

## THE WEST AND THE CAPE SEA ROUTE CO W.A. Dorning\*

### Changing perceptions and realities

Western strategists and politicians have traditionally acknowledged the vital importance of the Cape Sea Route. Their South African counterparts, for their part, have in the past regarded the Cape Sea Route's importance to the West as almost axiomatic, and have frequently sought to use this fact as a bargaining point in their negotiations with the Western Powers.<sup>1</sup> There are increasing signs, however, that a re-assessment of the importance of the Cape Sea Route is taking place in the West.

New strategic factors and balances have altered the Western Powers' perception of the importance of defending this major trade route. At the same time political pressures have forced the Western Powers to cut their military ties with the Republic — resulting in a complete collapse of their former co-operation in the defence of the Cape Route. The South African Government, in turn, has recently declared itself no longer willing to act as the sole 'guardian of the Cross-roads'. The debate nevertheless a con-

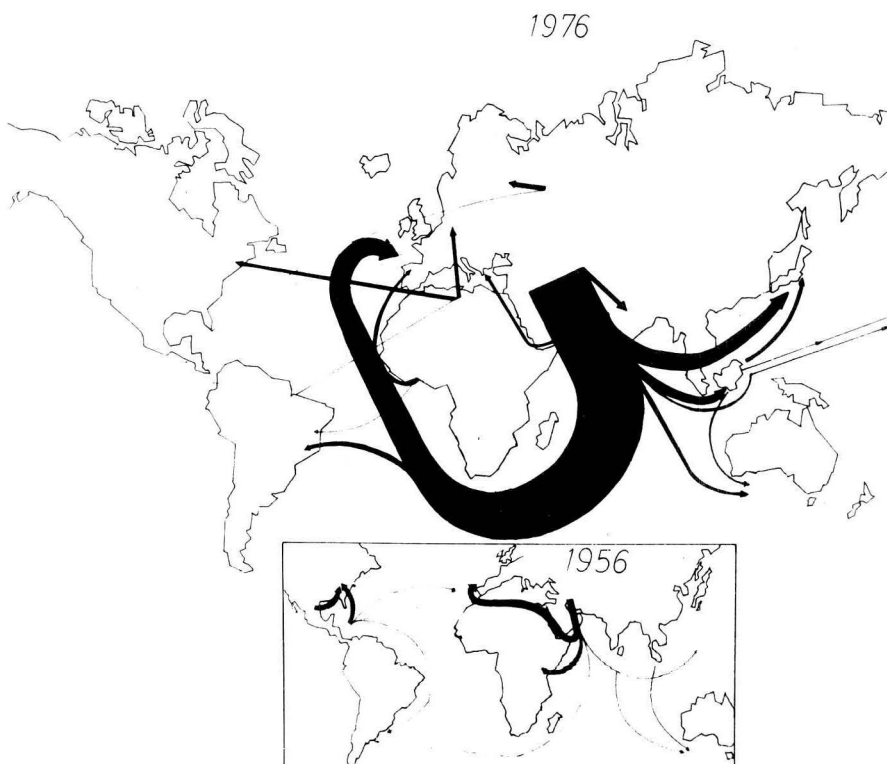
tinuing one — ambivalence is still the keynote of Western and South African attitudes to the importance of the Cape Sea Route.

It is in the interests of both the West and South Africa to evaluate carefully the strategic importance of the route at the present time. That way much of the tension and atmosphere of recrimination presently afflicting South African relations with the West might be avoided. And the two parties might well be able to look forward to an era of more realistic, if less ambitious, co-operation, based on a real understanding of the issues at stake.

### The importance of the Cape Sea Route

It is impossible to seriously challenge the notion that the Cape Sea Route is an important artery — perhaps *the* most important in the trade network of the Western world.

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The two maps, which illustrate to scale how the volume of oil movements by sea has changed over the past 20 years, clearly show how important the Cape Sea Route has become in this period.

The unreliability of the Suez Canal route in times of crisis was amply demonstrated in 1956 and again a decade later when conflict in the region resulted in closure of the canal. The instability of the region has increased in the seventies, and the recent revolution in Iran, with its profound implications for the West, must surely place a question mark over the continued availability of the Canal to Western shipping in the future — this in spite of the Egyptian-Israeli accord.

