

CASS SERIES: NAVAL POLICY AND HISTORY

# Twenty-First Century Seapower

Cooperation and conflict at sea

Edited by  
Peter Dutton, Robert S. Ross and  
Øystein Tunsjø



# Twenty-First Century Seapower

This book offers an assessment of the naval policies of emerging naval powers, and the implications for maritime security relations and the global maritime order.

Since the end of the Cold War, China, Japan, India and Russia have begun to challenge the status quo with the acquisition of advanced naval capabilities. The emergence of rising naval powers is a cause for concern, as the potential for great power instability is exacerbated by the multiple maritime territorial disputes among new and established naval powers.

This work explores the underlying sources of maritime ambition through an analysis of various historical cases of naval expansionism. It analyses both the sources and dynamics of international naval competition, and looks at the ways in which maritime stability and the widespread benefits of international commerce and maritime resource extraction can be sustained through the twenty-first century.

This book will be of much interest to students of naval power, Asian security and politics, strategic studies, security studies and IR in general.

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**47 Sea Power and the Asia-Pacific**

The triumph of Neptune?

*Edited by Geoffrey Till and  
Patrick Bratton*

**49 Twenty-First Century Seapower**

Cooperation and conflict at sea

*Edited by Peter Dutton,  
Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø*

**48 Maritime Private Security**

Market responses to piracy,  
terrorism and waterborne  
security risks in the  
21st century

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# **Twenty-First Century Seapower**

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**Edited by Peter Dutton, Robert S. Ross  
and Øystein Tunsjø**



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# Contents

<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xi
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
PETER DUTTON, ROBERT S. ROSS, AND ØYSTEIN TUNSJØ	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Land powers go to sea</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2 The national security of secondary maritime powers within the classic European states system</b>	<b>9</b>
ROLF HOBSON AND TOM KRISTIANSEN	
<b>3 Geography and seapower</b>	<b>18</b>
JAKUB GRYGIEL	
<b>4 Conflict at sea: how it happens and how it can be avoided</b>	<b>42</b>
XU QIYU	
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Emerging naval powers: sources and objectives of naval policies</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>5 The boundaries and directions of China's seapower</b>	<b>65</b>
SHI XIAOQIN	
<b>6 India's growing maritime power: roots, objectives and long-term plans</b>	<b>85</b>
ARUN PRAKASH	

<b>7</b>	<b>Russia's naval ambitions: driving forces and constraints</b>	<b>112</b>
	KATARZYNA ZYSK	
<b>8</b>	<b>Reluctant seapower: geopolitics in Asia and Japan's maritime strategy</b>	<b>136</b>
	TETSUO KOTANI	
<b>PART III</b>		
	<b>A new maritime strategy for the twenty-first century</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Defense of the system: changing the geometry of great power competition</b>	<b>157</b>
	ROBERT C. RUBEL	
<b>10</b>	<b>NATO: war fighting, naval diplomacy and multilateral cooperation at sea</b>	<b>177</b>
	GEOFFREY TILL	
<b>11</b>	<b>China's maritime security policy making and maritime confidence-building measures</b>	<b>197</b>
	REN XIAOFENG	
<b>12</b>	<b>Countering piracy and armed robbery in Asia: a study of two areas</b>	<b>213</b>
	CATHERINE ZARA RAYMOND	
<b>PART IV</b>		
	<b>Managing contemporary maritime security</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Applying the brakes to naval rivalry in the Western Pacific: an agenda for U.S.–China maritime partnership</b>	<b>239</b>
	LYLE GOLDSTEIN AND MICHAEL CHASE	
<b>14</b>	<b>Law of the sea for the twenty-first century</b>	<b>262</b>
	PETER DUTTON	
<b>15</b>	<b>Freedom of the seas and the law of the sea: a Chinese perspective</b>	<b>281</b>
	WU JILU AND ZHANG HAIWEN	
<b>16</b>	<b>Confidence-building measures and non-traditional security cooperation</b>	<b>298</b>
	ZHENG HONG	
	<i>Index</i>	<b>316</b>

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# 1 Introduction

*Peter Dutton, Robert S. Ross, and Øystein Tunsjø*

Over the past decade not just the United States, but also China, Japan, India, and Russia have developed advanced naval capabilities. They are also engaged in multiple maritime territorial disputes that can exacerbate security competition. These trends in contemporary maritime security affairs create concern for maintaining maritime stability in the twenty-first century. The scholarship in this volume reflects these concerns. The contributors explore historical cases of naval expansionism, the contemporary drivers of naval expansionism, the maritime interests and policies of the established naval powers, and potential mechanisms for sustained twenty-first century maritime cooperation among competitive great powers.

