From the earliest days of its history, the United States has relied on the bounty and opportunity of the seas for sustenance, for economic development, for defense and for communication and interaction with the rest of the world. Today, as the world's strongest maritime power and a leader of global maritime commerce, the United States has a compelling national interest in a stable international legal regime for the oceans. The time has come to take action to protect and advance the nation's national security, economic and environmental interests in the maritime domain -- through accession to the Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The convention entered into force in 1994 and now has more than 150 parties. It supports and strengthens navigational rights essential to global mobility and it clarifies and confirms important oceans freedoms. U.S. accession to the convention would put the maritime security and economic rights the nation enjoys on the firmest legal footing.

Accession makes sense from a national security perspective. This is a critical time for America and our friends and allies -- faced with a wider and more complex array of global and transnational security challenges than ever before. Effectively meeting those challenges requires unimpeded maritime mobility -- the ability of our forces to respond any time, anywhere, if so required.

The convention recognizes and supports the rights of transit and innocent passage -- it confirms that there is no need to ask each country along the way for a permission slip. That freedom is already widely accepted in practice, but the convention provides a welcome legal certainty -- a certainty and confidence that the nation owes to our brave men and women in uniform, as they deploy around the world to protect and defend freedom and liberty.

Accession also has great value from an economic perspective. In the first place, the freedom of navigation the convention helps ensure is as critical to global economic development as it is to security considerations.

The United States would also receive direct economic benefit from the rights the convention provides to coastal nations to regulate and protect their offshore marine areas. Specifically, the convention recognizes the sovereign rights of coastal nations over natural resources like oil, gas and minerals, in "exclusive economic zones" out to 200 nautical miles, and in rigorously defined continental shelf regions. The United States stands to gain considerably, since its Arctic shelf could potentially extend out to 600 nautical miles.

As a corollary, the convention recognizes coastal states' rights to extend over their respective maritime zones specific environmental protections -- like regulating fishing stocks and ocean
pollution. Assigning and supporting responsibility in this way could markedly improve prospects for the protection of the global environment.

Accession makes sense from the perspective of U.S. leadership on the world stage. Joining the convention would give the nation a seat at the table, a voice in the debates, to help shape the future development of oceans law, policy and practice. Accession would also give the United States better opportunities to keep a close watch on other nations' efforts to exercise their rights under the law of the sea and to counter excessive claims if necessary.

Finally, accession would powerfully and publicly reiterate the nation's commitment to the rule of law as the basis for policy and action. It would make U.S. leadership more credible and compelling, in important multi-national efforts like the Proliferation Security Initiative -- designed to counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other dangerous materials. And it would strengthen the general argument in favor of more robust international partnership in all domains? partnerships essential to meeting today's global and transnational security challenges.

For all of these reasons, President Bush has urged the Senate to act favorably on U.S. accession to the Law of the Sea Convention, during this session of Congress. It is simply the right thing to do, to support America's national interests, and to lay an effective foundation for the use and protection of the world's oceans for generations to come.

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