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Seapower for the 21st Century - Prospects and Challenges av professor Geoffrey Till
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Introduction: The Experience of Seapower
Seafaring began four and a half thousand years ago in the Red Sea and the Gulf. We have historical records of ships bringing "wood from foreign lands" [probably the Malabar coast of India] to Dilmun [modern Bahrain]

From that time on seapower was central to the rise and fall of countless cities and empires throughout the Indian ocean region, creating at its height [about 1400 AD] an Islamic empire all round the Indian Ocean loosely linked and interdependent through a network of sea-based trading. Typically, it all came to an end of the 15th Century with the arrival of the Portuguese. Benefiting from superior technology [in particular the use of the nail, which allowed the construction of robust warships able to cope with the heavy weather encountered in deep sea sailing and also with the shock of modern naval artillery] the Portuguese swept all before them and Islamic seapower collapsed for two hundred years.

This kind of experience echoes in other parts of the world too, for example medieval China and much of the far East. And in Europe too of course.

Processing the Experience

All this produced a vast store of seafaring experience that has been codified into maritime strategy, a set of ideas and beliefs about the importance of power at sea, about what nations have to do in order to increase and defend it, and about what happens when they lose it.

Appropriately, one of the first was a writer in the Arab World, Ahmad bin Majid who in 1489 wrote "A Book of Profitable Things concerning the First Principles and Rules of navaigation" and others too around the world but they been overshadowed by two westerners, the American Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Briton, Sir Julian Corbett.

Writing at the beginning of this century, they both concluded that the essential secret of maritime success lay in the recognition of its advantages as a means of transportation. Sending goods by sea was faster, cheaper and safer than doing so by land. Countries that had that capacity were therefore likely to prosper in peace. Likewise, the ability to transport military power around the sea and to project it ashore where the enemy was weak or unprepared was such a huge strategic advantage that countries who could do it were likely to prevail in war, or at least in those wars where the enemy's vital spots could be reached from the sea. Since they would therefore prosper in peace and prevail in war, the maritime powers would naturally tend to dominate world developments, concluded Mahan. Seapower he thought was the main material element in the rise and fall of nations.

Mahan, Corbett and countless other analysts of seapower have clarified the basic concepts of maritime strategy, although they each naturally have their own angles on the matter.

Briefly a country's maritime potential is a function of its geographic position and nature[which determines its interest in the sea, and the manner in which this interest is conducted] the nature of its society and systems of governance, its natural and industrial resources, its merchant fleet [both Mahan and Corbett would have been amazed now at the

way this element of seapower is de-emphasised by so many contemporary maritime analysts] and of course the relative nature and quality of naval forces.

The word "relative" needs to be emphasised here, for seapower is a relative thing. It is how much you hold in comparison with someone else that is the essential point, because it allows you to influence their behaviour more or less than they can influence yours.

This capacity may be greatly increased in wartime by the destruction of the enemy's main naval forces in battle, or if necessary by their neutralisation through blockade. Weaker navies will have to resort to some kind of naval defensive, although in some circumstances, even this can be strategically significant.

By these means do more or less successful navies hope to control the sea. In direct and proportionate consequence of their capacity to control the sea, they can use it to project military power ashore [while preventing the enemy from doing likewise] and defend their capacity to use the sea as a means of transportation for economic and military supplies and people, while attacking the enemy's.

Since overall victory has so often flowed from this set of capacities, the countries that have them can influence the behaviour of others even in peacetime without a shot being fired.

Thus traditional thinking on seapower up to the end of the 20th Century.

All Change for the 21st Century?

The development of seapower has always been subjected to political, technological and economic change. The Portuguese and their nails are a good example of the way that a particular technological development can revolutionise maritime practice.

Many analysts would now argue that we are living through a period or such radical change that they have recycled the old Soviet term the "Revolution in Military Affairs" and applied it to the sea, calling it a "Revolution in Maritime Affairs". The contention is that everything is so different now that we need a new set of Mahans and Corbetts to bring the theory up to date.

Most obviously, this need is said to derive from technological change brought about by the radical impact of Information Technology. Thus Admiral William Owens concept of "network centric warfare" - the notion that an integrated fleet can be controlled with the precision of single unit, whilst assuring its commander an endless variety of operational possibilities. Thus Admiral Cebrowski's idea of the "Streefighter Ship" exemplifying the hugely increased capacity of navies to project decisive precision fires deep inside the enemy's heartland. Less dramatically, there are many who would argue that technology has significantly increased the controllability and versatility of all naval forces, making them potentially even more useful than they were before.