## **Emerging navies in the twenty-first century**

India, China, and Russia have traditionally emphasized defense of continental interests. Yet each is now expanding its naval capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history nearly all continental powers have failed to gain greater maritime security by challenging the naval status quo.<sup>2</sup> Napoleonic France, Tsarist Russia, early twentieth-century Germany, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States each experienced periods of naval expansionism that challenged the great-power maritime status quo. In each case, the resulting maritime competition led to war or a naval arms race. These recurring dynamics suggest that there are underlying factors that affect maritime conflict and that may influence twenty-first-century naval politics, despite changes in technology and the existence of multiple political systems, national cultures, and historical experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting its economic successes, Chinese leaders have allocated increased resources to developing naval power. China has developed advanced submarine capabilities and its fleet has conducted increasingly sophisticated exercises in ever more distant waters. In 2011 it launched its first aircraft carrier. The Chinese Navy participates in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and in humanitarian relief operations in the South China Sea. And as its capabilities have improved, the PLA Navy has



operated in closer proximity to U.S. carrier battle groups and it has resisted U.S. surveillance activities within its exclusive economic zone.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Sino-Japanese maritime territorial and economic disputes, China's naval modernization program has elicited greater Japanese security concern and an increase in its own naval capabilities. Japan is expanding its submarine fleet, deployments around disputed islands, and cooperation with the United States Navy. But these trends in Japanese naval policy contribute to Chinese security concerns and the justification for its naval modernization.<sup>5</sup>

India is also focusing increased resources on its navy. As the Indian Ocean has become a major transit area for international trade and as China has modernized its navy, India has focused on emerging challenges to Indian maritime security. It has purchased Russian submarines and it has agreed to purchase Russian-made aircraft carriers and aircraft. Its navy now conducts exercises not only in the Indian Ocean but also in East Asian waters.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese and Indian development of advanced naval capabilities suggests the prospects of increased competition in the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> Each views the other's naval modernization program as justification for its own naval build-up. Moreover, many observers see the development of Chinese naval modernization as a reason for enhanced U.S.–Indian naval cooperation. Some Japanese observers perceive similar opportunities for Japanese–Indian naval cooperation. Mutual perceptions of maritime security challenges can thus be the catalyst of Sino-Indian tensions as well as to heightened U.S.–China and Sino-Japanese maritime conflict.

Russia is developing a renewed interest in maritime security. It is increasingly concerned with security in its northern waters, where there is potential access to natural resources. Moreover, the prospect of global warming suggests that the polar routes could become a major transit area for both world shipping and for great power navies, thus posing a potential challenge to Russian coastal security. The Russian navy remains in a rebuilding phase, but its proximity to the region offers it advantages in competition in northern waters.

Russian interest in the security of the northern waters has aroused security concerns among the Nordic countries, including Norway and Denmark, both NATO members with territory and natural resource deposits contiguous to the polar routes. The combination of global warming and potential great power competition for natural resources in northern waters suggests the prospect of maritime security competition involving Russia and NATO members.<sup>8</sup>

Development of advanced naval capabilities in China, Japan, India, and Russia may challenge the maritime status quo and maritime stability. But even as these emerging naval powers seek greater capabilities to enhance their maritime security, they also seek a peaceful maritime order that can contribute to economic development and technological modernization. China's concept of "peaceful rise" expresses this dual strategic objective.

## **The United States, NATO, and emerging navies**

As an established naval power, the United States is sensitive to any challenge to the existing maritime security order. But because of the prominent rise of China and of critical U.S. strategic and economic interests in East Asia, the United States has been especially sensitive to China's maritime capabilities and to a potential Chinese challenge to U.S. naval supremacy in the Western Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

Following heightened mainland–Taiwan tension and Chinese military exercises and missile tests in vicinity of Taiwan in 1996, the United States began to redeploy its forces from the European theater to the Western Pacific Ocean, including nuclear attack submarines, its most advanced military aircraft, cruise missile submarines and advanced communication systems to Guam and elsewhere in the region. It also consolidated its strategic relationships with Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia. More recently, the United States has focused on the trend in the maritime balance of power and the potential Chinese challenge to U.S. strategic partners in East Asia. Should China continue to improve its naval capabilities and the United States strive to maintain the maritime status quo, U.S.–China naval competition will likely increase, with implications for the maritime order and regional prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

But just as China seeks improved maritime security and “peaceful rise,” the United States seeks to balance the rise of China while sustaining the cooperative international maritime order. Since World War II the United States and its NATO partners have employed their naval capabilities to sustain the maritime order that has facilitated global commerce and access to maritime resources. An important element of this effort is U.S. and NATO naval cooperation with other countries' navies, including the Chinese Navy and the Russian Navy.<sup>10</sup>

