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FROM THE AGE OF SAIL TO THE PRESENT

Edited by
Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson



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Paul Kennedy is J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History at Yale University, USA.

Evan Wilson is an Assistant Professor in the John B. Hattendorf Center for Maritime Historical Research at the US Naval War College.

Cass Series: Naval Policy and History

Series Editor: Geoffrey Till

ISSN 1366-9478

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From the Age of Sail to the Present

**Edited by Paul Kennedy and
Evan Wilson**

First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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individual chapters, the contributors

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kennedy, Paul M., 1945– editor. | Wilson, Evan Mehaffey,
1984– editor.

Title: Navies in multipolar worlds : from the age of sail to the present /
Paul Kennedy, and Evan Mehaffey Wilson.

Other titles: From the age of sail to the present

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. |

Series: Naval policy and history | Includes bibliographical references
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020020124 (print) | LCCN 2020020125 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780367427221 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367855406 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Navies–History. | Naval history. | Naval art and science.

Classification: LCC VA40 .N29 2021 (print) | LCC VA40 (ebook) |

DDC 359/.03–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020124>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020125>

ISBN: 978-0-367-42722-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-85540-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

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Contributors

G.H. Bennett is Associate Professor (Reader) in History at the University of Plymouth and the author of more than a dozen books on the two world wars. He recently edited a collection of Admiralty dispatches during the Second World War. His most recent monograph is *The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity: British Naval Policy Under Lloyd George, 1919–22* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

Hu Bo is Director of the Center for Maritime Strategy Research and Research Professor at the Institute of Ocean Research, Peking University. He is also the Director of the *South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative* (SCSPI). He received his Ph.D. in Politics from the School of International Studies at Peking University and has extensive experience in policy analysis and consulting. His areas of specialization include maritime strategy, international security, and Chinese diplomacy. He has written three books and more than 40 journal articles and book chapters on topics related to China's maritime strategy and policy. His most recent books are *China's Sea Power in the Post Mahan Era* (Ocean Press, 2018) and *Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2019).

Brian C. Chao is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, under the supervision of Avery Goldstein, Michael C. Horowitz, and Alex Weisiger. His dissertation is entitled, "Winning Silver: Continental Great Powers and Naval Development." His research interests cover U.S. defense/foreign policy, international relations of East Asia, and naval power and geostrategy. He received his A.B. from Dartmouth in 2009 and his A.M. from Penn in 2016.

Timothy Choi is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Calgary, where his dissertation is entitled, "Maritime Strategies of the North: The Seapower of Smaller Navies in an Era of Broadened Security," which compares the development of Danish, Norwegian, and Canadian maritime forces within the context of international maritime law. He is a former Smith Richardson Predoctoral Fellow at International Security Studies at Yale University, and his work has appeared in the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, *Ocean*

Development and International Law, and Ian Bowers and Collin Koh, eds., *Grey and White Hulls: An International Analysis of the Navy-Coastguard Nexus* (Palgrave, 2019). He also serves on the editorial board of the *Canadian Naval Review*.

Fabio De Ninno is a Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor at the University of Siena. He has published a number of articles and chapters on Italian naval history, as well as two books: *I sommergibili del fascismo, Politica navale, strategia e uomini tra le due guerre mondiali* (Unicopli, 2014) and *Fascisti sul mare, La marina e gli ammiragli di Mussolini* (Laterza, 2017).

Alan James is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. He is an historian of early modern France and most recently edited, with J.D. Davies and Gijs Rommelse, *Ideologies of Western Naval Power, c. 1500–1815* (Routledge, 2020) and co-authored with Carlos Alfaro-Zaforteza and Malcolm Murfett, *European Navies and the Conduct of War* (Routledge, 2019).

Paul Kennedy is J. Richardson Dilworth Professor of History at Yale University. He is the author or editor of 19 books, including *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (Ashfield Press, 1980), *The War Plans of the Great Powers* (Allen & Unwin, 1979), *The Realities Behind Diplomacy* (Fontana, 1985), and *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (Vintage, 1993). His best-known work is *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Random House, 2017), which provoked an intense debate on its publication in 1987 and has been translated into over 20 languages. His latest book, *Engineers of Victory: The Problem Solvers who Turned the Tide in the Second World War*, was published in 2013 by Random House. He is now completing a study of seapower and the global power shifts in the same war, and he recently published a new foreword to his classic 1976 book, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Allen Lane).

