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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
EXTENSION

The Strategic Value of the Panama Canal

By

J. S. McKEAN

Commander, U. S. Navy



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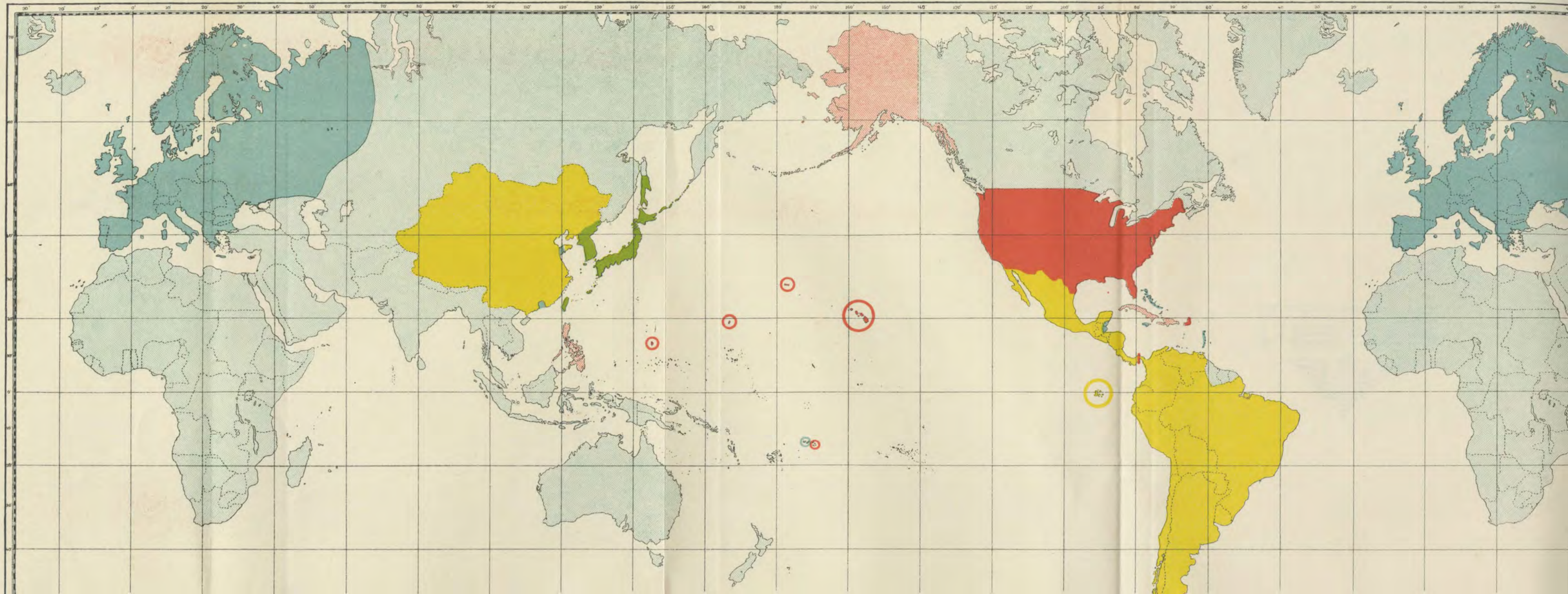
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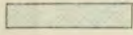





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THE STRATEGIC SITUATION OF THE UNITED STATES

IN RELATION TO THE UNDEVELOPED TERRITORY AND MARKETS OF THE WORLD UPON THE COMPLETION OF THE PANAMA CANAL

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------------|---|-------------------|
|  | European Control |  | United States Control |  | Asiatic Control |
|  | European Influence |  | United States Influence |  | Asiatic Influence |
|  | MARKETS OPEN TO THE UNRESTRICTED COMPETITION OF THE WORLD | | | | |

THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF THE PANAMA CANAL TO THE NAVY.

Although it is not intended to treat the subject in a highly technical way, it will be necessary to give some definitions and assume some fundamental principles.

National policy determines *when* war shall commence.

Naval strategy is that part of the art of naval warfare that determines *where* and *with what forces* naval actions are to be fought.

Naval tactics determine *how* these forces shall be used in the action or *how* the battle is to be fought.

Successful strategy gets *more ships, more guns, more men* or *better ships, guns, and men* to the scene of the battle than the enemy has there.