## **The challenge of maritime cooperation**

The challenge for the United States and the other naval powers is to maintain stability at sea even as they each experience heightened concern for their respective maritime security interests. There are various maritime activities that can constrain naval conflict and contribute to maritime stability. Such measures include simple military–military diplomacy, including exchanges among senior military leaders, less formal functional cooperation, and foreign officer enrollment in military academies and in other mid-career military training programs. But maritime cooperation extends beyond diplomacy and professional education. The 1972 U.S.–Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement established “rules of the road” to avoid unintended crises and conflict escalation.<sup>11</sup> The current maritime environment does not resemble the Cold War, but unintended incidents at sea can occur between the ships of any country. The March 2009 incident

between Chinese ships and the USNS *Impeccable* in the South China Sea suggests the ongoing importance of conflict avoidance mechanisms.<sup>12</sup> The U.S.–China 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement can provide the mechanism to establish a more effective “rules of the road” agreement.<sup>13</sup>

Bilateral conflict management measures can include joint military exercises among maritime powers. But such measures are the most sensitive form of military cooperation. Rescue at sea operations and humanitarian relief operations entail extensive cooperation among otherwise competitive navies, thus fostering communication and familiarity with routine operations that can diminish the likelihood of misunderstanding and unintended tension. In the aftermath of the 2008 Myanmar typhoon, for example, the United States Navy, the Indian Navy, and the Chinese Navy all participated in humanitarian relief activities. These relief activities may be expanded into multilateral maritime operations that allow for greater complexity and cooperation.

There are also opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in support of common interests. Anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden include the navies from Japan, China, India, the United States, and European countries. Given the number of different navies operating in a confined area, there is the potential for incidents. On the other hand, the complexity of the maritime environment in the Gulf of Aden creates the opportunity for multilateral cooperation. Even basic cooperative measures can contribute to greater awareness of other countries’ naval procedures and diminish the possibility of high-risk encounters at sea.

## **The structure of the volume**

**Part I** of the volume addresses the sources of naval expansionism and the historical record of competition between emerging navies and established naval powers. Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen discuss the traditional maritime strategies of land powers that seek maritime capabilities that can both contribute to security and that can minimize costly conflict with a maritime power. Jakub Grygiel’s contribution analyzes the intrinsic geopolitical obstacles that continental powers confront when they pursue great-power maritime ambitions and the frequently costly and counterproductive outcomes associated with such ambitions. Xu Qiyu’s chapter similarly examines the underlying sources of naval conflicts and stresses that maritime conflict does not necessarily reflect the rise of a new naval power but rather the emerging naval powers’ excessive ambitions that ignore enduring national constraints on naval expansionism.

**Part II** of the volume examines the maritime policies of the twenty-first century’s emerging navies. Chapters on China, India, Russia, and Japan consider the importance of both national security interests and the drive for status in these countries’ naval ambitions. These chapters underscore that each country’s ambitions reflect its understanding of other countries’

capabilities and ambitions for its own maritime security interests. These chapters stress the importance of developing multilateral perspectives on twenty-first-century maritime politics and the prospect for conflict and cooperation.

**Part III** of the volume addresses the naval strategies of the United States and of its NATO partners. Robert Rubel's chapter examines the U.S. interest in developing a global cooperative maritime order that would enable the United States to sustain the post-World War II maritime order that serves global prosperity and stability. Geoffrey Till analyzes the role of NATO maritime operations not only in promoting national security but also in developing a cooperative maritime order. Ren Xiaofeng's chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Chinese naval policy, including policy on military diplomacy and maritime cooperation and of China's maritime disputes in East Asia. Catherine Zara Raymond's chapter examines contemporary multilateral cooperation in anti-piracy operations, a critical element in global maritime stability.

**Part IV** of the volume focuses on management of twenty-first-century naval competition. Lyle Goldstein and Michael Chase develop a comprehensive agenda for mitigating U.S.–China naval rivalry through maritime cooperation. Peter Dutton presents an American interpretation of the Law of the Sea and the implications of the U.S. response to Chinese challenges to U.S. naval activities in East Asia. Wu Jilu and Zhang Haiwen present the Chinese perspective on the Law of the Sea and the implications for China's understanding of American naval activities in proximity to the Chinese coast. Zheng Hong addresses the maritime confidence-building mechanisms that the United States and China can develop to manage twenty-first-century naval competition. These chapters all establish both the difficulty of developing cooperation between a rising navy and an established navy as well as the shared U.S.–China commitment to manage security competition so that each can benefit from the economic and political benefits of a stable international maritime order.

