

Control of Seas

By the Associated Press

The biggest international conference in history may also be the most complex and will be beset by concern that although success will be hard to achieve, failure can spell disaster for the future of world stability.

A new dimension in global affairs takes shape as the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea opens in Caracas, Venezuela. Delegates from nearly all nations on earth will consider an agenda of 100 or more items, among them issues serious enough in the past to have impelled men to war. So a new phase of ocean politics begins.

The conference objective is to revise concepts now several centuries old and compose complex differences on such matters as economic and political sovereignty. The going will be tough.

The delegates will be groping for agreement toward a treaty against a backdrop of oil crisis and developing world shortages of food and raw materials.

Since that sharpens interest in mining and harvesting the seas for petroleum riches, metals vital to industry, and protein for the hungry, the situation heralds another phase of a swiftly developing clash between powerful "haves" and weak "have-nots." Yet, in the long run, failure to spell out workable rules as the need becomes more and more acute can mean future chaos.

A few examples of the conferees' major problems:

Seabed resources and fisheries: So much is at stake that even though the major powers hope for a treaty, they may be years trying to work out a pact acceptable to the majority.

As land resources are used up, the sea becomes vastly more important as the sources of immense amounts of oil and gas and such metals as copper, cobalt, nickel, and manganese, although at present only the United States and a few other advanced countries have the technology needed to exploit all this. Conflicting concepts of sovereignty over seabed and coastal waters will complicate matters enormously.

Territorial waters: This troublesome issue also affects the prospects for agreement on exploitation of the seas' resources. How far out does sovereignty of a coastal nation extend?

There never was a universal standard. The traditional three-mile limit was simply the distance an 18th century cannonball could reach from shore.

At sea law conferences in 1958 and 1960, the United States opposed Soviet and Chinese Communist attempts to establish a 12-mile limit, but things have changed radically since and national needs have overtaken ideology.

The Americans and Russians now can agree on a 12-mile limit, but many a developing "third world" nation with seacoasts, plus nations like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Norway, Iceland, Spain, and some others claim wide offshore control. Some Latin Americans claim a 200-mile limit. China, seeking to make capital, denounces the concept of "the open sea," supports the 200-mile concept,

and insists the superpowers are including so that their ships can operate close to the shores of weaker nations.

The United States, the U.S.S.R., France, Japan, and Britain want the fullest maritime freedom possible. An eventual compromise may involve distinction between an "economic zone" and the territorial sea, giving coastal nations a large measure of economic control while navigation remains free to all beyond 12 miles.

The world's straits: The doctrine of passage needs revision in the light of all the conflicting claims and interests, but important maritime nations, notably the superpowers, will resist strongly anything that might hinder free passage through straits. The world has about 100 of them, although only a relative few are of major importance.

More than one nation commands the coast in the cases of many a strait. In any case, for individual nations or groups of nations to assert exclusive control of such waters could threaten the peace of the area in question. For example, the 20-mile-wide Dover Strait sees 400,000 merchant ships annually. Gibraltar, nine miles wide,

accommodates 150,000 ships a year. The Malacca Strait, between Indonesia and Malaysia, is enormously important to a nation like Japan. Bab el Mandeb, 15 miles wide, commands the entrance to the Suez Canal, soon to be reopened. Hormuz, 50 miles across, is vital to Persian Gulf oil traffic.

Environment and pollution: Recent experience shocked nations into fearing pollution of the seas to the forefront of universal problems. The seas' bounty is threatened not only by overfishing, but by a variety of dangerous pollutants, some from shipping, some from land-based industry. Toxic substances like mercury, lead, and DDT severely damage the sea's food resources. So does oil spill or pumping of ballast from tankers or the dumping of solid wastes, or the outflow from sewage plants, and so on.

But the scope of controls and the machinery for enforcement can stir up wasps' nests in a world where national sovereignty as opposed to supernational authority remains a touchy subject.