While the Suez Canal was closed, a yearly average of 12 000 ships called at South African ports, while a further 14 000 ships rounded the Cape without calling.<sup>2</sup> Today, even with the Canal open, a staggering 2 300 vessels a month ply around the Cape of Good Hope — 600 of them oil tankers carrying 70 per cent of the total tonnage passing around the cape.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the recent deepening and enlargement of the Suez Canal, the great majority of oil tankers are still restricted from using the Canal by virtue of their size. At the end of 1976, more than half of the world's oil tankers were larger than 200 000 DW tons; nearly 80 per cent were greater than 65 000 DW tons.<sup>4</sup> Figures such as these led Mr P. W. Botha to assert in 1976 that even with the widening of the Canal 'Suez will hardly be able to cope with one fifth of the oil from the Persian Gulf, when we take into account that by 1980 some one million tons of oil will have to be trans-shipped by sea.'<sup>5</sup>

The strategic importance of the Cape Sea Route to NATO is easily demonstrated. It is estimated that 80 per cent of the oil consumed by the European members of NATO passes around the Cape in any one year.<sup>6</sup> Lord Chalfont recently put the estimate as high as 90 per cent.<sup>7</sup> In addition, 70 per cent of the strategic minerals required by NATO are transported to Europe via the Cape Sea Route.

### **Western attitudes to the Cape Sea Route**

Clearly, the Cape Sea Route is a vital lifeline to the economies of the West. Western strategists and military writers (as opposed to politicians) have been quick to acknowledge this in the past. While it is true that aspects of their argument are coming under increasing fire in contemporary times, there has never been a real shortage of apologists — in the old 'blue water school tradition' — for the policy of keeping constant vigilance over the Cape Sea Route to ensure that the Russians are dissuaded from disrupting its flow of traffic.

The dramatic increase in the presence of Russian ships in the Indian Ocean during the last decade, and the Soviet Union's growing access to naval facilities along the Eastern seaboard of Africa, has worried even some of the most complacent military observers in the West. Moscow's ability to interfere in the traffic of the Cape Sea Route has been dramatically heightened with the collapse of Portuguese rule in Mozambique, and the consequent access of the Soviet Union to the ports of Maputo, Beira, N'cala and Porto Amelia. Recently Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, retired US Naval Chief of Staff, was quoted as saying 'The Soviets to-day have the capability to cut our sea lanes to the Middle East by virtue of having been permitted to outspend the US (in naval combat capabilities) by 40 cent in a decade.'<sup>8</sup>

Long before this Russian threat became so apparent, Western allies of South Africa declared their willingness to share in the defence of the Cape Sea Route. At the handing over ceremony of the Simonstown Agreement between Great Britain and South Africa on 2 April, 1957, the Earl of Selkirk, then First Lord of the Admiralty, was of the opinion that '... The defence of the vital sea routes round the Cape can be assured only if the task and responsibilities which it entails are shared. That is what we are doing here and that is what we believe will be achieved.'<sup>9</sup>

In the light of what followed — the withdrawal of Western military support for South Africa, the ending of joint naval manoeuvres, the arms embargoes, and the termination of the Simonstown Agreement — the Earl of Selkirk's statement seems ironic. Yet as late as June 1974 Mr Harold Wilson still maintained that 'Britain has never questioned the value of the Simonstown Agreement.'<sup>10</sup> And after the Agreement was allowed to lapse Mr Wilson stated that British ships would continue to call at Simonstown as the occasion rose.

Indeed, as the Western Powers' physical co-operation in the defence of the Cape Sea Route diminished, and as the Russian threat grew commensurately, the voices of those warning about the danger signs grew louder. The Russian and Cuban intervention in Angola in 1975 seemed the last straw. President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing became so concerned about the threat to the Cape Sea Route that he prepared to despatch a naval task force with tactical nuclear weapons into the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup> Dr Kissinger, meanwhile, openly lobbied for NATO

intervention in the Angolan war in order to prevent South Africa and the Cape Sea Route from falling under Russian domination.<sup>12</sup> His plea was echoed by Patrick Wall, a British Conservative MP, who drew up NATO's military report for the parliamentarians' conference of the alliance in 1976.