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## Notes

- 1 Also see Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009); Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace:

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- 2 See Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
- 3 See, for example, Peter Padfield, *Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World, 1788–1851* (New York: Overlook Press, 2005); Peter Padfield, *Maritime Dominion and the Triumph of the Free World* (London: John Murray, 2009).
- 4 Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China’s Navy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010). On U.S. and Chinese perspectives on military surveillance activities in exclusive economic zones, see Peter Dutton, ed., *Military Activities in the EEZ: A U.S.–China Dialogue on Security and International Law in the Maritime Commons*, *China Maritime Study*, no. 7 (December 2010).
- 5 On Sino-Japanese security relations, see, for example, Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo’s Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Richard C. Bush, *The Perils of Proximity: China–Japan Security Relations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2010).
- 6 On the prospects for competition in the Indian Ocean, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).
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- 11 David F. Winkler, *Cold War at Sea: High-Seas Confrontation Between the United States and the Soviet Union* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000).
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- 13 For a survey of U.S. and Chinese perspectives on bilateral maritime activities and the potential for cooperation, see Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Nan Li, eds., *China, the United States and 21st-Century Sea Power: Defining a Maritime Security Partnership* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

## **Part I**

# **Land powers go to sea**



## 2 The national security of secondary maritime powers within the classic European states system

*Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen*

The secondary and smaller maritime powers are states with extensive maritime interests and navies which cannot on their own face up to that of the dominant seapower. The maritime dimension of their national security depends on their being able to cooperate with other, similarly placed powers to contain the hegemony of the power with the potential to command the sea. The balance struck between these two tendencies within the European states system found expression in maritime law and the leagues of armed neutrality up to 1801. During the two centuries between the wars of Louis XIV and the First World War, Britain was usually dominant at sea and exerted economic pressure on its opponents, to the extent that the maritime balance allowed. Some secondary powers sought to challenge that Britain conducted economic warfare in a manner similar to that of the dominant land power. Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany and the United States in the era of the world wars fall into the category of secondary powers which abandoned their traditional national security policy. We will here focus on those traditions, as they pertained to those secondary maritime powers of the eighteenth century – Sweden, Denmark–Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Venice – which became small naval powers in the nineteenth century; also continental great powers which could not afford a first rate navy, such as Russia and Spain, or France, Germany and the United States in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Since the powers involved in the maritime balance were in possession of colonies and trading posts, their naval policies also heavily affected the world outside Europe proper. We will focus on the interaction among the dominant, the secondary and the smaller navies. The secondary navies were in the position to affect the balance of power; the latter were left with a policy of response and adaptation to shifts within it. It can be argued that European history does offer some useful insights into this particular aspect of the security dilemma which still have a certain relevance.

It is important to bear in mind what characterizes European waters, hence a few points. They are rich in resources and the coastal states were very dependent on their fisheries; moreover, they were of vital importance



for domestic and international trade. The trade routes were the main arteries of the growing colonial powers. European waters are surrounded by small countries, as well as secondary and great powers. In addition, from a maritime point of view, the area is rather confined, in particular the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, on which France, Germany, Great Britain and Russia bordered. Throughout modern history these restricted waters witnessed the rise and decline of great and small powers and an array of diverse conflicts criss-crossed the area. The major conflicts were usually decided on land, but navies played an important part in either maintaining the balance of power or disrupting it. The smaller countries were often caught between the devil and deep blue sea, left with no other alternative than to unite in the so-called leagues of armed neutrality and, most importantly, to participate in the efforts to create a corpus of international law to regulate war at sea and non-belligerent seaborne trade. Codification was based on precedent and international treaties, and reached what appeared to be the fulfilment of the long-standing aspirations of small maritime nations shortly before the outbreak of the First World War.

For at least two centuries, some important structural features of the European states system remained relatively unchanged. Despite the fact that the number of states declined rapidly, it was dominated by five great powers: Austria, France, Britain, Russia and Prussia (after 1871 the German Empire). These powers were defined by their economic and military resources and by their ability to rise again after defeat. Major European conflicts always involved a struggle among them to maintain or upset the balance of power; the hegemonic pretensions of one of them were as a rule contained by a coalition of the others. Smaller states tended to gravitate towards one of the great powers, and their semi-independence was maintained by the unwillingness of its rivals to allow them to be completely swallowed up. Some cases in point are Portugal, the Scandinavian countries and the Low Countries, which constituted a substantial part of Europe's southern and northern Atlantic rim.

