts of geographical factors. They develop and tacitly or explicitly endorse 'geopolitical visions' or 'geo-strategies' that directly or indirectly guide their foreign and security policy goals and activities. In other words, both in practice and in the collective imaginaries, geography contributes to defining the boundaries of what is possible to achieve in international relations along with other material and ideational factors.

The expression 'maritime security' is recent. Before the end of the Cold War it was rarely used and primarily in reference to sea control over maritime areas in the context of the superpower confrontation, that is to say in a naval context. It is thus not surprising that during the Cold War maritime security was more frequently employed in references to geopolitical considerations (such as sovereignty claims over maritime territories, the status of coastal waters, and the control over maritime zones) than in the 21st century. Since the end of the 1990's and the beginning of the 2000's, maritime security was increasingly used to describe preventive measures set up to respond to illegal activities at sea or from the sea (including the protection of shipping and ports). Terrorism (post 9/11) and piracy (especially after 2007 and the rise of attacks at the Horn of Africa) attracted most of the media's attention. However, arms and drug trafficking, people smuggling, illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUUF), and deliberate pollution still represent the bulk of illegal and disruptive activities at sea. Today, states and international actors such as the EU have adopted a more comprehensive and pro-active approach to maritime security, which centres around the exercise of the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence at sea to implement and maintain security, safety and good governance within the maritime domain, with both preventive measures (e.g. port security regulations) and reactive measures (e.g. counter-piracy operations). Maritime security is increasingly linked to economic and environmental considerations, as illustrated by the EU *Integrated Maritime Policy* (IMP) adopted in 2007 and the *Blue Growth* initiative adopted in 2012 [4,5]. Indeed, although the main driver of the IMP has been economic growth, the success of the *Blue Growth* strategy rests on a safe and secure maritime domain, which grants economic agents with the stability and certainties they expect to see before they make any investment. Marine environment and fisheries protection as well as maritime surveillance initiatives have been instrumental in raising maritime security objectives to the top of the security agenda of various state and non-state actors.

The geopolitical dimension of maritime security accounts for the way geography constrains and informs (directly or indirectly) maritime security policies, regulations, measures and operations,

as well as how states take (tacitly or explicitly) geography into account when developing their maritime security strategies.

3. Geography and maritime security

Geographical 'permanence' such as the length of a country's coastline or the absence of direct access to the high seas constrains seapower in general (e.g. [16]) and maritime security policies in particular, "for geography does not argue. It simply is" ([19]: 236). This in no way means that politics and policies are determined by geography but that geographical factors need to be taken into account in the list of explanatory factors along with other material, structural and ideational factors.

Maritime security has to do with (illegal and disruptive) human activities in the maritime *milieu*, that is to say a certain geographically delimited space. Thus, states are differently impacted by maritime security threats depending on their actual geographical location. For example, in the case of illegal immigration by sea, Italy is more directly impacted than (for instance) the United Kingdom, because of its very geographical location. Sicily and especially the island of Lampedusa are located directly on the main (and one of the shortest) immigration route from North Africa to the EU and have thus sustained a constant flow of illegal migrants for the past decades. In other words, even if Britain, France or Germany may be the ultimate destination goal of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean on small boats, Italy, Spain (through the Gibraltar Strait) and Malta are more easily, quickly (and relatively safely) accessible by boat than the UK or even France, due to evident geographical factors. As a result Italy has to spend more resources on counter-immigration than many other EU states, which explains its recent request for the EU's assistance in dealing with counter-immigration at sea in central Mediterranean, leading to the launch of FRONTEX operation Triton in November 2014. This example illustrates that simple geographical realities have constraining impacts on states' maritime security policies, notably when it comes to regulating human activities at sea.

The same reasoning works for other types of illegal flow within the maritime domain. For example, drug smuggling directly impacts countries located on the main routes, such as Spain through the Gibraltar Strait, or those whose coasts are difficult to monitor due to a negative ratio between the length of the coast to police and the resources at the disposal of the navy/coast-guard. This can be the case for small states such as for example Ireland with limited resources and a rather extended coastline or powerful states such as the United States, which despite the resources at the disposal of its coast-guard service has such a long coast to monitor and is the intended destination goal of so much drug trafficking that it still struggles to 'seal' its maritime borders. Here the geographical factor (length of coasts) is clearly not sufficient to explain the burden of counter-narcotics. Material power (such as the coast-guard budget) and drug traffickers' business strategies (privileged destination countries) need to be factored in the explanation. As shown in Table 1, the geographical factor is still very relevant. Despite the US deploying almost 20 times more coast-guard vessels, each of those vessels have a theoretical length of coast to monitor that is just

Table 1
Ratio between length of coast and coast-guard resources **(comparison Ireland – USA).**

	Length of coast (in km)	Number of coast-guard vessels	Ratio (km of coast per ship)
Ireland	1500	8 OPV	187
USA	20,000	More than 159 coast-guard vessels	125