Successful tactics uses these *ships, men, and guns* more *efficiently* than the enemy.

Strategy, naval or commercial, depends on *bases of operations, lines of operation*, and *lines of communication*, and the similarity of the two types of strategy is readily seen when a chart of any part of the ocean is made and one sees how almost identical are the naval and commercial bases, lines of operation, and communication even in times of peace. In time of war the commercial lines are so displaced that the two become identical, and friendly commerce follows the lines used by the armed forces while enemy commerce is either stopped entirely or so widely diverted as to make it almost noncompetitive.

A *strategic area* is an area so situated that a naval force acting from a secure naval base or bases can control it.

The strategic value of the canal is due to its being the shortest line connecting the two strategic areas in which our Navy will operate, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This strategic value can best be shown by a study of the strategic charts of the two oceans.

Since our national policies are all defensive policies and may be summed up in one "*keep what we have*," our strategy will also be defensive in both oceans; but with our bases properly selected, fortified, and equipped our fleet should be in a position and condition, when war was no longer avoidable, to take the offensive.

A *naval base* is a place equipped to *repair, refit, and resupply* a fleet. It may be compared to a fortress the guns of which are represented by the ships based there, the range of the guns being the "*radius of action*" of the fleet.

Lines of operation are the courses or direction of movements of the fleet from one base to another and from the most advanced base toward the enemy objective, and as the various points of this line are passed that part of the *lines of operation* to the rear of the fleet become *lines of communication* from the fleet back to its home ports and bases and *lines of supply* from these home ports or bases to the fleet.

(See *Plate, The Atlantic strategic area.*)

This area divides naturally into two (2) parts, the *North Atlantic*, as far south as the line *Trinidad, Cape de Verde Islands*, and the *South Atlantic*, all south of the above line.

Again the North Atlantic divides into the *Eastern Atlantic*, in which, owing to our national policies, we have little interest, and the *Western Atlantic*, in which, as it covers the whole of our own coasts, our interests are all important and vital.

The *Western Atlantic* is again by nature subdivided into two sections:

- (1) *Our home coast region* from Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, to Culebra.
- (2) The *Caribbean region* from Culebra to and including *Trinidad*.

In our *home coast region* we own all the strong strategic positions except *Halifax* and *Bermuda*, belonging to *Great Britain*, both capable of development into first-class naval bases, and from which, when so developed and serving as bases for a fleet superior to ours, every point on our home coast is seriously threatened.

In the Caribbean region we own Colon, Culebra, Fajardo, Porto Rico; control Guantanamo, Cuba, and, were it necessary, could probably obtain the use of other points such as Samana Bay, Santo Domingo, and San Nicolas Mole, Haiti.

Great Britain owns a number of islands, the most important strategically being *Trinidad, St. Lucia*, and *Jamaica*.

St. Lucia is already fortified and *Kingston, Jamaica*, is capable of development into a first-class naval base, and when so developed would serve as a base for a fleet which would be nearer the canal than our own fleet if based on either *Culebra* or *Guantanamo*.

The weakness of *Kingston*, as pointed out by Capt. Mahan, is that our fleet based on Guantanamo flanks the line of communication from her halfway station at *St. Lucia* and all direct lines from her home or Canadian ports. This would be equally true of our fleet based in the *Culebra-Fajardo* region.

France in *Port de France, Martinique*, has a site for an excellent naval or commercial harbor.

Other important strategic points are *St. Thomas*, belonging to Denmark; *Caraçoa*, belonging to *Holland*; *Marguerita Island* with *Curaçao Gulf*, belonging to *Venezuela*; *Cartagena*, belonging to *Colombia*; and *Chiriqui Lagoon* and *Almirante Bay*, belonging to *Panama*.

The *lines of approach* across the Atlantic are:

(1) The direct route from Ushant to our home coast; bad weather, especially in winter.

(2) Via the Azores (Portuguese) to either our *home coast* or to the *Caribbean*; better weather, but still not good for small craft in winter.

(3) *Via the Canaries* (Spanish), *Cape de Verdes* (Portuguese), or the African coast to our home coast in winter; at all seasons to the Caribbean or the South Atlantic region.

In case of *continued* operations on our own *home coast* the enemy would, except in the case of *Great Britain*, have to seize a base for his fleet and transports. He might select *Provincetown, Narragansett Bay, Delaware Bay*, or the *Chesapeake*.