Hegemonic wars were always struggles over the dominance of the continent. However, the maritime powers also played a particular role within the overall power balance, which also encompassed the colonies in the Americas and Asia. Britain was usually the predominant seapower, although it was unusually weak two decades after the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). So long as the Royal Navy maintained command of the sea, the British Isles were protected against invasion from the continent. Britain could also exert pressure on continental opponents by cutting off their seaborne trade and supporting their enemies on land. Maintaining a balance of power on land was of vital importance to Britain because a continental hegemon would be able to mobilize superior resources to build a fleet which could threaten the British Isles with invasion. Britain's rivals also sought to exert economic pressure on London by attacking its

exposed merchant shipping. This was first of all the case with the hereditary enemy France. France embarked on a building programme after the Seven Years' War, which brought it success during the American War of Independence (1776–1783). But the French and Spanish navies were severely defeated in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Neither of them was to regain a position from which it could challenge the Royal Navy.

The secondary maritime powers sought to profit as much as possible from the wars of the great powers while avoiding threats to their own independence. Those threats were both British control of their maritime trade and, most dangerously, the continental hegemony of a land power. The smaller maritime powers maintained navies which could not face up to those of Britain or France, but which to a certain extent could protect their own trade and which might combine to assert their rights against the encroachments of a dominant seapower. Nevertheless, the smaller navies constituted an element of uncertainty in the overall maritime balance since they could fall into the hands of a great power navy. That was the case with the Danish–Norwegian navy in 1807 when it was conquered by the British in an audacious attack on its main base in Copenhagen – an incident which has had enormous repercussions in both Danish and Norwegian security thinking ever since.<sup>2</sup>

The maritime balance of power between a dominant Britain, its somewhat weaker main rival at sea (usually France) and the secondary maritime powers found expression in maritime law.<sup>3</sup> The laws of war at sea were a reality of international politics because they had the ultimate sanction of naval force behind them.<sup>4</sup> For centuries an elaborate body of treaty law and interpretation by prize courts had been constructed to regulate war at sea, which to some extent became codified with the Declaration of Paris (1856), the Hague Convention of (1907) and the Declaration of London (1909).

The dominant seapower in any given conflict sought to use its belligerent rights to control enemy commerce to the maximum extent. The secondary maritime powers sought to strengthen neutral immunity from the encroachments of the dominant seapower. The main rival of the dominant seapower encouraged them to defend their rights because it benefited when neutrals took up the trade it lost, while it waged all-out war on the exposed commercial interests of the dominant seapower. A belligerent which ignored the protests of the neutrals could end up provoking them into a combination which might threaten to overwhelm its own navy. Such leagues of armed neutralities of the Scandinavian states, the United Provinces, Prussia, Spain, Naples or Russia in various combinations were on occasion successful in forcing Britain to respect their neutral rights. But the will to cooperate against the dominant maritime belligerent collapsed whenever they were faced with the direct threat to their national independence represented by a hegemonic power on land. The Armed Neutrality of 1780 was fairly successful in coercing Britain because France

was opposing it on another continent.<sup>5</sup> The Russian attempt to resurrect armed neutrality 20 years later failed because France then represented a far more direct threat to the continental balance of power.<sup>6</sup> The United States, which was protected from such hegemonic threats by the Atlantic, went to war with Britain over neutral rights in 1812; its diplomacy sought to uphold the most extensive interpretation of them until the First World War.

Maritime law was hence an important element in the national security of smaller seapowers. It could not be ignored by the powerful, as international law could be in wars on land. The attitude which a state adopted towards maritime law depended on its position within the naval balance of power and the specific constellation of individual conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Britain usually sought to restrict neutral and extend belligerent rights, except in conflicts in which it was itself neutral or on the defensive. France sought to limit belligerent rights such as blockade and the right to search ships for contraband on the high seas, but also to keep open possibilities for legitimate commerce warfare. At the same time, it supported the smaller maritime powers in their desire to strengthen neutral rights because France, often the weaker belligerent at sea, profited when they carried on the trade that was cut off by the stronger belligerent.

The secondary and smaller maritime powers sought to strengthen neutral rights, even going so far as to propose the complete immunity of private property at sea. This was initially the position of the newly independent United States; but during the course of the nineteenth century its attitude changed as it grew to become a new world power. As its naval strength increased, it came to support more extensive belligerent rights. This also became the position of Germany from the turn of the twentieth century, after the small and weak German states were united and aspired to build a powerful battle fleet.

During the eighteenth century, the United Provinces, Sweden, Denmark–Norway, Russia, Naples and Portugal maintained respected, second-rate navies which ensured them a hearing in discussions over maritime law. In the great struggle between Britain and revolutionary (later Napoleonic) France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they were eliminated or contained by the Royal Navy. The threat that they might be used to France's advantage was too great for Britain to respect their independence. During the nineteenth century, they were never to be rebuilt to the same relative position in the international hierarchy. However, the introduction in the latter part of the century of new and affordable vessels and weapons, in addition to new operational concepts at least put them in a position to protect their territorial waters from neutrality violations. This, moreover, forced the great powers to take the assets of even the small countries into account when they made up their strategic calculations.

