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Why Do We Need to Study Naval Power as a Tool of Statecraft?

Contested freedom of navigation, welcome back. Absent from mainstream debates about the relevance of military power in international politics since the end of the Cold War, until recently naval power had come to embody the linear progression underwriting Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history.'¹ Since the United States had no major enemy left to fight as the Soviet navy faded into the twilight of history, freedom of navigation stood without threats. The ocean had become the staging platform for the uncontested projection of power of the U.S. and its allies. Exploiting command of the sea in support of expeditionary campaigns from the Balkans to the Middle East replaced Cold War concerns over securing sea control in the North Atlantic or the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Reflecting upon this doctrinal transformation in the mid-1990s, Geoffrey Till remarked that the emergence of requirements for "good order at sea" to manage resource depletion and environmental challenges further added a new dimension to an overall 'post-modern' shift in naval affairs.²

Today this is no longer the case. The doctrinal pendulum is swinging back towards the relevance of ensuring freedom of navigation in peacetime and maintaining sea control in war. This is the core argument that Jonathan Caverley and Peter Dombrowski set out to debate in this special issue of *Security Studies*. In the introduction to a body of six essays they point out the core reasons calling for a greater maritime focus in security studies. First, in addressing the defining current competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), the role of naval power is remarkably marginal, if not absent in mainstream security studies literature. This is striking, Caverley and Dombrowski argue, since the most likely "friction points" between the established American hegemon and the rising Chinese

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 2020 [1992]).

² Geoffrey Till, "Maritime Strategy in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17:1 (1995): 176-199, here 194-196; also, on the idea of post-modern navies, see Geoffrey Till, "Maritime Strategy in a Globalizing World," *Orbis* 51:4 (2007): 569-575.

competitor are at sea.³ Second, security studies' scholarship has used naval examples to explore issues such as nuclear stability or theoretical constructs such as balancing. Yet, most theories remain developed on the basis of continental/territorial or nuclear-oriented research, raising issues in terms of their applicability at sea (582).

Caverley and Dombrowski propose an analytical shift in the agenda and the articles in the issue endeavour to showcase how to do so methodologically and thematically. Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay, and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell lead the charge with two essays drawing upon a quantitative methodology to explore how naval capabilities affect foreign policy, and maritime claims effect risks of escalation. Given the centrality of the latter issue to regional security in key theatres like the East and South China Seas, and the importance of the former in debates over blue-water capabilities and Chinese international influence, these essays are a most welcome addition. In their paper, Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay⁴ critically confirm the long-held proposition by naval experts that navies can enhance a country's global presence, influence, and diplomacy. In turn, their data suggest a correlation between a state's enhanced opportunity for engagement through naval power and international instability. This is an important argument albeit one that seems to underestimate the difference between an increased capacity for policy action and the no less relevant circumstances to act. As recent naval scholarship explained, this distinction is crucial to naval diplomacy's ability to engage a variety of security stakeholders.⁵

A similar tension informs Sara McLaughlin Mitchell's essay.⁶ In the maritime literature, boundary delimitation disputes are distinguished from sovereignty claims over island features, the former concerning issues of economic gains whilst the latter entailing ownership of territory, however small, and a government's duty to defend it.⁷ In the paper, maritime claims are grouped together and this enables the author to make a strong case linking enhanced naval capabilities to governments' tendencies to opt for more coercive ways to stake their claims. In the East and South China Seas, developments in Chinese capabilities would generally support these findings. Yet, in the specific case of the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands, known in China as Diaoyu, the escalation of tensions preceded the Chinese build-up of relevant law-enforcement capabilities.⁸ How to explain this? McLaughlin Mitchell's argument about escalation risks in maritime disputes should be further tested against the distinction used in maritime literature. From this perspective,

³ Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, "Too Important to Be Left to the Admirals: The Need to Study Maritime Great-Power Competition," *Security Studies* 29:4 (2020) [hereafter *SS*]: 579-600, at 580.

⁴ Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, "The Influence of Sea Power on Politics: Domain- and Platform-Specific Attributes of Material Capabilities," *SS*: 601-636.

⁵ This point is well explained in Kevin Rowlands, *Naval Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁶ Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims," *SS*, 637-670.