In case of operations against the canal, any enemy from across the Atlantic, excepting again *Great Britain*, would have to seize a base in the Caribbean region, where his fleet could coal, etc., before proceeding to the canal region.

If the operations were in the South American region, both our own and the enemy fleet would be compelled to depend on their supply trains until bases had been secured either by seizure or agreement.

It is to be noted that south of 10° north latitude we have lost the advantage of shorter lines of communication and supply and are only on an equality either in commercial or naval strategy, and that to succeed here we require *smaller prices* and a *larger Navy* than our competitor, whoever he may be. (See *Plate, The Pacific strategic area.*)

The *Pacific strategical area* divides itself into two parts: (1) *The North Pacific*, extending as far south as the line *Panama-Galapagos Islands-Tutuila-Singapore*, and (2) the *South Pacific*, south of, but including, this same line.

The *North Pacific area* divides naturally into the eastern and western areas.

The *eastern North Pacific area* is, with the exception of three (3) strategic points—*Esquimault, Magdalena Bay*, and the *Galapagos Islands*—entirely controlled by the *United States*, who owns all the other strategic points in this area, the strategic center of which is the *Sandwich Islands*.

The *western North Pacific*—west of the line *Tutuila-Midway-Kiska*—is divided among all the military and maritime powers (except *Austria* and *Italy*), each possessing one or more strategic points. The *strategic center* of this area is the *island of Guam*.

The eastern South Pacific is of importance only from the fact that certain powers might use routes through this area to reach strategic points in the eastern North Pacific. The important strategic points

are the *Strait of Magellan*, *Valparaiso*, *the Galapagos Islands*, *Tahite*, *Tutuila*.

The western South Pacific is of value because *Australia* and *New Zealand* form part of the British strategic front extending from *Hongkong* through *Singapore-Australia-New Zealand* to the *Cape of Good Hope* and has numerous available bases in its rear and a few points available for *advance bases* in front of it.

An examination of the strategic chart of the Pacific shows such a coincidence in the lines of operations, communication, and supplies for the various powers that for our purposes the Pacific can best be considered as a single strategic area.

The important strategic points are as follows:

(1) *Belonging to the United States*: The Philippines, Guam, Honolulu, Kiska, Unalaska, Puget Sound, San Francisco, Panama, Tutuila.

(2) *Belonging to Great Britain*: Cape Town, Wellington, Auckland, Melbourne, Singapore, Hongkong.

(3) *Belonging to Japan*: Yotorofu, Hakodate, Yokohama, Inland Sea, Bongo Island, Zoo Choo Island, Formosa, and the Pescadores.

(4) *Belonging to Russia*: Vladivostock.

(5) *Belonging to Germany*: Kino Chao, the Carolines, Savoi and Upolu.

(6) *Belonging to France*: Tonkin and Tahite.

(7) *Belonging to China*: Gulf of Pechili, Shanghai, Canton.

(8) *Belonging to Portugal*: Macas.

(9) *Belonging to Mexico*: Magdalena Bay.

(10) *Belonging to Ecuador*: Galapagos Islands.

(11) *Belonging to Chile*: Valparaiso, Puente Arenas.

If strategic lines connecting these various points be drawn (see strategic chart of the Pacific) the numerous intersections of these lines in and near Guam and Honolulu will at once mark these two points as the strategic foci of the whole Pacific, Guam the focus of the western part and Honolulu of the eastern. Each of these strategic centers used as the base of a fleet dominates the strategic front opposed to it. For example, a fleet based on Honolulu threatens or protects our strategic front from Unalaska to Panama, and in the same way a fleet based on Guam (supposing it developed and equipped as a first-class naval base) threatens every strategic area from Vladivostok and Yotorofu to Singapore and lies on the flank of the line of communications or operations from Australia and New Zealand to Esquimault. It is to be further noted that even as to Australia, New Zealand, and Cape Town that the combination of Guam, Honolulu, and Panama cuts the lines of communication or operation between Great Britain's bases in the western Pacific and her only strategic base, Esquimault, in the eastern Pacific.

Each of these centers when held by a friend protects the same area and front that it threatens when held by an enemy. The two

centers in a single hand furnish the best protection and the gravest of threats. When held by opposing forces they are practically of equal value and with equal naval forces based on each the fight would be a draw, as neither fleet would dare pass the other's base to advance on his coast as he would leave the enemy fleet on his line of communication and supply, nearer its base than he, and would certainly meet disaster. A general fleet action somewhere between is the only solution.