Roger Knight recently retired as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. He led a Leverhulme-funded project examining the victualling system of the Royal Navy at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, published (with Martin Wilcox) as *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793–1815: War, the British Navy and the Contractor State* (Boydell, 2010). In 2013 he completed *Britain against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory* (Penguin) and is now working on a book on the British convoy system, 1803–15, scheduled to be published in 2022.

John H. Maurer is the Alfred Thayer Mahan Professor of Sea Power and Grand Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. He was chair of the Strategy and Policy Department for 8 years, and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He has published books on the outbreak of the First World War, military interventions in the developing world, naval arms control, and Winston Churchill.

S.C.M. Paine is William S. Sims University Professor of History and Grand Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. She has published extensively on the political, maritime, and military history of China, Russia, and Japan. Her most recent books are *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to the Present*, co-written with Bruce A. Elleman, 2nd edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Geoffrey Till holds the Dudley W. Knox Chair for Naval History and Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. Formerly Dean of Academic Studies at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College, he is also currently Professor Emeritus of Maritime Studies in the Defence Studies Department and Chairman of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy, King's College London. The author of over 200 articles and book chapters, he recently published the fourth edition of his *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2018).

Evan Wilson is an Assistant Professor in the John B. Hattendorf Center for Maritime Historical Research at the U.S. Naval War College. In 2018, he won the Sir Julian Corbett Prize in Modern Naval History. His first book was *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815* (Boydell, 2017), and his current project follows soldiers and sailors home after the Napoleonic Wars. He is the editor of four books and has published articles in a number of journals, including the *English Historical Review* and the *Naval War College Review*. Before coming to Newport, he was the Caird Senior Research Fellow at the National Maritime Museum (UK) and the Associate Director of International Security Studies at Yale University. He holds degrees from Yale, Cambridge and Oxford.

Preface

An interesting but happy conjuncture of strategical, political, and intellectual currents first provoked the editors of this volume into the idea of inviting a group of naval historians to join them in a comparative examination of an age-old issue: that is, how do sovereign states and their naval services handle the challenges thrown at them when they confront more than one maritime rival, and when their navies have to operate in more than one direction? Already at the beginning of 2016, the then-Chief of Naval Operations to the U.S. Navy, Admiral John Richardson, had published his open-access statement on naval strategy, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, which called for his service to confront the emergence or, better, re-emergence of a world of several significant other navies.¹ If there had been a “unipolar naval moment,” to paraphrase Charles Krauthammer’s famous 1990 phrase about the enhanced American strategic position after the fall of the Soviet Union,² then it was no more. Not only was the Russian Navy under the determined Vladimir Putin government developing sophisticated sea and air weapons-systems intended, in an asymmetrical way, to reduce the U.S.’s global military effectiveness, but, even more alarming, there was arising across East Asian waters a new and long-term Chinese naval challenge which might be far more substantial than anything they had obtained even during the Cold War. There was also, one might add, the continued challenge of trying to preserve maritime security in the Persian Gulf in the face of Iranian military threats, not to mention the question of whether the United States Navy could continue to operate in the eastern Mediterranean. Even if American maritime forces were larger than anybody else’s, they could not be strong everywhere if threats were arising at the same time in different parts of the world. Yet if the Navy had to divide its assets, would that be better or worse than concentrating upon only one danger, say, China, and abandoning obligations elsewhere? How did one choose?

Here, History kicks in. A reader of Admiral Richardson’s message might well have wondered, at least a little, how an earlier U.S. Navy had thought about multiple foreign threats, say, during its rise before the First World War, or during the twin expansion of Japanese and German naval capacities in the late 1930s. And, as it turned out, the Chief of Naval Operations was indeed wanting to stress the importance for flag officers to have thought historically. In fact, it

would be critical, he went on to say, for today's and tomorrow's naval officer corps to have imbibed the writings and lessons of the great classics of the past: of Thucydides, Mahan, and Richmond.³

Even if, moreover, the historical circumstances today are different than from any period of our pre-nuclear-weapons and pre-Artificial Intelligence past—and of course each age will differ in certain critical ways from those preceding it—might there not be a benefit to taking another look at this issue: of looking at various examples of how other naval powers, especially great powers, had juggled the problem of having to face in different directions, and of their navies having to plan for, to deploy, and perhaps on occasion to fight, in what was truly a multipolar world? In an unashamedly didactic way, might not one go looking for historical “Lessons” for today's navies, who may now have to operate in strategical and geopolitical circumstances that are neither bipolar (Cold War) nor unipolar (post-Cold War), but have become more complex and multivariate? Perhaps we have not yet come to a post-American world order, and it certainly still doesn't look that way when measured in terms of “hard power” naval assets right now, although even that comfortable assurance may have to change fairly soon.⁴ Whatever one's judgment about America's relative capacity currently, though, it remains worth asking the question: how do navies and their leaderships operate in a situation where they conclude that they are facing multiple challenges?