⁷ Alessio Patalano, "Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea," *Asian Affairs* XLV:1 (2014): 34-54; Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives – China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review*, 64:4 (2011): 42-67; Patalano, "When Strategy is Hybrid and Not Grey: Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea," *The Pacific Review* 31:6 (2018): 811-839.

⁸ Todd Hall, "More Significance than Value: Explaining Developments in the Sino-Japanese Contest Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands," *Texas National Security Review* 2:4 (2019): 11-137; Alessio Patalano, 'What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands', *War on the Rocks* (blog), 10 September 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/#:~:text=In%20an%20unprecedented%20move%2C%20Chinese,to%20exercise%20law%2Denforcement%20powers.>

both essays are superbly thought-provoking in methodological terms, doing exactly what the issue intends to do: raise issues so that different disciplines can establish forms of dialogue to advance our understanding.

The second group of two essays tests, conversely, IR theories linking capabilities and posture to American grand strategy. Caverley and Dombrowski, and Paul van Hooft, take on two important debates within realism to reveal why naval power is uniquely differently within a national military apparatus in the way it contributes to national security. In realist literature, John Mearsheimer⁹ led the way in exploring this question by developing the notion of the ‘stopping power of water.’ The sea constitutes, the argument goes, a natural barrier to states’ ability to project power beyond national boundaries. However, authors like Barry Posen have suggested that this can be an advantage for those states pursuing a strategy of offshore balancing, using the sea as a protection to their territory and a conduit to decide how far they wish to intervene in international affairs to retain a dominant, if not hegemonic, position.¹⁰ Van Hooft’s article effectively challenges Posen’s proposition.¹¹ The political provisions needed to ensure the logistical needs for an effective global posture are simply incompatible with a strategy of limited engagement. For the United States, he argues, this is particularly true in maritime-centric theatres like the Indo-Pacific, in which the only viable options are to be ‘all in’ or ‘all out.’ This is a piece of fine scholarship that complements, integrates, and partly corrects Mearsheimer’s ‘stopping power’ idea whilst exposing the limits of Posen’s argument.

In a similar fashion, Caverley and Dombrowski add depth to the literature on capabilities and crisis stability.¹² They go well beyond the question of how orders of battles speak to specific intentions and whether and to what extent the action-reaction dynamics that are inherent to arms racing affect risks of escalation. They introduce the role of bureaucratic and doctrinal cultures as factors informing the preference of the U.S. navy preference for an offensive stance. These cultures convincingly explain why – against a context in which technology is shifting the offense-defence balance in favour of the latter – the U.S. navy continues to remain committed to a forward deployed posture. In so doing, the authors re-engineer the relevance of ‘strategic cultures’ through the specificities of naval bureaucratic politics and operational issues. Whether the U.S. navy’s posture, coupled with Chinese military expansion, makes escalation at sea more likely is a different matter, one that invites further investigation. Caverley and Dombrowski rightly point out how the Cold War examples of the (add date) blockade of Cuba and the standoff in the Mediterranean during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War were dangerous incidents. Yet, these were maritime encounters in support of crises ashore. In today’s Indo-Pacific, unfettered access to the sea is a key issue. Does the different nature of the objective affect escalation management and the role of naval power in the pursuit of statecraft? Ian Bowers noted that of the numerous naval engagements between the two Koreas on the North Limit Line over several decades, some of which with loss of life, none escalated into open war.¹³ Caverley and Dombrowski have set the stage for another important debate.

The last two essays offer informative answers to the above question. Evan Braden Montgomery makes a compelling case about how one of the ways in which the United States can mitigate challenges to its global posture is by diversifying its

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

¹⁰ Barry R. Posen, “Command of Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28:1 (2003): 5-46.

¹¹ Paul van Hooft, “All-in or All-out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes,” *SS*, 701-729.

¹² Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, “Cruising for a Bruising: Maritime Competition in an Anti-Access Age,” *SS*: 671-700.