After 1815 the maritime balance of power was essentially a balance between the navies of the great powers, from which the smaller maritime

states had been eliminated. Yet this balance was also reflected in maritime law, indeed it underpinned the important extension of neutral rights which took effect when Britain acceded to the Declaration of Paris in 1856.<sup>8</sup> This treaty was a step towards the immunity of private property at sea, but subsequent attempts to further define the rights of neutrals at the Second Hague conference of 1907, and the London conference of 1908/1909 were hampered by British (and German) opposition.

The first peace conference in The Hague in 1899 among other things set out to protect hospital ships and to regulate the use of them during hostilities. The follow-up conference in 1907 was meant to modify and expand the agreements reached eight years earlier. It had a special focus on naval warfare and the status of seaborne trade. Thirteen declarations were negotiated and all except number 12 on "The Creation of an International Prize Court" were ratified and entered into effect in 1910. Section 13 was titled "The Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War". The Hague Convention of 1907 was regarded as a defining piece of international law by the small maritime countries. They considered it a safeguard against infringements and as important as naval power in securing vital national interests in times of war. The London conference in 1908/09 dealt with the unsolved questions of blockade, contraband and prize. It resulted in a reiteration of existing law and demonstrated an enhanced regard for neutral rights by drawing up lists of so-called conditional and unconditional contraband which were of vital importance for neutral trade. Not surprisingly, the U.S. was the only country to ratify the agreement.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the secondary great power navies adopted different strategies to offset British dominance. The Franco-Russian alliance, which came into being in the 1890s, posed the traditional threat of a combination of battle fleets, against which Britain sought to maintain the supremacy of the Royal Navy by means of the Naval Defence Act of 1889. Within the French naval officer corps a group of colonial enthusiasts called the *Jeune école* advocated a completely different approach.<sup>9</sup> They argued that technological developments, especially torpedoes based on small, fast surface vessels and submarines, had made it possible to attack Britain's exposed commercial interests without having to face down its battle fleet. It was believed that the threat of economic disruption and social unrest could force Britain to surrender, thus anticipating the core of the air-power thinking in the interwar years. Such a strategy, however, flew in the face of international law, and the *Jeune école* did not solve the problem of how to avoid the opposition that such a move would encounter.

Germany, in contrast, at the turn of the century adopted a different approach. The so-called "Tirpitz Plan" was laid down in the naval bills drawn up by Admiral Alfred Tirpitz. The first two passed the Reichstag in 1898 and 1900, and three more followed in 1906, 1908 and 1912. Tirpitz

envisaged that a modern secondary battle fleet concentrated in the North Sea would represent such a threat to the superiority of the Royal Navy that Britain would be forced to make political concessions enabling Germany to rise to world power status as a colonial and commercial power.<sup>10</sup> The weakness of the "Tirpitz Plan" was that it did not rest on any clear strategic conception. Paradoxically, Tirpitz's belief that the growing battle fleet did represent a real threat to Britain led him to advocate the abandonment of Germany's traditional support for neutral rights.<sup>11</sup> In effect, he adopted the attitude towards maritime law of a dominant seapower, without actually being one.

The United States pursued a fourth course. It maintained its traditional support for extensive neutral rights, including the complete immunity of private property at sea. At the same time, from the 1890s onwards it pursued a policy of naval rearmament that was eventually to result in the goal of a battle fleet "second to none". After the outbreak of war in 1914, however, it did not throw its naval strength into the balance to support neutral rights. Out of sympathy with Britain's defence of liberal civilization against militarist Germany, President Woodrow Wilson in practice allowed Britain to override neutral rights and impose a crippling blockade on Germany.<sup>12</sup> When Germany declared unlimited submarine warfare in 1917, however, Wilson entered the war with the declared aim of defending the freedom of the seas, an objective that was also to be pursued during the peace conference after the war ended in 1918.

Despite the large-scale naval race in the two decades before the outbreak of war in 1914 (in which, by the way, both great and small powers took part) the small neutral maritime powers had every reason to believe that the belligerents would respect the rights that had become common practice and been written into international law over the centuries. Very few envisaged that they would be quickly swept away in the total war that followed. We would therefore briefly like to present some historical illustrations of how the Scandinavian states adapted their national security to the realities of maritime law in the ensuing conflicts of the twentieth century.

