Preparing for the Next Mass Migration: Lessons from the Past and Recommendations for the Future

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In 1995 over 60,000 migrants from both Haiti and Cuba attempted to reach the United States through maritime means, primarily vastly overcrowded sailboats and rafts. While it is unclear how many died in the attempt to reach the United States, the vast number were rescued via a huge inter-agency effort led by the Coast Guard and Navy. In 2006, it was feared that a migration on this scale was imminent due to failing health of President Castro. But much had changed since the 1990s; the strategic migration plan—Operation Vigilant Sentry—did not reflect the formation of DHS or the massive organizational and interagency shift that had occurred since 9/11. After an extensive inter-agency planning effort, the strategy was updated to reflect the new operational reality; fortunately, the threat of a new mass migration subsided.

Ten years later, the problem of maritime migration not only remains likely in our hemisphere due to political and economic unrest in South and Central America, but is also becoming a global phenomenon.

The History

Maritime migration has always been a consistent, global historical norm. This is perfectly understandable; the sea is the great global highway, and transport of goods and people on the sea is universal. The United States has experienced three mass migrations in the past 30 years, the size and scope of which are indicative of the problem; almost 200,000 migrants were rescued. Strategically, these events shared a number of common characteristics. Each was predicated by a significant political event, either the change (or perceived) change of policy by national governments or potential host nations. In each, migrant groups en masse perceived an opportunity for exploitation. Although this perception was often false (such as the rumor that the U.S. was changing its stance on accepting migrants, a significant driver in Haiti in 1994), the result was still the same. In general migrants were poor and almost completely ignorant or unaware of seafaring, creating an enormous safety of life at sea issue.

The Lessons

The overwhelming number of lessons learned during the mass migrations of the 1990s focused on effective command and control and the rapid establishment of a strategic process that effectively handled each phase of the migrant process (interdiction, transport, disposition). A centralized interagency command and control system, ideally at sea, was

essential to migrant interdiction and rescue. This was effective in three areas:

Interdiction: Strategic interdiction is all about getting as many afloat assets to the region as quickly as possible. But simply “flooding” the area with assets wasn’t enough. During the Haitian and Cuban migrations this was conducted through the implementation of the “CTU” (Commander Task Unit) concept, a modification of the Navy Task Force model tailored for drug and migrant interdiction, an effective planning and execution organization for interagency support.

Transport: The number of people in danger and the speed required to rescue them often resulted in mass overloading; in one case, for example, a 270ft ship had well over 800 migrants onboard before it was forced to leave the area. This mass overloading was the norm rather than the exception. To address this, the CTU designated the largest afloat asset available—in this case, a Navy amphibious ship—to act as a roaming “bus” in the OpArea to load on migrants from rescue units who could then continue operations. This tactic was subsequently institutionalized in the follow on migrant plan for 2006.

Disposition: The 1990s mass migrations relied on GTMO for the disposition of migrants; as noted, camps where migrants could be housed and fed until final status was determined. Logistically, this was an enormous effort, coordinated by the establishment of a Joint Task Force (JTF) specifically designed to house, feed, and provide medical care for tens of thousands of migrants. This ultimately was a great success. However, it should be noted that the establishment of facilities at GTMO was a political decision and by far the most important one in terms of long term success.

The Future

These lessons were ultimately updated in the new migrant plan, Operations Vigilant Sentry (OVS) in 2007. But today, there are significant “game changers” that must be considered. These are primarily technological; in 1994 forces assigned for rescue and interdiction had the vast technological edge in the OpArea in terms of speed, mobility, and the ability to conduct command, control and communication. This is no longer the case. Today smugglers can coordinate with speed and sophistication previously undreamed of, including communication, navigation, and ability to control “battle rhythm through the internet.

Given the speed inherent in a mass migration and its potential scope, it is imperative that supply and training for a mass migration be part of the planning cycle and TTP (training, tactics and procedures) for today’s fleet of Coast Guard and Navy vessels. Rescue of migrants is a dangerous operation, and transport of large numbers of migrants must be designed and practiced by each class of vessel. Vessels of all services must have a fundamental understanding of the mechanics of mass migration as it is highly likely that literally anything that floats will be sent to the scene of disaster. Readiness at the tactical level is key for overall success.

Ultimately, we must be familiar with our strategy and work to keep it current with modern

trends. Predicting the future is, of course, the classic challenge for any strategist. But analyzing the classic elements of mass migration can be of great benefit. We know that migration by sea is becoming increasingly common in areas of political instability. We know that mass migration is often driven by rumor and conjecture, something that is easily spread through the internet. And we know that, in general, most nations are willing to address it if there is a unifying goal of saving life at sea. This should be our focus. The author may be reached at WattsR3@ndu.edu .

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