

United States has an interest in keeping the sea lanes approaching its borders free of foreign naval power. The United States secured its Pacific approaches first. During the Civil War it acquired Alaska. In 1898 it annexed Hawaii. Those two actions taken together closed off the threat of any enemy fleet being able to approach the continent from the west, by eliminating any anchorage for supplying a fleet. The United States secured the Atlantic by using World War II to rake advantage of British weakness, driving it from near the U.S. coast, and by the end of World War II had created a fleet of such enormous power that the British were unable to operate in the Atlantic without U.S. approval. This made the United States effectively invulnerable to invasion.

4: COMPLETE DOMINATION OF THE WORLD'S OCEANS TO FURTHER SECURE U.S. PHYSICAL SAFETY AND GUARANTEE CONTROL OVER THE INTERNATIONAL TRADING SYSTEM

The fact that the United States emerged from World War II not only with the world's largest navy but also with naval bases scattered around the world changed the way the world worked. As I mentioned previously, any seagoing vessel—commercial or military, from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea to the Caribbean—could be monitored by the United States Navy, who could choose to watch it, stop it, or sink it. From the end of World War II onward, the combined weight of all of the world's existing fleets was insignificant compared to American naval power.

This highlights the single most important geopolitical fact in the world: the United States controls all of the oceans. No other power in history has been able to do this. And that control is not only the foundation of America's security but also the foundation of its ability to shape the international system. No one goes anywhere on the seas if the United States doesn't approve. At the end of the day, maintaining its control of the world's oceans is the single most important goal for the United States geopolitically.

5: THE PREVENTION OF ANY OTHER NATION FROM CHALLENGING U.S. GLOBAL NAVAL POWER

Having achieved the unprecedented feat of dominating all of the world's oceans, the United States obviously wanted to continue to hold them. The simplest way to do this was to prevent other nations from building navies, and this could be done by making certain that no one was motivated to build navies—or had the resources to do so. One strategy, “the carrot,” is to make sure that everyone has access to the sea without needing to build a navy. The other strategy, “the stick,” is to tie down potential enemies in land-based confrontations so that they are forced to exhaust their military dollars on troops and tanks, with little left over for navies.

The United States emerged from the Cold War with both an ongoing interest and a fixed strategy. The ongoing interest was preventing any Eurasian power from becoming sufficiently secure to divert resources to navy building. Since there was no longer a single threat of Eurasian hegemony, the United States focused on the emergence of secondary, regional hegemons who might develop enough regional security to allow them to begin probing out to sea. The United States therefore worked to create a continually shifting series of alliances designed to tie down any potential regional hegemon.

The United States had to be prepared for regular and unpredictable interventions throughout the Eurasian landmass. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it did engage in a series of operations designed to maintain the regional balance and block the emergence of a regional power. The first major intervention was in Kuwait, where the United States blocked Iraqi ambitions after the Soviets were dead but not yet buried. The next was in Yugoslavia, with the goal of blocking the emergence of Serbian hegemony over the Balkans. The third series of interventions was in the Islamic world, designed to block al Qaeda's (or anyone else's) desire to create a secure Islamic empire.

The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were both a part of this effort. For all the noise and fuss, these were minor affairs. In Iraq, the largest operation, the United States has used fewer than 200,000 troops and suffered fewer than 5,000 killed. This is about 6 to 8 percent of the casualties suffered in Vietnam, and about 1 percent of the casualties in World War II.