

## GEOPOLITICS AND TRANSPORTATION. UNITED STATES AND PANAMA CANAL

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*This article presents the great connection which exists between the realization of Panama Canal and the rising power on United States; and how this state, after the construction of this canal, could promote efficiently at global level its interests.*

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The American supremacy owes much to its geographical position. Being on the North American land mass, having to the North a big country – the second country on the earth by the surface – but with a population which is under 30 millions, and in the South a country which pays attention due to its population and seashore length in the Gulf of Mexico, but not for its surface or economic strength, USA has a certainty of the fact that none of them could start a military assault against it. Of course, there were exceptions, like that tried during WW1 by Zimmerman (then German Foreign Minister), through which Germany tried to win on his side and against USA the Mexican state, promising to help it; but this action didn't have any success.

But a much greater importance is the fact that USA has “good” neighbors on the West and East, because there it is “guarded” by two water extents, which act for its security as two buffer zones. USA has a great certainty that it would not be attacked by a land power (such as Mexico or Canada); furthermore, after it bought Alaska from Russia (March 1867) this certainty would be even higher. The only possibility to attack this country – if we don't take into consideration the intermediate ballistic missiles or intercontinental ballistic missiles – could come only from a great maritime power, and which could, through its long fleet's arm, touch the American territory with its navy (this meaning that the ships could arrive close enough to American seashores) or with the airplanes which could take on from the navy.

But this thing could be possible only if the USA didn't possess a fleet which provided means for its security, and didn't have possessions in the Pacific Ocean, from where it could supervise hostile acts which could be directed against it. Hawaii, Samoa, Johnston, Palmyra, Fanning, Jarvis, Wake, Guam, Okinawa are but a few points from where USA supervise the Pacific Ocean's immensity.

But we cannot forget the following thing: USA is “forced” to be a maritime power because only in this way it can proceed to sell its products and to be present every where on the Earth; in the same time, the length of its seashores to the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean – which are important factors regarding its maritime propensity – its natural resources – which permit it to build and maintain a great maritime fleet – and the acknowledge of the fact that it is better to prevent than to treat – which means that it is better to check all the seas which touch her territory than to protect only its seashores – impose this country to be a great maritime power.

Furthermore, taking account of the New Orleans's importance, where there is the mouth of Mississippi river, and of the importance of this river's basin for USA economy and security, the security of the Caribbean Sea and of the Gulf of Mexico, are of the greatest importance; of course, the security of Florida peninsula is of the greatest importance for Southern and Eastern parts of USA. The unshipping of a land army on this peninsula could generate great troubles for USA; and its shape impose that it could be better protected from the sea, not from the land. This is due to the fact that any peninsula could be better protected from the sea that from the land.

The uncertainty of unshipping of a hostile army imposes that a peninsula should be protected from the sea; this kind of defense permits a quicker interception of the enemy's fleet and hinders its desire to unship troops on the peninsula. The impossibility of precise identification means that in case a peninsula is protected only from the land, the defense troops could be *dispersed*, making much harder for them to defend in case of a massive attack. For this reason, a submarine fleet which has an eye upon the coasts (and upon the possessions from the high seas) are more important for its security than a strong land army.

What was missing to America in order to exercise its power in the Caribbean Sea, in the two oceans which wet its coastlines, and why not on the entire Earth, was its incapacity to *concentrate its fleet*. After USA took from Spaniards possessions in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, it pursued a canal building in Panama Isthmus. When this canal's building was pursuing – with its huge importance for global economy – the geopolitical factors had a greater predominance for American leadership. Through its construction, the USA wins the advantages of insularity, which means its capacity to concentrate its navy.<sup>33</sup> This canal facilitates the *quick* concentration of the navy. Without this impressive project the USA would have played an important role only on regional level, and wouldn't have had the capacity to influence the affairs on the continents which border the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

After the transformation of Atlantic Ocean into a fortified area (through the application of Monroe doctrine), the USA sustained that it could even commence a war, in order to maintain the inviolability of Western hemisphere.<sup>34</sup> In this way USA could expand its commerce and political influence, and could proceed to territorial annexation – it could become a great power without appealing to a policy of force.<sup>35</sup> Even from the beginning of their history USA followed up a policy of expansion with great tenacity; after 1794, through a series of treaties there were established the borders with Canada and Florida, in America's advantage. It was opened the Mississippi river for American trade and navigation; there was bought Louisiana from France (1803), a huge territory, together with the aspirations for Spanish territories such as Florida and Texas – bases for the future American sea power.<sup>36</sup>

In 1845 President James Polk explained that he pursued the Texas' annexation in USA because it was necessary to avoid that this state to become an "ally with or dependent by a foreign nation much stronger than itself", transforming in this way into a great menace to American security.<sup>37</sup>