Admiral Richardson's query about how a future U.S. Navy might respond to a world of multiple naval threats struck a particular chord among some of us who had been researching and debating how previous great maritime Powers—most notably, the Royal Navy before both World Wars—grappled with a similar problem. Moreover, if one searches the historical record, it becomes clear that the challenge of facing two or more naval obligations was not solely a British one back then, or an American one just now. So why not take a further look at this issue, and invite a dozen or so specialist scholars to present case studies that might help illuminate things? When, indeed, this happened—in an April 2018 conference at Yale entitled “Navies in Multipolar Worlds”⁵—the organizers were struck by the richness of material and variety of non-Anglo-American examples that contributors brought to the debate, and hence to this collection. At almost all ages in the past, it seems, navies have had to operate in a world of multiple powers and thus found themselves tugged in various geographical directions. Indeed, anyone familiar with the late Jan Glete's remarkable book *Navies and Nations* (1993) will know that admiralties of the past had to operate with eyes in the backs of their heads. Thus, to pick just one random example, which foreign naval power was the chief concern of the Royal Danish Navy during the volatile conflicts of the early eighteenth century: Sweden, Russia, France, Britain, or the Netherlands? It was always hard to say, and quite often a new enemy would rise to eclipse an older one.⁶

If it is the British example that is so often cited, it is because the Royal Navy was the world's predominant maritime empire for so long, and because its extensive global commitments meant that it faced frequent threats in so many

foreign theaters. Could it ever, then, place all of its naval eggs (or fleets) in a single basket? How could it, say, in the troubled 1930s, avoid Frederick the Great's well-known warning that the dispersion of military forces would always lead to one's being "weak everywhere, and thus strong nowhere"?⁷ When in 1970 the accomplished American naval scholar Arthur J. Marder took a first look at the newly-released British naval and cabinet records for the 1930s and produced his important article on "The Royal Navy and the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935–1936,"⁸ he described a service whose contradictory advice to the Cabinet simply reflected the confused strategic scene which then existed. Mussolini's blatant aggressions against Abyssinia flouted the League of Nations' principles, and had to be answered; but how? To be sure, the Royal Navy felt that it could take on the Italian fleet of that time, and this despite its growing realization of the defense deficiencies at the critical bases of Gibraltar, Malta, and Alexandria. Yet it also warned that it would need to keep a substantial force in home waters to keep a watchful eye over the rising German fleet; and, above all, it strongly urged the British government to reach a diplomatic compromise with Rome, because it feared that an escalating Anglo-Italian conflict in the Mediterranean and Red Sea might encourage the ambitious Japanese to take advantage of that, and make a forward move in East Asia. Naval strategy could not be made vis-à-vis one particular challenger and in one region, therefore, without consideration of the larger picture. With war clouds darkening in several places, having a single focus was not enough; and the awful prospect loomed that perhaps the British Empire might have to "appease" in one part of the globe in order to stay committed in another.⁹

Interestingly, some 30 years earlier, around 1905–6, the Royal Navy and the British government had been confronting a somewhat analogous strategic problem, although with different foreign players in the constellation. For decades before that time, the Admiralty had based its fleet allocation strategy—and, indeed, its successive "Two-Power Standard" warship-building programs¹⁰—on the assumption that its chief foes were the substantial fleets of France and Russia, who were also its greatest colonial rivals. The destruction of the Russian Navy at Tsushima in May 1905, and the coming of the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale significantly changed things. So, perhaps even more, did London's recognition that Admiral Tirpitz's fast-expanding "risk fleet" could be a challenge to British naval mastery. Along with the new "diplomatic revolution," there might have to come a naval-strategic revolution as well, as Germany became the Power against which Britain most likely might find itself at war in the near future.¹¹ This in turn required a screeching alteration in the Royal Navy's fleet dispositions, the building of a new naval base in the North Sea (at Rosyth), the recall of the battleship squadron from Hong Kong, the transfer of many flotillas from the Mediterranean to home waters, the scrapping of many older, slower warships, and the hammering-out of completely new operational plans.