Nor were the dangers so evident during the Angolan war quickly forgotten. Lord Chalfont made the point in June 1977 that the Soviet Union was now in a position to seriously harass the Cape supply line in a situation short of war.<sup>13</sup> In November of the same year, columnist Jack Anderson of the Chronicle claimed to have access to US intelligence findings which pointed to the Cape Sea Route as a prime Russian maritime target and one of the West's defensive 'choke points'. Anderson claimed that the intelligence reports regarded the southern coast of Africa as 'an unguarded NATO jugular.'<sup>14</sup> Less than a month later the NATO Secretary-General himself, Dr Joseph Luns, was reported as saying that the 'oil supply route to Europe round the Cape is of capital importance.' In the same report NATO officials in Brussels conceded that a 'blueprint for the defence of the Cape route is no doubt gathering dust here.'<sup>15</sup> (In fact as early as 1972 the Defence Planning Committee of NATO authorized the drawing up of contingency plans to protect the Cape Sea Routes in the event of war.<sup>16</sup>)

Senator Harry Byrd meanwhile, a member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, has recently said that the time has come for discussions with South Africa for increased American use of the superb maritime facilities at Simonstown — only this could give adequate protection to the Cape Route.<sup>17</sup>

There thus clearly exists a body of informed opinion in the Western World which accepts for a fact the vital importance of the Cape Sea Route, and which advocates increased Western co-operation with South Africa in its defence.

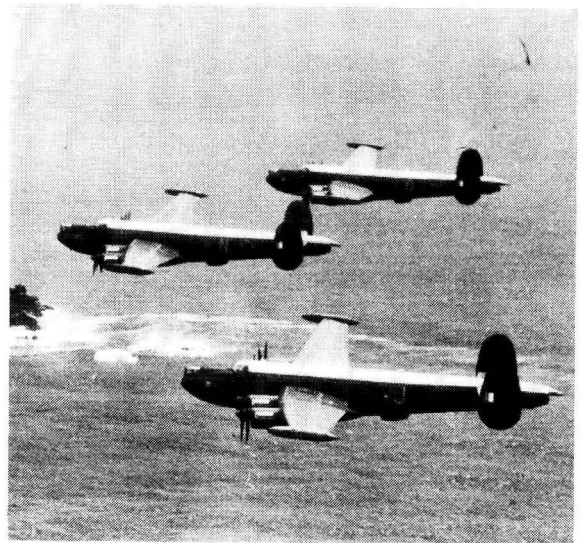
Yet, paradoxically, as the Russian threat to the Cape Sea Route has increased, recent developments — political as well as strategic/technological — have tended equally to lessen the will of the West to co-operate with South Africa in its defence. The result is the atmosphere of confusing ambivalence with which the West approaches the issue.

### **Factors diminishing the importance of the Cape Sea Route political**

The political pressures which militate against Western co-operation in the defence of the Cape Sea Route take little or no account of the real issues at stake, and are therefore logically indefensible. This doesn't make them any less important. Political prejudice is perhaps the key to what might otherwise seem an inexplicable lack of foresight on the part of the Western Powers.

Before the growth of the vociferous Afro/Asian bloc in the United Nations, and before the orchestrated attack on South Africa's racial policies gathered momentum, the major Western Powers participated fully in South Africa's defence plans for the Cape Route. In the immediate aftermath of the McCarthyite era, and while tensions with the belligerent Khrushchev's Soviet Union were running high in the early 1960's, it seemed a perfectly logical policy.

In the years following the Simonstown Agreement, US as well as British ships made full use of the facilities at the South African naval base. True, South Africa had failed in her attempts to get a 'Southern NATO', but on the whole she had little to complain about. In October 1959, ships of the United States, British, French, Portuguese and South African navies held combined anti-submarine operations off the Cape. These joint exercises, named CAPEX, continued annually until the early nineteen-sixties.<sup>18</sup>