¹³ Ian Bowers, “Escalation at Sea: Stability and Instability in Maritime East Asia” *Naval War College Review* 71:4, (2018): 45-65, 51.

strategy.¹⁴ He argues that the United States does not need to be able to implement a denial strategy on a global scale to retain its dominant position. Rather, in areas like the Middle East less costly options such as strategies of punishment via blockade against actors like Iran may be more desirable, so that denial postures can be pursued in the Indo-Pacific. Montgomery's approach draws upon an in-depth examination of the link between the value of 'geographic space' and the development of strategy. In so doing, he takes an important step in reversing what Or Rosenboim defined as a process of marginalisation of geopolitics and political geography in the development of international relations in the 1950s.¹⁵ Today, essays like this send a strong message of how that original choice is being corrected.

Fiona Cunningham's contribution to the issue is yet another enlightening example of how fruitful the dialogue between maritime and security studies can be.¹⁶ She similarly delves into the options that naval power offers to national policy, reviewing the case for a distant blockade as an option to coerce China in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing upon the American experience in the Maritime Interception Operation (MIO) to enforce United Nations sanctions on Iraq before the first Gulf War, Cunningham develops a model for a blockade of the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok straits. In examining differences and similarities between the two cases, her essay considers a minimum period of six months to elicit an effect on China and develops the requirements for capabilities in order to achieve 25% or 50% intercepts. Cunningham masters the different variables affecting the implementation of a blockade to produce a highly informative piece of research. The result is striking in that a blockade against China would be a very demanding affair, but also one that would force China to escort its shipping or escalate and choose to attack American picket lines or bases. As she put it, a blockade would test the "patience and willingness of Chinese leaders to absorb costs in warfare" presenting an opportunity for a continued process of political negotiation (768).

Taken altogether, this issue is likely to become an intellectual lighthouse in the process of the reintegration of the study of naval power within the broader field of security studies. Yet, future research will have to engage further in providing definitions to guide the use of vocabulary such as 'naval' and 'maritime,' 'seapower' and 'sea power.' In his most recent work, Andrew Lambert argues that there is a difference between seapower states and states with considerable 'sea,' or naval, power. The United States – in his view – represents the most evident example of the latter, a super continental power with considerable maritime forces; a small "group of second- and third-rank powers, from Britain and Denmark to Japan and Singapore" embodies the former. "(T)hese states are disproportionately engaged with global trade, unusually dependent on imported resources, and culturally attuned to maritime activity."¹⁷ For Lambert, a crucial point is that seapower states are not defined by the ability to afford maritime dominance. Rather, their geography makes them dependent on the sea to survive and thrive as sovereign states; as a result of such dependency, their elites elect to create a shared political "consciousness" that bind national security to the requirements of an export-oriented economic outlook.¹⁸ Seapower states do pursue naval power but the extent of such a pursuit is dependent on above-mentioned

¹⁴ Evan Braden Montgomery, "Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline," *SS*, 769-796.

¹⁵ Or Rosenboim, "The Value of Space: Geopolitics, Geography and the American Search for International Theory in the 1950s," *The International History Review* 42:3 (2020): 639-655.

¹⁶ Fiona S. Cunningham, "The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a US-China Conflict," *SS*: 730-768.

¹⁷ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires, and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 7.

¹⁸ Lambert, *Seapower States* 7-9.

domestic and security circumstances. Their ultimate objective is stability and avoidance of war to allow for greater prosperity.

In this special issue, the authors used different vocabulary to express different ideas, but greater clarity on definitions matters to maritime competition in two crucial ways. First, Lambert's category of seapower states introduces the role of alliances in both managing risks of escalation and shaping the security environment in a way that enhances stability. How can maritime alliances make a difference in peacetime competition? What is needed for them to produce positive effects on stability? This is a subject that is relevant to all the essays in this issue but that remained outside of its scope. Second, naval competition co-exists with, and more often than not is intertwined with, maritime security. Indeed, for actors across the Indo-Pacific – from seapower states like Japan to small maritime states in the South Pacific – issues of good order at sea and environmental management are as important to national security as the avoidance of naval conflict. What does that say about maritime competition? How can addressing maritime security challenges inject greater resilience in regional stability? These questions are not aimed at dismissing the saliency of major-power competition; they offer a crucial opportunity nonetheless to explore the ways to constrain and defuse the risks of conflict. In all, this special issue is a powerful reminder that in peacetime naval power is a primary tool of statecraft, one which today demands much greater study in order for its influence in international politics to be fully understood. The challenge is on.

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