It is rarely an easy thing for a country's armed services to adjust in all regards to the emergence of a new, powerful challenger, and in this case the archival

record shows that both the British Army (formerly focused upon colonial wars) and, even more, the Royal Navy, found it hard to grasp the full consequences of the German threat.¹² This was especially hard because the Admiralty was also trying to understand and respond effectively to the swift development of certain brand-new and critical technologies and weapons-systems (the wireless, the torpedo, the naval mine, new fire-control systems, the submarine, possibly newer aircraft), some of which might give an asymmetric-warfare advantage to a numerically inferior navy. Even if one measured relative naval power solely in terms of capital ships, and the Admiralty designers produced the super-fast, all-big-gunned *Dreadnought* types, such measures could be (and very soon were) imitated by Imperial Germany. Moreover, the fact that the High Seas Fleet was expanding so swiftly just across the North Sea did not mean that exclusive attention could be paid to this theater alone. The Royal Navy still had huge imperial trade routes to look after, the political scene in the Far East and Near East was still rather precarious, Russia still seemed a dangerous and unpredictable factor, and there was considerable resistance to pulling out completely, or even substantially, from the Mediterranean.

Could the Number One Naval Power just focus, then, upon a single challenger (however impressive the new Germany appeared), in a single theater of the globe? Was it not called upon to remain strong elsewhere? One after another Admiralty statement seemed to wrestle with this dilemma. Thus, as early as October 1902, a Memorandum by the First Lord, Selborne, called attention to the rise of Imperial Germany, whose navy “seemed designed for a possible conflict with the British Fleet.”¹³ Yet it was only a few years later, in 1905, that Selborne’s successor, Earl Cawdor, had issued in his name another strategic statement that warned against the assumption that any reallocation of naval forces and fleets should somehow be regarded as fixed. In what became a memorable turn of phrase, then, the Cawdor Memorandum stated that “the kaleidoscopic nature of international relations, as well as the variations or new developments in Seapower,” made necessary periodic redistributions to meet any newer political requirements.¹⁴ In other words, just because the Royal Navy’s battleship and cruiser numbers were disposed to particular overseas Stations in previous years certainly did not preclude such assets being moved to another part of the globe if the political circumstances called for it. By this token, just where and when the Royal Navy’s strength was allocated depended on the subjective assessment of where the greater maritime challenge lay—whether in the Franco-Russian naval danger of yore, or in the newer German strategic threat.

Reference to the Cawdor Memorandum is made here for two rather different reasons. In historiographical terms, it constitutes just one in a voluminous and often contradictory array of documents about the true direction and purposes of British foreign and naval policy in those years of flux. Was it really becoming fixated upon the German threat, to the relative discounting of concerns about France and Russia? Cawdor’s general principle of course worked both ways; while written to justify pulling overseas squadrons back into home waters in

1905, there was no reason why—should circumstances change, and a Franco-Russian challenge re-emerge—the Admiralty couldn't once again make those powers its chief concern. A definitive account of the British government's strategic prioritization in this period is still not available, and in the meantime the reader has to be content with a formidable and frequently partisan array of scholarly arguments over this important matter.¹⁵ Certainly, this editor's own writings about "the rise of the Anglo-German antagonism" prior to 1914¹⁶ is not the only voice in this matter. It is nice to include in this volume, therefore, John Maurer's illuminating Afterword on the British grapplings over the longer term with its dilemma of being in the uncertain world of various naval power. In a larger collection than we have here, perhaps more could have been attempted. As it is, case studies of how the Royal Navy responded to rising new threats over time offers the single largest corpus of materials to U.S. naval officers studying that strategic and operational problem today.