**Three of the Maritime Air Command's Ageing Shackleton reconnaissance aircraft.**

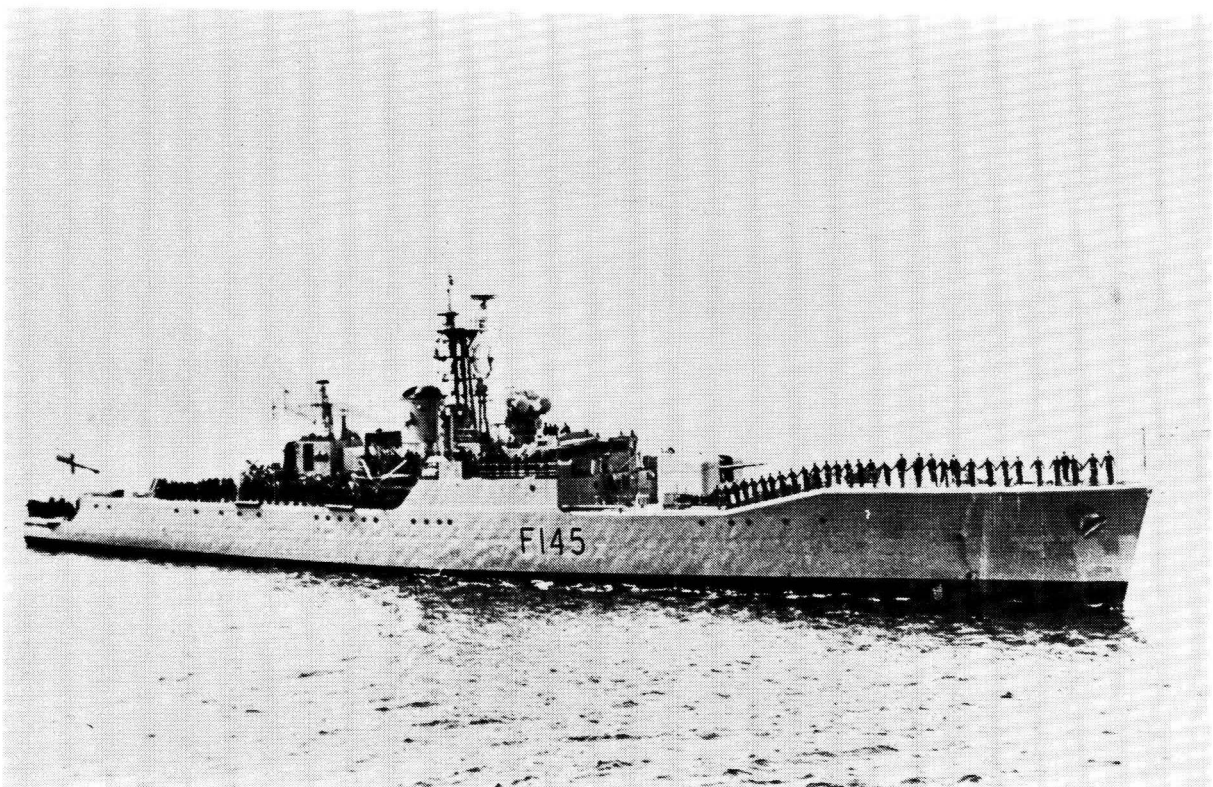
By that stage, international pressure for an arms embargo against South Africa had begun to prove irresistible. The US unilaterally imposed an arms embargo against South Africa on 2 August 1963. As Dr Prinsloo points out, the years of the Johnson administration were bad years for US-SA military co-operation, culminating in the 'Roosevelt' incident of February 1967. On that occasion shore leave was refused members of the USS 'Franklin D. Roosevelt', about to refuel at Cape Town.<sup>19</sup> After this incident US naval ships ceased to call at South African ports, except in emergencies. This held true throughout the years of the Vietnam war — it became a classic example of the lengths to which the West was now prepared to go to avoid any military contact with South Africa. While the Suez Canal was closed US destroyers had to travel the dangerously long 2 800 mile distance between Luanda on the west coast of Africa and Lourenco Marques in the East to avoid having to call at SA ports.

In 1967 even France ceased to hold joint naval manoeuvres with SA, while, to some, the height of absurdity was reached when the US and Australia refused to receive intelligence reports

on Soviet sea traffic in the Indian Ocean from the sophisticated South African communications centre at Silvermine.

The military atmosphere between the US and SA improved slightly during the Nixon administration, but has since frozen over almost completely with the coming to power of President Carter. The latter, far from wishing to increase the American naval presence in the Indian Ocean, has suggested to the Soviet Union that he would like to see the establishment of a 'peace zone' in the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> It is not difficult to imagine what the South African naval establishment, confronted by almost daily evidence of growing Soviet naval power in the Indian Ocean, thinks of this proposal.

In fact, viewed from the perspective of 1979 the isolation of SA militarily seems complete. No Royal Navy ships have called at Simonstown since 1974. South Africa's ability to patrol the Cape Sea Route, meanwhile, received an irreversible blow in the form of a comprehensive UN arms embargo against the Republic in November 1977.



