NSF-OCE guidelines for fleet security: Implications for MARGINS research

NSF-OCE contained in their Fall/Winter 2001 Newsletter a very important statement about research ship safety and security. Some of the crucial statements contained in this document are reiterated below (the full document is available at http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02055/nsf02055_2.htm):

“Before submitting a proposal to NSF, Principal Investigators should carefully consider regions of potential danger when proposing a cruise strategy. Wherever possible, cruises should be planned to avoid regions for which research vessels are not automatically insured through their existing global coverage insurance policies. These war exclusion zones are the coastal waters adjacent to countries with significant political instability or active warring factions”.

As this is not always possible, especially if we consider the interest of the Earth Science community to work in the northern Red Sea focus site of the Rupturing Continental Lithosphere Initiative, then we need to advance to the next level of procedures:

“Ship operators are responsible for the general safety of a cruise, which includes the ship, crew and science complement. Thus NSF does not require operators to sail to regions or enter ports they deem unsafe. NSF will not support cruises in areas where war risk insurance is unavailable, or is available at excessive premiums”. Further, in “sufficient time prior to ship scheduling meetings (which begin early in the summer of the year preceding the cruise), the ship operator will be asked to indicate willingness to undertake the planned cruise. If the operator agrees to schedule the cruise, NSF will make a final determination to support the cruise based on (1) a security review made in consultation with relevant federal offices (Office of Naval Intelligence, Maritime Administration of the Department of Transportation, US Coast Guard, Oceanographer of the Navy, State Department), and (2) additional cost of insurance, if available, and cost of any additional security measures recommended. Any additional costs will be weighed in the context of other program fiscal constraints. Cruise safety will be reevaluated prior to ship sailing, and the chief scientist should have a well defined alternate cruise plan in case last minute changes are required in the cruise schedule”.

Irrespective of these procedures and protocols or PI’s interests to work in problematic regions, NSF-OCE “currently advises reviewers and panelists not to introduce issues of security as a criterion in the proposal merit review. [NSF] recognizes that the security status of regions can change rapidly, and most proposed cruises would occur a year or two beyond the proposal review period. Proposals recommended for funding that require cruises to locations considered a security risk, such as those areas not covered automatically by the worldwide insurance of the ship operator, will be held until a determination is made regarding insurance and security. If parts of the proposal are independent of the cruise, those parts can be funded”.

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In terms of proposed research work in the northern Red Sea, the Sudanese Government remains a problem in terms of the U.S. State Department. Thus for ship security and safety and insurance reasons alone, it would seem prudent for the MARGINS community to constrain any research within the northern Red Sea to areas under Egyptian and Saudi Arabian jurisdiction. Quoting from NSF-MARGINS, the “NSF-OCE policy vis a vis the Red Sea is the same as any other area with fleet security considerations. Northern Red Sea proposals can be submitted for the next deadline and they will be reviewed only on the basis of accepted scientific criteria for review (i.e., without the security as an issue)”.

With respect to the upcoming November 1, 2002 proposal deadline, NSF-MARGINS is expecting to receive well-written, collaborative proposals for all initiatives, including proposals for the Gulf of Suez/northern Red Sea region (excluding The Sudan).