The second reason, obviously, is that Cawdor's reference to "the kaleidoscopic nature of international relations" necessitating periodic shifts in a navy's fleet dispositions and war plans brings us back to Admiral Richardson's policy statement, and thus to the U.S.'s global strategic obligations today. And even in the few years that have elapsed since *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority* appeared, the strategic debate about how the Pentagon and the U.S. Navy should respond to China's growth has intensified.¹⁷

As this book goes to press in the spring of 2020, then, it is interesting to note an apparently authoritative newspaper report that the U.S. Marine Corps is itself engaged in a complex re-examination of its global mission, with a consequent need for major changes in its force structures, equipment, battle training, and its expected geographical theater of future deployment. Instead of being conformed to fight far from the sea, in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Marines would return to their former interwar-years posture, preparing for an island-hopping fight across the Pacific, against a newer foe, "with China in mind."¹⁸ They would therefore be much more closely aligned with their parent-service, the U.S. Navy, than has been the case since the "9/11" attack caused a re-orientation of American strategic priorities and the Marines became a sort of mini-land army. This was no longer to be the case, and the so-called "pivot to Asia" in American strategic planning would further intensify. But just as interesting here, the same *Wall Street Journal* article reported on other voices—expressed by retired senior Marine officers—against "organiz[ing] yourself to go after a specific region," and, presumably, a single possible future foe.¹⁹ In an anarchic and unpredictable world, where threats to the national interests rise and fall, concentrating attention upon one military task, or one theater of operations, or one particular foe, could be very unwise indeed. Although of course the critics were not invoking it, might one not hear an echo of that distant Cawdor Memorandum, and an intimation of the strategic dilemma that faces all great Naval Powers in a world of various contending obligations. Even as the U.S. Navy and its Marine Corps tilt again toward the Pacific realm, will they not also have to bear in mind the warning that "the kaleidoscopic nature of international relations ... forbids any

permanent allocation of numbers”? And as naval challenges always change over time, won’t there always be “the necessity for periodic redistribution”?

Both with the maritime historian’s professional interest in examining case studies of navies and naval policy in the past, and in the belief that this exercise might contribute toward fulfilling Admiral Richardson’s hope that contemporary U. S. strategy might be usefully enhanced by a stronger historical understanding, the editors offer to the reader this present scholarly collection.

Paul Kennedy

Notes

- 1 John M. Richardson, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority* (Washington: Department of the Navy, January 2016).
- 2 Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (September 1990).
- 3 Richardson, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*.
- 4 Patrick M. Cronin, Mira Rapp-Hooper, Harry Krejsa, Alex Sullivan, and Rush Doshi, *Beyond the San Hai: The Challenge of China’s Blue-Water Navy*, CNAS (May 2017), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNASReport-BlueWaterNavy-Finalb.pdf>; “Beijing Wants Six Carriers, But Won’t Compete With the US,” *Asia Times*, May 17, 2018, www.atimes.com/article/beijing-wants-six-carriers-but-wont-compete-with-the-us/; Michael A. McDevitt, “China’s Navy Will Be the World’s Largest in 2035,” United States Naval Institute *Proceedings* 146, no. 2 (2020).
- 5 “Navies in Multipolar Worlds,” Yale Naval History Conference, International Security Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT, April 20–21, 2018.
- 6 Jan Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State Building in Europe and America, 1500–1860* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993).
- 7 Frederick the Great, *Instructions for His Generals*, trans. Thomas R. Phillips (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company, 1951).
- 8 Arthur J. Marder, “The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935–36,” *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 5 (1970): 1327–56.
- 9 See further, Paul M. Kennedy, “‘Appeasement’ and British Defence Policy in the Inter-War Years,” *British Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 2 (1978): 161–77.
- 10 See, in considerable detail, Arthur Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: British Naval Policy 1880–1905* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964).
- 11 Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–1919*, vol. 1, *The Road to War 1904–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
- 12 The British Army’s difficulties in grappling with the German threat are detailed, inter alia, in Samuel R. Williamson, *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); and M.E. Howard, *The Continental Commitment* (London: Ashfield Press, 1989), chapters 1–2. Barry M. Gough, *Pax Britannica: Ruling the Waves and Keeping the Peace before Armageddon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- 13 Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vol. 1, 107.
- 14 A large portion of this is printed in Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), 219.
- 15 The debate cannot be summarized in one footnote, but interested readers might consult: Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1999); Christopher M. Bell, “Sir John Fisher’s Naval

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- 16 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1980).
- 17 For more on this debate, see the Introduction.
- 18 Michael R. Gordon, “Marines Will Retool, With an Eye to China,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2020.
- 19 Ibid.

Acknowledgments

This project began at International Security Studies (ISS) at Yale. We thank Ky Thompson and Marge Melun for donating books to begin a small library there, as part of the Maritime and Naval Studies Initiative. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Rob Wallace, Bruce McLanahan, Reuben Jeffery, and the Smith Richardson Foundation. The 2018 conference from which many of the chapters are drawn would not have happened without the able administrative support of the staff of ISS: Liz Vastakis, Kathleen Galo, and Igor Biryukov.