**SAS PRESIDENT PRETORIUS, one of SAN's President-class frigates which may be scrapped in terms of the new naval strategy forced on South Africa.**

Admiral Zumwalt perhaps best summed up the position on a recent visit to SA by conceding that the Simonstown facilities were so important that in the event of a conventional war 'we could hardly do without them.' He qualified this statement, however, by asserting that America's ability to use Simonstown had been 'nullified' by her distaste for apartheid.<sup>21</sup>

### **Strategic/Technological**

The West's cold-shouldering of Simonstown on political grounds alone is seen by many as a short-sighted and idealistic approach (the more pragmatic Russians, on the other hand, must have view the Western dilemma with some amusement).

There has recently developed, however, a more cogent attack on the arguments of those favouring an increased Western commitment to the defence of the Cape Sea Route. This school does not question the importance of the Cape Sea Route to the West — that has been established beyond doubt. Rather, it queries the circumstances in which the traffic around the Cape might be disrupted in *peace-time*. It asserts as a corollary that peace-time patrolling of the Cape waters is therefore costly and unnecessary. It points out, moreover, that in the case of war, the defence of the Cape Sea Traffic becomes both impossible *and* superfluous.

There is much to be said for this line of argument. It is, for instance, more sophisticated than the approach adopted by unnamed American military 'experts' in 1969, who after asserting that the proportion of oil and other strategic materials passing around the Cape for Europe was 'not great' and that in any case America has alternate access to the Far East and the Indian Ocean, claimed flippantly 'The closing of the Cape Route might cause some inconvenience on the Washington cocktail circuit through a shortage of cashew nuts.'<sup>22</sup> Reginald Maudling was more to the point when he stated at a Unisa conference in 1977 that 'The argument about the Cape Sea Route was becoming a little out of date. It might be important in a major war but a major war of the past, not one of the future.'<sup>23</sup>

Major Rex Simpson has not quite followed this approach to its logical conclusion in his article on 'The Cape Sea Route.'<sup>24</sup> Major Simpson dwells on the undeniable difficulties a major military power, let alone South Africa, would have in defending the Cape Route in the event of war. He

points to the enormous area that would have to be patrolled, the extreme size and vulnerability of the supertankers, the threat to South African ports themselves. (He might have added the extreme difficulty in the detection of submarines off the Cape owing to differences in temperature and direction of currents.)

The point is, surely, that the traffic around the Cape could not be disrupted short of triggering a major war involving the superpowers, and in the event of such a war, apart from the difficulties mentioned by Major Simpson, the use of nuclear weapons would render the defence of the Cape Sea Route quite irrelevant. Bill Johnson, author of 'How long will South Africa survive,' neatly sums up this viewpoint. When questioned on the strategic importance of the Cape Route, he replied:

*'The usual scenario is of a 'strategy of denial', based on interdiction of sea traffic round the Cape by Soviet submarines. Such thinking is 19th or even 18th century. The very first ship sinking would constitute a major act of war and the missiles would be in the air before long, making interruptions of sea traffic quite irrelevant.'*<sup>25</sup>

Much the same logic is employed in an article in Africa Report in September–October 1976, which seeks to prove that the 'Cape Route argument' is 'patently nonsensical'. It is worth quoting extensively:

*'Many military analysts, among them Lawrence Martin and Jack Spence, have rejected it ( the Cape Route argument). They do not believe that there is any real threat to the Cape Route from Soviet Forces in the Indian Ocean. Such forces are hardly likely to pose a threat in the event of a general war in which nuclear weapons are used. There would be no point in it. In war the 'problem' of securing the Cape would become a minor and an almost irrelevant matter. Interferences with western oil supplies from the Gulf could be undertaken more effectively at the source by the destruction of wells and pipelines, closer to the Soviet Union and with a wider flexibility of methods and actions. And short of a general war the Soviet Union, even if she had the capacity to do so, would hardly be likely to 'cut' the Cape Route. For that act would be tantamount to declaring war. It would inevitably bring sharp and massive Western retaliation. Therefore,*

*below the threshold of war, any attempt to stop all western ships around the Cape would seem pointless. It is difficult, in consequence, to see how the argument can be taken seriously . . .*<sup>26</sup>

The language is more violent than Johnson's, but the essential argument is the same. The importance of the Cape Sea Route, in terms of sheer statistics and the logistics of the West's supply routes, is not questioned. What is questioned, is the Soviet Union's intention of ever disrupting this route in peace-time, and the necessity for her to disrupt it in the event of war.