Strategically, with both these centers in our hands properly fortified and equipped as first-class naval bases and with an advance base in the Philippines, our Pacific frontier is on the China coast.

Both Guam and Pearl Harbor possess the primary and essential characteristic of a naval base—*position*—and are unique in being the *only* available positions in their respective areas.

Guam has no resources, but being a small island can be given the other requisite of a naval base, resources and strength, at a minimum cost of men and money.

Pearl Harbor has limited resources available and can be made strong, but at an expense of both men and money greatly in excess of that required for Guam. Roughly, the cost of defenses of Guam and Oahu would be in the ratio of the size of the two islands, 200 square miles to 600 square miles, or 1 to 3.

With Guam converted into a Pacific Gibraltar, Honolulu, behind our western frontier covered by Guam and near our home ports, becomes a secondary base and can be less strongly held against attacks from the west. Any other attack, assuming the canal in our possession, would have to come through the Strait of Magellan or from Cape Town via Australia, and would be so long in reaching its objective that we would have ample time to reinforce the garrison from the mainland. For the same reasons and to the same degree the fortifications of Guam and Oahu reduce the necessary permanent garrisons at our naval bases on the mainland. In effect their fortification would be an expanded and intelligently elaborated coast defense, which, combined with an adequate fleet to bind them together, would keep the enemy from ever approaching our coast and would permit our sea trade between the canal and our west coast ports to be carried out in almost the security of times of peace.

As is shown by the strategic chart, all lines of approach to our coast, whoever the enemy, must pass by either Guam or Pearl Harbor, or both.

As shown by the strategic maps, the Panama Canal not only connects the two important strategic areas, but shortens by from 8,000 to 10,000 miles the distance between them.

The public, the Congress, the press, and I fear some naval officers got the impression that the canal, by furnishing a short cut between the two oceans, "doubled our fleet."

What the canal really will do is to increase immensely our fleet's "mobility"—freedom and speed of movement—by permitting a rapid transfer and concentration in either ocean, and it *simplifies* and *reduces the cost* of our *logistics*, that is, the *supply* and *maintenance* of the fleet *on the way to* and in the *area of operations*.

The canal, in the case of a fleet consisting of 48 battleships and their attendant satellites, would save \$6,000,000 in fuel and 60 days in time between *Culebra* and *Panama*. It will reduce the number of colliers, store ships, etc., by at least 100 vessels of 5,000 tons each, costing \$50,000,000.

Outside, and in importance away beyond the saving in logistics, is the gain in *strategy*—that 60 days of time.

It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which this saving of 60 days in time would save more in the total cost of the war than the cost of the completed canal, \$400,000,000. It is only a little less easy to imagine a case where this 60 days' saving might entirely *prevent* a war costing ten times the cost of the canal.

From the above it is easily seen that while the value of the canal to commercial strategy, which is appreciated by all, is immense, its value to naval strategy is beyond calculation. In a few words, *the Panama Canal* is a *commercial convenience*, but is also a *naval necessity*.

To sum up: The Panama Canal, by transferring vessels from one ocean to the other within from 8 to 10 hours, furnishes the only means yet discovered to advance a ship, man-of-war or merchant, toward her destination—a fight or a market—at the rate of 1,000 miles per hour.

The value of the canal can only be preserved to us and denied to the enemy—to whom it would be equally great—by so defending the canal and our absolutely necessary naval bases in the Atlantic that the fleet will be free to seek the enemy fleet wherever it may be. To enable the fleet to so operate it must, when concentrated, be equal to the largest fleet that any *possible* enemy may bring across both oceans; or, should circumstances find the fleet divided, that part in the Atlantic should be at least equal to the fleet of the *most probable* enemy in the Atlantic, while that part in the Pacific should be at least equal to the fleet of the *most probable* enemy in that ocean.

As we say in the Navy—"R. H. I. P."—"Rank has its *privileges*," also its corresponding *responsibilities and duties*.

We are a first-class world power; we have large opportunities; we have assumed large responsibilities and duties. Let us provide for them. Fortify, equip, and defend our absolutely necessary naval bases in both oceans, including the canal. Build an *adequate, well-balanced fleet*, so that we may go about our business at *home* and *abroad* in *peace* and *quiet*.