In New Haven, we benefitted from the enthusiasm of ISS's three naval and maritime predoctoral fellows: Nicholas C. Prime, Timothy Choi, and Louis Halewood. In Newport, the vibrant scholarly community of the Hattendorf Historical Center Working Group provided valuable feedback and editorial advice, especially Rob Dahlin, J. Ross Dancy, Mark Fiorey, John Hattendorf, David Kohnen, Alicia Maggard, Kevin McCranie, Jamie McGrath, and Craig Symonds. In addition to the anonymous reviewers whose suggestions were so helpful, we also thank the eagle-eyed production and editorial teams at Routledge (especially Andrew Humphrys and Bethany Lund-Yates) and Wearset (especially Emma Critchley and Charlotte Parkins).

We are particularly indebted to John Maurer, who not only participated in the conference and the volume but also agreed to write the afterword on a deadline. James Goldrick served as the world's most over-qualified copy editor, and we cannot thank him enough for his feedback. David Blagden helped two baffled historians navigate the world of international relations scholarship—the mistakes that have no doubt lingered are our own. Most of all, we thank Geoff Till, who contributed, brought along other contributors, shepherded the work through Routledge's review process, and provided consistent support for all of our efforts.



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Introduction

Evan Wilson

Most of the contributors and both of the editors of this book are historians, but its title uses the language of International Relations. This decision requires some justification. Scholars of International Relations have long used polarity as an explanatory tool. Structural realists, such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, have tended to deploy tightly bounded definitions, which distil as the capacity of a state to balance independently against the most powerful other state in the system without relying on allies.¹ A unipolar system has one state against whom no other state can balance; a bipolar system has two that can balance against each other; and a multipolar system has multiple states capable of balancing against each other. That much is simple and straightforward, comprehensible even to fuzzy-headed historians.

Yet it is remarkable how little agreement there is among both scholars and policymakers about the nature of the international system today. For some commentators, we are still in the long lee of 1991, with the United States predominant, while for others, we have entered either a bipolar or multipolar world. There are two reasons for this confusion, and the first stems from the perspective adopted when defining a state's capacities. If we adopt the structural realist perspective, which usually encompasses the entire international system, in relative material and military terms the United States remains the sole superpower.² But from other perspectives, especially when polarity is applied regionally rather than globally, unipolarity is not the best explanatory tool.³ China's growing capabilities in the South China Sea, for example, illustrate one way a rising power is beginning to balance against the unipole—suggesting an end or at least a weakening of the unipolar era.⁴

This book is not concerned with resolving the debate about the nature of the international system. There are perfectly sound reasons to think that today the world is genuinely multipolar, and that it may be a balanced or unbalanced system. Similarly, we admit the strength of arguments that see a return of Cold War-style bipolarity between the U.S. and China, as well as those that see a continuation of U.S. hegemony.⁵ Instead, this book is concerned with the second problem that has confused the debate about polarity: what it means when one state *perceives* the nature of the system to be changing.⁶ As Paul Kennedy mentions in his Preface, the particular case that inspired this book dates from

2016, when U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson admitted that for the first time in decades, the U.S. Navy was facing a return to a multi-navy great power rivalry.⁷ From Richardson's perspective, and that of a number of other commentators and policymakers, the U.S. Navy could no longer be assured of continuing maritime supremacy. To belabor the point: whether this is true is not the question that animates this book, but we should understand what happens when states conclude that their hegemony is being challenged. The perception of multipolarity is at least as important as tangible evidence of it.

For the editors, the question that stemmed from Admiral Richardson's observation was, how have navies grappled with the challenges of preparing for or executing great power conflicts in the past? Based in part on papers given at the inaugural Yale Naval History Conference in April 2018, the chapters in this book address this question from a variety of angles, including: the regional and global distribution of forces; trade and communication protection; arms races; the emergence of naval challengers; fleet design; logistics; technology; civil-naval relations; and grand strategy. They look beyond the Anglo-American world, and they cover topics from the age of sail to the present. In general, they adopt four vantage points, which depend on two variables: how relatively powerful is the navy in question, and how multipolar is the system in which it is operating?