But there is of course, a downside to all this. Sceptics argue that the new gadgetry might not work. Or that it can be turned to equal advantage by a resourceful adversary. Or that such an adversary might find other ancient counters [such as Saddam Hussein's 1300 sea-mines] or even effective non-technological responses. [Thus the challenge posed to the UN Sanctions system by the Ibn Khaldoon, on Dec 26th 1990, an Iraqi merchnatship taking deliberately

provocative action, full of women and peace activists being difficult, in the express hope of creating an embarrassing incident for Christmas]

This particular example didn't work but others like it tend to be used by sceptics of the RMA to argue that we have all been here before, and that what is called for is a process of continual amendment in our approach to sea-power, not of radical transformation – not an RMA but a MTR [a military-technical revolution] in the arcane terminology of Soviet analysts of this sort of thing.

There is also the view that the technological dimension of the RMA has been consistently over-played [particularly by the Americans] and the real revolution has come about in the political and economic sphere. The end of the Cold war, and everything that has gone with it is the real source of dramatic change for it has determined change not merely in how military force is used, but, much more importantly, in what it is used for.

Some Leading Issues for Modern Mariners

This paper will conclude with a brief review of three key issues for modern mariners as they move into the new century. One relates to times of peace, one to crises and one to conflict.

Peacetime: Wider Concepts of Maritime Security

The sea is becoming more important to the prosperity of nations, not less. Mahan was right, only more so. Its advantages for transportation are as important as ever they were. The same goes for the importance of the sea for energy, mineral and food supplies at a time when land-based sources are under increasing pressure. Even more fundamentally and although we don't fully understand the way it works, the ocean is not just a barometer but also a regulator of the world climate to the extent that the physical health of the planet may depend on the state of the ocean.

But sadly all this is under increasing threat from a diversity of sources. First, general pollution and the over exploitation of the world's fisheries, now facing catastrophic depletion in many areas. Second, criminal activity, in the shape of piracy, the smuggling of drugs, arms, people, and other illegitimate cargoes. Third, operational accident in seas becoming ever busier with competing uses and users.

Fourth, and this is a consequence of the above, our ability to use the sea is threatened though disputes over ownership that themselves reflect the importance it now has and desperate rivalries for vanishing resources.

For navies many of these are in the grey area, which aren't quite military and strategic but which they simply cannot ignore to the extent they did in the old days, when the exigencies of fighting for the First or Second World War, and preparing for the Third, forced them to become much more specialised in the art of war at sea than navies normally are. After all the whole existence of some nations my be threatened by rising sea levels, and you can't get much more strategic than that !

For all these reasons, maritime security is likely to embrace much more than it used to and is likely to require navies, or at least maritime forces, to expand the range and extent of their

activities beyond the traditionally military. Maritime resources being finite, this is likely to pose some difficult choices.

In time of Crisis : A Developing Future for Naval Diplomacy

For the time being navies are likely to have to prepare for situations that are more likely, but less intense than they used to be in the old Cold war days.

We face a world where the mobility, potential readiness, mobility in mass, access, flexibility adaptability and, importantly withdrawability of naval forces has always made them effective as diplomatic instruments, probably more than is the case with instruments of air or land warfare.

They can be used to reassure allies, to compel an adversary to do something he doesn't want to do, or to deter him from doing something he does want to.

In Desert Shield and Desert Storm, for example, the Sanctions campaign was a crucial way of "shaping the battle" politically by rallying the allies and convincing worried electorates around the world that indeed all means short of force had been tried to persuade Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait peacefully and that now nothing was left but lethal coercion. Providing the political conditions in which the military campaign could take place was arguably seapower's greatest contribution to the victory of 1991.

At the same time, the manner in which the participating ships engaged in the sanctions campaign showed considerable variety in position, tactics, rules of engagement. It made the campaign much more difficult operationally, but much more effective politically because it provided a flexible means by which participating states could signal their varying attachment to the cause. [It is important to remember that strategy is not simply about influencing the behaviour of adversaries; it is often at least as important to target that of your friends]. The same applied to the campaign of coercion, when it came.

Mariners may take heart from all this, and from the expectation that in a more complex world, the demand for their diplomatic services will probably increase, but there are dangers as well. Obviously such campaigns of maritime persuasion may not always work. Indeed it mostly has not, against Saddam Hussein. The rapid appearance of the US and other navies in the Gulf may have reassured the Saudis and other locals that help was indeed on the way [thereby persuading them to make their ports and airbases available] but it did not persuade Saddam to leave. Nor was he apparently impressed by the careful signalling intended by the US Navy's combined exercise with the UAE's navies shortly before the invasion. Perhaps Saddam didn't notice.

Paradoxically there is also the problem that because it generally does seem to work, politicians will get involved in distant situations where they shouldn't, simply because they can.

Tensions may well develop between the various roles that maritime forces are expected to perform. Nowadays, the military seem to have to be able to deliver everything from bombs to babies and this too may involve some difficult choices in procurement, training time, general resourcing and so on. The requirements of diplomacy, even of a militant kind, do not always sit well with the requirements of war. For example, convinced by the lessons of their

experience in Vietnam [as apparently confirmed in differing ways by Desert Storm and the recent Kosovo operation] the Americans have developed and all-or-nothing doctrine of "overwhelming force" for the use of lethal force. This may pose real problems for the Americans in matching of military means to political ends, and for effective cooperation with allies.