The Louisiana's selling was made by Napoleon the 1-st, because this territorial acquisition means with certainty the "rising of US power, and here we had already given to England a maritime rival, which sooner or later would beat its great proud."<sup>38</sup>

But an aspect with greater implications was another thing: there was manifesting a desire from a newcomer to enter the select club of most powerful nations on the Earth. And this took place in the second part of the 19-th century – when Great Britain, then being considered the greatest power on Earth, took the second place, after US. In 1875, US got an upper hand upon Great Britain in manufactures' production,<sup>39</sup> and to the end of the century US energy consumption was greater than that of Germany, France, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Japan, and Italy, taken together.<sup>40</sup>

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33 Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality. A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1942, p. 60

34 Henry Alfred Kissinger, *Diplomația*, București, Editura Bic All, 2002, p. 30

35 *ibidem*, p. 31

36 *ibidem*, pp. 26-27

37 David Newton Lott, *The Presidents Speak*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, p. 95

38 Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Foreign Policy: A History*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1977, p. 60

39 Henry Alfred Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 31

40 *ibidem*, p. 31

Once the US entered the phase of accelerate economic growth, its political power was felt more and more, and US perceived that it must proceed to translate this power into a more important position on international arena. Beginning with this period US started to build its commercial fleet and navy; and in 1889 Captain A. T. Mahan exposed a series of principles which promoted the development of military navy by US.

As a matter of fact, President Theodore Roosevelt was the first president which insisted that US duty was to make felt its influence on global level and presented the American interests on international arena in terms of national interest. For this purpose, the US needed the creation of movement organs which could promote this position on global stage. And the development of maritime capabilities by this new power was of crucial importance. Roosevelt considered US as a power member in the great powers club, and in case that US interests collided with that of others, America had to mobilize its resources in order to impose its interests;<sup>41</sup> and for this reason this president was the one which gave to Monore's doctrine the most interventionists' interpretation, identifying it with the epoch's imperialist doctrines.

The optimism generated by the idea of "Evident Destiny" and the desire of some important personalities – the most notable being that of Roosevelt – looked for taking out USA from their isolationist position. William Seward, Secretary of State during Johnson Administration considered that US had inevitably to exercise their commercial preeminence in "Pacific Ocean, in its inlands, and on continents which borders it."<sup>42</sup> He wished American producers to conquer the Asian markets, and for attaining that, the US should first remove the foreign concurrence on the northern part of Pacific Ocean and to get the access in the most important ports in that region. He pursued the acquisition of Alaska Peninsula from Russia; his successors hadn't renounced the idea of the expansionism policy, the Pacific Ocean being the most important interest area for American foreign trade. After the Civil War, US wanted to develop commercial settlements in this area, claiming more islands and coral atolls in central Pacific. Some of them were of the most strategic importance: the Samoa and Hawaiian islands. In 1898 Samoa signed a treaty with US through which there was provided a maritime base in Pago Pago. In 1879 Great Britain and Germany concluded similar treaties which were focalized on Samoa archipelagos.

But Hawaiian islands were (and are) of greater importance and have a greater strategic importance, because their occupation by a power hostile to US means a direct menace to American commercial interests (especially those regarding the trade with sugar), and a menace to American continent's security, because US couldn't check and defense itself from Pacific Ocean its Western coasts. And as a consequence of an unabated policy, in 1894 the Hawaiian Islands were annexed by USA.

The expansionist spirit fully manifested in the decade 1890-1900, and a noisy group (which gathered more and more sympathizers) manifested the desire regarding the foreign territories' conquering; the group had as leaders: Albert Beveridge, Henry Cabot Lodge, T. Roosevelt, and A. T. Mahan.<sup>43</sup> The tensions, and after that, the war between Americans and Spaniards in 1898, were the consequences of such a policy. All assay – which were successfully touched by Americans – had as central purpose the abolishment of other power's access to the close space of US, especially in Caribbean Sea; these were indispensable premises regarding the exertion of US power in Panama Isthmus zone, area on which depended the possibility of American power's expansion.

Although the French started the workings at the Panama Canal, the Americans looked to identify ways which could permit them to exercise the control in the area where the canal was to be

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41 ibidem, p. 33

42 George Brown Tindall și David E. Shi, *America, o istorie narativă*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, vol. II, 1996, p. 602

43 ibidem, p. 605

fulfilled; they went even further: they followed the workings initiated by Universal Company of Inter Oceanic Canal regarding the connection of the two oceans in Panama area.

The economic development of US and the looking for possibilities which could facilitate the external markets' conquering had risen the importance of commercial fleet and of navigation. And as the commercial fleet's protection could be provided only by a navy, there appeared the necessity for such a navy's construction. "The necessity of a navy" told Mahan "is a direct resultant of a commercial fleet's development, which is peacefully, and disappears in the same time with it, the only exception being that one where a nation manifests aggressive tendencies and keep its navy as a part of its military corps."