What were the dominating challenges facing the Scandinavian countries as neutrals? The short answer is that they were vulnerable in times of war because of their geography and resources, although in different ways. Denmark and Norway flanked the debouches to the Atlantic, which made them a part of Germany's and Russia's strategic calculations. Consequently Britain also had vital naval interests attached to Danish and Norwegian waters in a war with any of them. If a blockade were to be efficient the Royal Navy had to control enemy shipping in Danish and Norwegian waters or the inner leads. Sweden had a more favourable strategic position and was not directly linked to great-power naval strategy. Moreover, the weakest military power among them, Denmark, was by far the most vulnerable due to its proximity to Germany and its control of the Baltic narrows.

Norway's position was also vulnerable because the 2,600 kilometre coast-line offered protected passage for belligerent naval and merchant vessels. But the remoteness from the areas of conflicts was by many regarded as a safeguard in itself.

The Scandinavian countries were open economies totally dependent on international trade and shipping. Denmark was a major exporter of food which was of great importance to both Britain and Germany. Sweden was a supplier of raw materials and industrial products on the international market and therefore also dependent on the uninterrupted flow of trade during war. Norway was a huge exporter of raw materials and fish. However, the most striking feature of the Norwegian economy was the merchant navy, which turned out to be an important factor in both world wars and in western contingency planning during the Cold War.

From the mid-nineteenth century the Norwegian merchant fleet grew tremendously. Before the outbreak of the First World War it was the fourth biggest in the world. The Norwegian merchant navy was therefore seen as a vital factor in international trade simply because of its considerable size, its versatile capacities, its competitiveness and its worldwide distribution. The most important feature of the Norwegian merchant navy was that it to a large extent served the trade system that encompassed the British Empire. To be inextricably woven into both the trade systems and the security calculations of the northern great powers posed a huge challenge for the Scandinavian countries. The tricky question was whether it was at all possible to remain outside a major conflict under such circumstances.

The Scandinavian governments firmly believed so on the basis of historical experiences underpinned by the recent development of international law. What they had in common was a policy of strict non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in times of war. This policy was undisputed and not questioned by any government in any of the countries up to 1940. The economic structure of the Scandinavian states certainly had strong political, strategic and economic implications. Isolation and detachment from great power politics were generally assumed to constitute a viable security option. In peacetime the foreign ministries directed much of their efforts and attention to activities such as negotiating arbitration treaties, promoting arms reduction and the development of international law and institutions. The efforts to change the code of conduct between states and to encourage commerce and social development were believed to be far more important for national security than military preparation. But which military measures were most suitable to shore up the policy of non-alignment and neutrality?

The Scandinavian countries first of all needed a defence organization that could endure periods of protracted neutrality as the countries' first line of defence in compliance with political guidelines, historical experience and international law. This meant a relatively large defence establishment to cover a vast area with a relatively small scattered population.

Coastal artillery forts and controlled mine fields situated at the approaches to the major towns, aircraft for observation and interception and naval vessels and hired civilian patrol boats for the surveillance of the long coastline.

It was realized in the late nineteenth century that torpedoes and mines offered a unique opportunity for small countries to acquire efficient and affordable seapower for littoral operations, in particular for sea denial. The neutrality guards were also heavily dependent on a tight network of observation posts served by the navy and civilian communications facilities along the coast. There was, moreover, a close cooperation with civilian agencies such as local police authorities, the customs service, the pilot service, and lighthouse keepers for surveillance and reporting.

The task of the neutrality guard was to ensure that strategically sensitive sea areas did not become power vacuums, which it was feared could be filled by the great powers with vital interests attached to them. In addition, the military forces were necessary to meet the duties laid down in international law. When the total sea defence and observational system was mustered at the outbreak of the First World War it proved to be surprisingly effective, and well-adjusted to the coastal landscape of Scandinavia. The Scandinavian navies were actually able to intercept great power infringements successfully on a number of occasions during the war.

It was no doubt the extremely vulnerable position as maritime flank nations, demonstrated in the total wars of the twentieth century, which finally led Denmark and Norway to give up non-alignment and neutrality. No neutral free space existed and no policy of isolation from the surrounding world was practicable when the great powers were engaged in an existential war. This was demonstrated after the U.S. became a belligerent in 1917 and the German attack in 1940 left no doubt. International law could simply not be regarded as a viable option for national security. Reluctantly, Denmark and Norway chose to become a part of the western security arrangement, which, after all, represented the free world. The fact that Sweden remained neutral both during the Second World War and the Cold War illustrates our case: geography, under certain conditions, overrules political wishes and traditions.