Conflict : Implications of an Expeditionary Future.

It is now pretty much agreed that since most of the world's troubles and instabilities develop in the littorals where they can be reached from the sea, the military planner's future will be expeditionary. Corbett with his emphasis on the projection of power ashore, on power from the sea, rather than a more Mahanian stress on power at sea, has come into his own. The emphasis on portable, mobile self-contained but decisive force packages was powerfully exemplified in Desert Storm, and has set something of a template.

With their dependence on sea control, on sea transportation and the projection of power ashore the requirement for such operations would seem to work to the future advantage of navies changing their shape and composition certainly, but pointing at the need for modern platforms and weaponry capable of sustaining high-intensity combat, on organic airpower, on all sorts of "precision fires" and on amphibious forces.

But there were lessons to be learned as well as plaudits to be gathered in the conduct of the naval side of Desert Storm. It is easy now to forget the initial reluctance to send the big carrier groups into such narrow waters. Unless they did, they couldn't defend northern Saudi Arabia or Kuwait; but if they did would their manoeuvring space not be squeezed by shallows, oil-rigs at a times when hot air demanded higher aircraft launch speeds. Would they not be vulnerable to hit and run attacks by Iraqi FPBs armed with missiles, or still more worryingly by aircraft passing through Iran's Zagros mountains and coming at them from behind ? The ease with which this threats were contained should not blind us to the potential dangers such situations inevitably confer, nor to the crucial reliance on the near total air superiority which the Coalition enjoyed. If the Iraqi airforce had been a touch more active, it might not have proved quite so easy to dispose of the Iraqi's FPBs. And the Coalition's forces did prove vulnerable to Iraqi mines after all.

Nor should the difficulties and risks of the crucial transportation effort be forgotten. The threat of Libyan Foxtrots, or mines in the Red Sea as in the mid 1980s proved a chimera, but might not have been. Non-flag shipping did prove available, and appropriate, but how wise is it to assume that this will always be the case ? Moreover, with the tendency towards containerisation will the necessary shipping exist unless navies follow the American lead in developing their own sea-lift fleet ?

When the British 7th Armoured brigade Group set off for the Gulf, 35,000 soldiers, 400,000 tons of equipment, munitions and supplies and 13,500 vehicles had to be taken to the operational area. The people often went by air taking 7 or 12 hours, the equipment by sea taking 21 or 22 days. On the way, lorries were lost overboard in bad weather in the Mediterranean. The complexity, difficulty and scale of this enterprise was considerable. So was the dependence on the excellent port facilities of the area, and sometimes the risks of using them. On Feb 15th 1991, a Scud landed at al-Jubayl, near a dockful of 8 ships, including a Hospital ship, and 5000 tons of 150mm artillery shells stacked near-by. Fortunately, the

Scud failed to explode. None of this is easy or can be taken for granted even when the resistance is minimal. Nor is it cheap.

Finally, navies will need to acknowledge that the future is also "joint". One of the greatest contributions that seapower made to the outcome of the conflict was through its capacity to pose an amphibious threat from the sea. In fact, a direct assault on Kuwait city would have been a particularly difficult and probably costly operation, but the allies launched a campaign of deliberate deception through such means as the well-publicised "Operation Imminent Thunder" in mid November which reinforced Iraqi anticipations by the conduct of large scale exercise landings in Saudi Arabia. This ploy tied down perhaps 7 Iraqi divisions in a futile attempt to guard the coast and meant that over 40% Iraqi guns were pointed out to sea.

But really what made this threat so effective was that it worked synergistically with what the other services were doing. Airpower made it difficult for the Iraqis to discover what was going on and to move their forces constructively. Modern landpower facilitated an unexpectedly rapid break though along the coast and the dramatic and surprise left hook by armoured forces 200 miles to the West. Operational Manoeuvre From the Sea is best delivered, it seems, in conjunction with the other services.

A reluctance to accept a consequential reduction in the traditional operational independence of naval forces and to integrate themselves fully into CENTCOM’s command structure, it is said, played a part in the 6 days delay in despatching MPS ships from Diego Garcia, to unnecessary inefficiencies in the targeting of the naval air campaign, and to the assessment of its operational effectiveness. The lesson needs to be taken to heart.

This is to deny neither the necessary distinctiveness of the sea service, nor the unique conditions under which it operates [so dramatically demonstrated recently in the tragedy of the Kursk] but it does suggest that the days of naval exclusivity are numbered.

Conclusions

Reverting finally to where we started, none of this would have surprised Sir Julian Corbett who went out of his way to encourage the Royal Navy to think constructively how it should best operate with the other services and who was very much aware of the primacy of land concerns and of the need to limit and match military actions with political objectives. It all makes one suspect that the future might in fact be rather less different than we often think it will be.