And the same author sustained that when the maritime trade would get again its normal attention from American leadership, the interests linked to commercial navigation would sure bring the navy to life. He went even further and said that "it is possible that when there will be a certainty the possibility that a canal could cut the Panama Isthmus, the aggressive impulse would be strong enough to lead to the same result"<sup>44</sup> – those regarding the construction of a war fleet be US, as an element which could provide US with the means which could help it to influence the global affairs. Captain Mahan was to be a light for guidance for Roosevelt, as a prophet and teacher, in the same time, regarding the construction on an isthmian canal.

Roosevelt regarded the canal's construction in a very different way in comparison with important personalities of its time; if for some leaders there was a welcome thing to speak about the fulfilling of the Columbus dream, to name it a huge step in civilization area, or as Lesseps sustained, to bring a huge contribution in development of global trade, Roosevelt had a very different vision: for him the canal's fulfilling, first and last, mean not a vision regarding commercial aims, nor the universal utility of the canal. For him it mean always the vital way, the indispensable way, to the global destiny for the United States.<sup>45</sup>

He had a special vision regarding its country's destiny: he saw the US as a power which would command the two oceans, united through a constructed canal, being in the possession, being operated, supervised, and fortified by his own country. The canal would to be the first step taken for American supremacy on seas.<sup>46</sup> Doesn't matter how big and important, or admirable would be other benefits as a result of canal's construction, they worth only a secondary importance, for Roosevelt.

Once the isthmian barrier would be put aside, the Caribbean Sea would become – as Mahan said – not only an area where the commercial currents would manifest with great intensity, but a vital military path. In that moment USA would need military bases in Caribbean Sea, which, "as a result of their natural advantages, susceptible to be protected, and being close to the strategic problem [the canal] would permit the navy to stay closer to the scene as any opponent." With the Mississippi river entrance and exit provided – its basin being the permanent military operational base for USA – and with the Caribbean possessions in its hands, with the safe communications among these bases (the Mississippi base being included), with adequate military preparations, for which US disposed of all necessary means, their preponderance resulted "from their geographical position with a mathematical precision."

A member of Senate, Lodge, the closest Roosevelt's friend, sustained even before 1900 that the canal's existence made the Hawaiian Island's possession a necessity, while Senator Morgan sustained that even Cuba should be controlled by the Americans, taking account of its geographical position regarding the Panama Isthmus.

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44 Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History. 1660 – 1783*, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1987, p. 26

45 David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas. The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1977, p. 250

46 *ibidem*, p. 250

After the American – Spanish War, the US became more active in Caribbean Sea area;<sup>47</sup> after the American victory over the Spaniards, then Secretary of State Hay entered negotiations with the British ambassador, Julien Pauncefote, in order to obtain the British's consent regarding the American plan for a canal construction in the Isthmus of Panama. Hay and the British ambassador made quick steps, and as a result, USA got the right to construct and operate the canal. This treaty was signed on February 5, 1900. But the Senate would refuse the treaty's specifications; the reason was this: if a canal would be open to all vessels, in time of peace or war, doesn't matter under which flag they navigate, this would mean that it would pose an additional menace to US security; it would mean an additional duty, an additional geographical point where the American navy should watch. But if it is "fortified by us, it becomes one of the greatest source of American maritime power."<sup>48</sup>

After President McKinley's death, Roosevelt asked Hay to renegotiate his first treaty regarding Panama Canal. And there appeared the first treaty of Roosevelt's administration. It provided the US the possibility to undertake all the necessary steps in order to protect the Canal "against the injustice and disorder", this meaning in fact the possibility to fortify the Canal area. It was signed in the greatest secrecy in the morning of November 18-th, 1901, while President Roosevelt declared himself "delighted."<sup>49</sup>

This was to be the first important move of his mandate: and it regarded the construction and control upon Panama Canal. Even if the Canal didn't existed, the US would have manifested a special preoccupation in relation to Caribbean Sea; and regarding the actions made in that region by any hostile power.

And the US, through the help given to Panamanian secessionists during 1903, would obtain the greatest benefits: "We conquered the Panamanian area", eulogized Roosevelt later. He conquered it, but by biting down the Latino-American pride.

But this Canal would provide the rise of American power on global stage; digging it, the USA fulfilled the aim regarding the turning to account of its geographical position. It constitutes that element which is the base of American maritime power, because this canal watched by US is the path through which there could be made the juncture of American navies from Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

*It created for the United States the capacity to concentrate its military fleet. Creating for the US, through its realization, the advantage given by **insularity**, the Panama Canal and the American bases situated in Pacific Ocean, gives to American power the capacity to influence in an overwhelming way the Far East affairs, element which couldn't pass unchecked by the fear and suspicion of the Siberian "Bear".*

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47 George Brown Tindall și David E. Shi, op. cit., p. 622

48 ibidem, p. 257

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