The first vantage point is that of the most powerful navy in an era when it faced few challengers at sea. In examining the British Royal Navy in the nineteenth century and the U.S. Navy after 1991, the contributors demonstrate that no hegemon is as confident as it appears. Even when the threats to its supremacy have largely collapsed, it spends significant time and energy worrying that they will return. A dispassionate appraisal of relative tonnage or number of hulls might suggest dominance, but prudent administrators see threats around every corner. With no obvious challenger to design a fleet against, hegemonic navies struggle to re-shape fleets to meet new challenges and have even more difficulty than normal in predicting the future. Though the importance of convoys seems obvious in retrospect, Roger Knight's chapter demonstrates how hard it is to anticipate the shape of the next war in the midst of rapid technological change. Dominant navies also struggle to adapt to new missions without losing capabilities and experience in fighting peer competitors. They become more like maritime police forces, even though they were not designed to act in that capacity. Few hegemonic navies are happy with such a role: the Royal Navy's campaign against the slave trade endured for decades, and the U.S. Navy's rules of engagement limited its effectiveness in recent anti-piracy actions off Somalia.

On the other hand, a naval superpower's dominance at sea allows it to take risks and make mistakes. Few of the U.S. Navy's recent innovations in ship design have been wholly successful, but the long unipolar era has provided space for experimentation and for learning procurement lessons. Naval policy in peacetime is as much a question of domestic politics as foreign policy: what levels of spending are appropriate? How many capital ships are really necessary

if there are no peer competitors? After 1815, domestic war-exhaustion combined with tight budgets meant Britain's enormous advantage in capital ships shrank rapidly. In the short term, that meant adopting a relatively passive stance in international affairs; in the long term, the absence of another war gave the Royal Navy time to construct an even more powerful fleet.

Eventually, though, peer competitors emerge, or, as Admiral Richardson's remarks illustrate, peer competitors are perceived to be emerging. The second perspective adopted by the contributors is that of the most powerful navy in an age of multipolar competition or war. In a surprising number of instances, we see such navies unable simply to impose their will, and instead turning to innovative strategies to compete. Two chapters examine the Royal Navy in the interwar period. For John Maurer, dealing with the emergence of naval challengers began domestically. Many of the most important battles happened in cabinet meetings, as politicians and admirals had to agree on the significance of the threat and the best way to meet it. G.H. Bennett picks up the story and looks at the ways in which the British adroitly used diplomacy to ring-fence the competition. One of the salient lessons of the period before 1914 was that if arms races were allowed to run unchecked, both sides ran unacceptable risks.⁸ In the interwar period, the British sought to use bilateral and multilateral agreements to constrain and delay their rivals while limiting the domestic impact of their building programs.

British relative decline could only be delayed, not prevented, as Paul Kennedy's chapter shows. The realization of the full potential of U.S. industry shifted the global balance of naval power. In many ways, Hu Bo and Geoffrey Till are asking whether the same will be true of the United States and China. That would require a commitment on the part of China to seek global maritime supremacy, and it is not at all clear that such a commitment will be forthcoming or would even be sensible if it were. China has many legitimate reasons to push the United States out of its near seas, but it is fundamentally a continental power.⁹ Again we see the salience of Maurer's insight that domestic issues shape such decisions.

A third vantage point is that of the number two navy in a multipolar great power competition. What strategy should it adopt? If it adopts a maritime strategy, should it compete directly or asymmetrically? If it adopts the naval strategy of a continental power, what are the naval consequences of that choice? France features heavily here. In Alan James' chapter, a close reading of the treaties that ended the War of Spanish Succession overturns the scholarly consensus on the origins of the concept of balance of power. By showing that the European system still relied on older mechanics of competition and dynastic issues, James reasserts the resilience of French naval power. He encourages historians to look beyond the war and France's famous turn toward a commerce-raiding strategy. A broader perspective shows many of France's core interests still intact through the peace process and French naval power reviving after the war. Brian Chao also finds France to be an under-appreciated naval power, even after the great defeats of the Napoleonic Wars. Though it was always likely to

come second to Britain at sea, France nevertheless reached the pinnacle of its global power in the nineteenth century. Chao identifies France's strategy as that of threat diffusion—the deployment of naval force to places and for purposes not antagonistic to the British—which allowed it to be an innovative player in the multipolar world of nineteenth century Europe. The looming threat of defeat can be a powerful stimulus for thinking creatively about how best to challenge a nearby rival.