### **South Africa's approach to the issue**

In the light of these arguments it is evident that SA's policy in the first half of the decade of railing against the West for its neglect of the Cape Sea Route, was always likely to prove non-productive. Whether because it had carefully thought the issue out, or whether because it was guided by the dictates of political expediency, the West turned a deaf ear (for all practical purposes) to South Africa's repeated warnings.<sup>27</sup> Mr P. W. Botha was, in retrospect, pursuing the wrong tack when he said in a speech before the Afrikaanse Sakekamer at George on 27 January 1976

*'We have long since held that the Republic of South Africa was the guardian of the cross-roads of the oceans, and that she was indispensable to the global trade and strategy of the free West . . .*<sup>28</sup>

It is easy, one might say, to talk from the position of hindsight. But that South African policy makers themselves recognized that a change in approach was needed, became clear in the first half of 1978. The Western failure to intervene in Angola, and the subsequent ousting of Dr Kissinger, probably convinced most of the South African decision-makers that the West no longer regarded the defence of the Cape Sea Route as all — important — certainly not in peace-time. In any event, partly to test the West's reaction once and for all, and partly because she herself had decided it was the only sensible course to pursue, South Africa, in a spate of announcements in the autumn of 1978, declared herself no longer willing to guard the Cape Sea Route on behalf of the West.

On 8 April 1978, Mr P. W. Botha said in an interview that 'in future the safety of the West's tanker and cargo fleets would be its own responsibility in the southern Indian and Atlantic Oceans. We have been forced into this situation by the arms boycott against us and from now on our attitude can be summed up like this — no arms, no service.'<sup>29</sup> The switch in policy, for practical reasons alone, was inevitable. In the wake of the UN's arms embargo against South Africa, France had refused to deliver two Agosta-class attack submarines and two corvettes to the South African Navy. South Africa's ageing President-clan frigates and Shackleton maritime reconnaissance aircraft were quite inadequate for the enormous task of patrolling the southern sea lanes. In the same interview Mr Botha spelt out the new role assigned to the navy. 'From now on South Africa's Navy will be specially geared and designed for coastal defence and protecting the sovereignty of home waters.' Mr Botha's views were closely echoed by General Magnus Malan and Vice-Admiral Walters. On April 8, 1978 Vice-Admiral Walters in the course of a speech stated 'What it comes down to — and there is no use in talking around it — is that the Western world will have to ensure the safety of merchant traffic and strategic minerals around the Cape Sea Route itself.'<sup>30</sup> South Africa, in short, was to revert to a navy of 'little ships' once more, with priority being given to fast, missile-carrying patrol boats. South Africa even hinted that the Silvermine communications and intelligence centre would no longer automatically provide the West with free information.<sup>31</sup>

There were therefore good practical reasons for the switch in policy. More important, though, was probably the realization on South Africa's part that changing circumstances had altered the strategic position of the Cape Sea Route. In peace-time, defence of the Cape Sea Route was unnecessary. In wartime it became superfluous. The almost total lack of Western reaction to South Africa's change in policy can only have confirmed South Africa's original doubts about the West's commitment to the Cape Route.

### **Conclusion**

Does this mean that from the point of view of her strategic importance, South Africa has lost all leverage on the West? The answer is quite plainly no. The Cape Sea Route is never likely to entirely lose its significance. In any conventional war of the future its defence would still be of paramount importance.

It should also be noted that the question of the Cape Sea Route itself is related to another, more important issue. If the Russians were ever to gain control over Southern Africa, it would not only be the Cape Sea Route that would be threatened. The West's access to the vital raw materials of Southern Africa would also be compromised. In the long run, this is a more important factor to the West than the safety of the Cape Sea Route. The West might be able to survive the disruption of sea traffic around the Cape. It is doubtful whether the West in the long run could easily survive the loss of access to Southern Africa's strategic raw materials without a major crisis. In the words of Dr Kunert:

*'America and Europe would be in a greatly disadvantaged position if Southern Africa were drawn into the Soviet orbit. Unimpeded USA access to the subcontinent's raw materials is critical, even vital. A recent USA study concludes 'The United States is strategically more vulnerable to a long term chromium embargo than to an embargo of any other mineral resource including petroleum.'*

As for Europe:

*'The interdiction of supplies from Southern Africa would be fundamentally destructive to NATO's capability and offensive power. Its high degree of dependence on strategic raw materials has long since been singled out as the Western Alliance System's Achilles Heel.'*<sup>32</sup>

South Africa is still as vitally important to the West as it has ever been, perhaps even more so, but for reasons not entirely connected with its pivotal position as regards the Cape Sea Route. In the view of Carel Birkby, 'A fresh evaluation of the 'Cape Sea Route' might well be directed not to its seas but to its soils — the South African Strategic Area.'<sup>33</sup> It would therefore be to South Africa's advantage to abandon the Cape Sea Route card — in Johnson's words an 'old fashioned naval fantasy' — and concentrate on its position as a major supplier of raw materials to the West.

