

Teacher's Notes – Strategic Straits

Big idea: Students need to learn latitude and longitude. On that point, we probably all agree. But some teachers seem to think that the way to teach the global coordinate system is all by itself, often with an imaginary continent full of cutesy names. That is a missed opportunity. The focus of this lesson is on some geopolitical hotspots that could be in the headlines at any time.

Subordinate objectives:

- to learn the locations of twelve strategic straits.
- to evaluate a strategic strait by looking at the movement of one key commodity, petroleum

Possible setup information: An oil tanker is a big, slow, and very tempting target. Once it gets out on the open ocean, it can be hard to find, because the ocean is so big. But the tankers that carry oil from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Russia have to go through some narrow straits, often called chokepoints, in order to get to Europe, Japan, Korea, and the United States. These straits are places where the world oil supply chain is very vulnerable to disruption by terrorists.

Possible additional or alternative setup: Some of the major sea battles in history – including the Spanish Armada – were fought in some of the narrowest areas in the ocean, the straits between continents or islands.

Vocabulary: chokepoint latitude longitude strait trade

Procedure: The worksheet is the core of the activity. Like other activities in this book, this can be done as an individual worksheet, small-group activity, whole-class discussion (with or without a computer projector), or takehome project. It works better when linked with a larger task that justifies doing a worksheet like this in order to master the skill involved. Those larger tasks might include a study of historical conflicts or present-day terrorist risks.

Answers: Hormuz – Iran, Oman Malacca – Malaysia, Indonesia
Bab el-Mandeb – Yemen, Saudi Arabia Suez – Egypt Bosphorus – Turkey
Gibraltar – Spain, Morocco Panama – Panama Florida – Florida, Cuba
Dover – England, France Korea – Korea, Japan Kattegat – Denmark, Sweden
Bering – Alaska, Russia Answers also available on the clickable pdf

Extensions and supplements: Students can design posters or powerpoint presentations to describe the historic importance and present-day threats in each strait. Several of these chokepoints are widely regarded as among the most dangerous places in the world.

A parallel objective is to enhance student ability to “translate” between several different locational vocabularies – the mathematical coordinates of the latitude-longitude grid, and the topological statements that identify the location of a strait as between a named pair of countries or other political entities (or as the connection between specific oceans or seas).

Complication: A GIS can put a buffer zone along the shore and show how a strait can be an area of dispute among two or more countries. Most of the strategic straits of the world are narrower than the modern 200-mile zone of jurisdiction for commercial fishing or oil exploration; some are narrower than the 12-mile and 3-mile limits that define the military jurisdiction of a country. The CD for Teaching Geography has a unit on the Law of the Sea. The notion of a buffer zone is an application of the mode of spatial thinking that we call “aura” in this book – it is one of the most important forms of applied geography, with special application in international diplomacy.