S.C.M. Paine's chapter on Japan in the first half of the twentieth century should be seen in partnership with the chapters on France. Whereas France's geographic position always made it more likely to focus on its eastern border, especially as German power grew, Japan was a natural maritime power. Yet as Paine shows, Japan chose to turn away from the sea, with catastrophic consequences. A similar debate emerges in Hu Bo's chapter on China, though with the geographic constraints reversed. One path forward for China would be to adopt the strategies of nineteenth century France: investing consistently in naval forces; pushing technological innovations; and avoiding direct conflicts with the United States. China may eventually seek to challenge U.S. naval supremacy directly, but that requires a sustained commitment to the project.

The final vantage point is that of a second-tier power in an age of multipolarity. Kennedy's survey of the naval powers during the Second World War covers some of this territory, but the two chapters that deal with this issue most directly are Fabio De Ninno's discussion of the Italian Navy under Mussolini and Timothy Choi's examination of the Danish Navy in the last 40 years. In both cases, geography plays an important role in defining the nature of the multipolar world. For the Italians, what mattered was not British supremacy globally, but rather British and French forces in the Mediterranean. No power can afford to ignore the wider strategic context for local competition, but the more they can prevent the full weight of the stronger powers from being deployed to the geographic area in question, the better their chances of competing successfully. Even more so than the Italians, geography shapes Danish naval policy. The division between Baltic and Arctic responsibilities makes designing a fleet capable of operating in both environments particularly challenging. We can also add to that challenge the importance of the unipole: if American control of the maritime commons is no longer guaranteed, how does that shape Denmark's strategic choices, both in the Baltic and the Arctic?

The final three chapters in the book offer diverse perspectives—the Danish, Chinese, and U.S. navies view their worlds very differently—but they do raise similar questions about the prospects for future wars at sea. Can competition in the Arctic be contained there, particularly as climate change gives more countries access to its resources? Will China and the United States fall into the so-called "Thucydides Trap"? Is China dangerous because it is a rising power determined to challenge the status quo, or is the United States more likely to initiate a conflict before its relative power has waned? Should we even be worried about a violent transition of power, or is it in fact common for power to

transition peacefully? How do second-tier navies grapple with the uncertainties of great power competition?¹⁰

Lurking in the background of this book is a debate among International Relations scholars about the stability of multipolar systems. For some, they are more prone to great power conflict than their bipolar or unipolar cousins. Balanced multipolar systems have multiple points that could be contested by one or more powers, none of whom feel constrained by the presence of a super-power capable of limiting their scope for independent action; unbalanced multipolar systems may see some powers constrained, but their complexities may also make conflict more likely.¹¹ An alternative interpretation sees conflict throughout unipolar and bipolar systems, though often at a level below great power conflict, while multipolar systems have built-in balancing mechanisms. If one power turns aggressive, there are usually two or more powers who are capable of deterring it.¹² The case studies in this book do not resolve this debate, but they broaden our understanding of the various forms multipolarity can take.

Navies may be particularly wary of multipolar systems because of their need to invest heavily in peacetime against a wider and diverse range of threats. If the international system is relatively stable, then decisions about fleet design and capacities may appear to be easier to make; the opposite is true in multipolar systems. Capital ships have always been among the most complex, expensive, and long-gestating of national endeavors.¹³ Unstable multipolar systems force difficult choices on navies more so than other services. The qualities and quantities of the fleet needed in 10 or 20 years' time requires careful planning and a good deal of luck; armies, speaking in general terms, may perhaps be more readily reshaped on short notice.

Little wonder, then, that the U.S. Navy is warning of a return of great power competition. Perhaps lamenting the passage of its unipolar moment, it is now grappling with the consequences of multipolarity and even the prospect of bipolarity at sea. What form that polarity will take may depend not only on the relative balance of power, but also on the posture of that power. How should the U.S. Navy handle direct challenges to its sea control? Should it react differently if instead the challenge takes the form of sea denial? And should the answer to those questions shape how we think about polarity—or even what a “pole” is—at sea?

As the chapters in this book show, no two multipolar environments are ever quite the same, and there is no one formula for success. But there is undoubtedly value in thinking through some of the ways in which the navies of the past have approached similar problems. One theme that emerges can be succinctly summarized by the ancient Greek aphorism, “know thyself.”¹⁴ It can have both positive and negative connotations, and both are relevant to navies. Negatively, it can be used as a put-down—know your place in the world, mere mortal. Navies must correctly identify their relative position in a multipolar environment. More positively, it is a call for self-study and reflection: what are your strengths and weaknesses, your tendencies and habits? Navies are not people,