Therein lies South Africa's real importance. There are encouraging signs that this shift in perception has already taken place.

## FOOT-NOTES

1. Believing, rightly or wrongly, that South Africa's unique position straddling this major trade route placed the Republic in a position powerful enough to 'blackmail' the West in crucial negotiations affecting mutual interests.
2. *Unpublished Pointer*, (C. J. Nöthling and M. L. Japhet: South Africa and the Indian Ocean.)
3. *Byvoegsel tot SALVO*, Vol 3, No 8, January 1979 (D. Prinsloo: Changes in US Policy Towards SA) p 8.
4. *South African Journal of Science*, Vol 73 No 8, August 1977.
5. *Newcastle Advertiser*, 28.1.1976 (Mr P. W. Botha on the Cape Sea Route.)
6. *Defence Africa*, Vol 5 No 3, May 1979 (N. Dodd: The Strategic Importance of the Cape Sea Route).
7. *To The Point*, 24 June 1976 (D. Barnes Interview Lord Chalfont: Internal change and the Cape Sea Route).
8. *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16, No 2 1978 (C. Birkby: The Cape Sea Route) p 50.
9. *Defence Africa*, Vol 5, No 3, May 1979 (Loc cit).
10. *United States Naval Institute*, September 1976 (N. Dodd: *The South African Navy: Guardian of the Crossroads*) p. 94.
11. *Eastern Province Herald*, 12.7.1976 (Cape Sea Route Protection).
12. *Beeld*, 17.1.1976 (Kissinger vra Navo-hulp).
13. *To The Point*, Vol 6, No 25, 24.6.1977 (loc cit).
14. *Chronicle*, 26.11.1977.
15. *The Argus*, 12.12.1977 (Cape Oil Route of 'Capital Importance' — NATO Chief).
16. *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16, No 2, 1978 (loc cit) p 51.
17. *Defence Africa*, Vol 5, No 3, May 1979 (loc cit) p 9.
18. *Byvoegsel tot SALVO*, Vol 3, No 8, May 1979 (loc cit), p 9.
19. *Byvoegsel tot SALVO*, Vol 3, No 8, (loc cit), p 9.
20. *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16 No 2, 1978 (loc cit), p. 53.
21. *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16 No 2, 1978 (loc cit), p. 50.
22. *The Argus*, 29.11.1969 (Cape Route 'Not that Important').
23. *Rand Daily Mail*, 19.10.1977 (You can't blackmail the West Maudling tells SA).
24. *Cape Times*, 1.7.1977 (Simpson: The Cubans and the Cape Sea Route).
25. *To The Point*, Vol 6 No 25, 24.6.1977 (A. Spence interviews B. Johnson).
26. Extract quoted in *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16, No 2, 1978 (loc cit), p 51.
27. *Evening Post*, 31.12.1975 (Sir De Villiers Graaff: SA Duty to guard Cape Sea Route);  
*Evening Post*, 19.12.1975 (Botha warns over Angola).  
*Rand Daily Mail* (P. W. Botha: Help on Merit).  
*Sunday Tribune*, 27.3.1977 (Navy Chief Slams West over Cape Route).
28. *Newcastle Advertiser*, 28.1.1976 (loc cit).
29. *Natal Mercury*, 7.4.1978 (SA Tells West to defend Cape Sea Route).
30. *Eastern Province Herald*, 10.4.1978 (West's Ships 'Not SA Responsibility').
31. *To The Point*, Vol No, 19, 12 May 1978 (Navy pulls out of Cape Sea Route Patrols), p 39.
32. *South African Journal of African Affairs*, No 2, 1978. (D. T. Kunert: The Role of the Superpowers).
33. *Afrika Bulletin*, Vol 16, NO 2, 1978 (loc cit), p 53.