To fully grasp the maritime development of any region, we will argue, it is crucial to take both the dominant, the secondary and the smaller navies into consideration. It is the dynamics between all of them that offer insights that are not provided by a scrutiny of only the dominant power and its main contenders.

## Notes

- 1 For important aspects of the history of neutrality, see, for example, Ole Feldbæk, *Denmark and the Armed Neutrality 1800–1801: Small Power Policy In A World War* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980); John W. Coogan, *The End of*



- Neutrality. The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899–1915* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Carl J. Kulsrud, *Maritime Neutrality to 1780. A History of the Main Principles Governing Neutrality and Belligerency to 1780* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936); Trygve Mathisen, “Nøytralitetstanken i norsk politikk fra 1890-årene til Norge gikk med i Folkeforbundet”, *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 36, 1952.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Thomas Munch-Petersen, *Defying Napoleon. How Britain Bombed Copenhagen and Seized the Danish Fleet in 1807* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2007).
- <sup>3</sup> For Britain and the development of the laws of the sea, see, for example, Andrew Lambert, “Great Britain and Maritime Law from the Declaration of Paris to the Era of Total War”, in Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen, eds, *Navies in Northern Waters, 1721–2000* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914* (Boston: Brill, 2002), [Chapter 1](#), part 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Kulsrud, *Maritime Neutrality*.
- <sup>6</sup> Feldbæk, *Denmark and the Armed Neutrality*.
- <sup>7</sup> Hobson and Kristiansen, eds, *Navies in Northern Waters*, for more on the examples in this paragraph.
- <sup>8</sup> C.I. Hamilton, “Anglo-French Seapower and the Declaration of Paris”, *International History Review*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1982).
- <sup>9</sup> Arne Røksund, *The Jeune École: The Strategy of the Weak* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*.
- <sup>11</sup> Hobson, “Prussia, Germany and Maritime Law from Armed Neutrality to Unlimited Submarine Warfare”, in Hobson and Kristiansen, eds, *Navies in Northern Waters*.
- <sup>12</sup> John W. Coogan, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899–1915* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).



### 3 Geography and seapower

*Jakub Grygiel*

Can any state with access to the seas, political will, and sufficient financial resources develop a navy and become a seapower? Navies are capital-intensive forms of military power, and arguably the answer to this question should be affirmative: a coastline and money can give you seapower. History, however, suggests that in order to become both a naval and a seapower, an important distinction explained below, a state needs more than a port, a willing leadership, and a generous budget. These features are necessary but insufficient conditions to generate naval and seapower.

There are, in fact, several other variables related to geography that shape a state's capacity to emerge as naval and seapowers. In what follows, I examine five sets of features: (1) the nature of the coastline and access to seas; (2) the political situation on the land borders; (3) technology; (4) control over distant bases and chokepoints; (5) strategic mindset or culture. Some of these (e.g., the coastline) are more geological in nature than others (e.g., strategic culture), but they are all shaped by the geopolitical position of the state, and they all influence that state's ability to develop a navy and to become a seapower.

Naturally, the insight that geographic considerations are important in the development and implementation of a strategy, and of seapower in particular, is not new. I do not claim to break new ground here, and this chapter is merely a restatement of some of these ancient points, which at times may seem trite and simplistic. Yet, these insights are not antiquated. On the contrary, they continue to have enormous importance in any analysis of why and how states decide to build naval power, and also of how they may turn their naval forces into seapower. In particular, they are very timely as strategists and naval experts debate Chinese maritime ambitions, naval capabilities, and future trends. China's geographic conditions,<sup>1</sup> from the nature of its land borders to its strategic culture, play an important role in its ability to build and project naval power. At the same time, these conditions alone will not tell us whether China, or any other power, will develop seapower. Geography does not cause naval expansion; it merely constrains or aids it, influencing its effectiveness.

## **Two clarifications: naval versus seapower and line of causation**

Before dwelling on the five categories of geographic variables, two clarifications are necessary. First, a distinction needs to be made between naval power and seapower. Second, the relationship between geographic features, naval power, and seapower is complex and demands a caveat.

First, naval power refers to the technical capabilities of the navy: the operational range, the armor, the firepower, the number and the tactical prowess of the ships and their commanders. It is a component of state power, alongside the infantry or the air force, as well as the industrial capacity and resource base. All these components contribute to the capability of the state to defend itself and, if feasible and necessary, to project influence abroad.

Seapower is contingent on the possession of a fleet, but does not automatically stem from it. Simply put, seapower denotes the ability to bring naval capabilities to bear on the interests and security of another state, thereby altering its behavior. Such ability depends obviously on the possession of a navy, but also on the target state's vulnerability and exposure to the sea. If a state is not dependent on sealand and is landlocked (or its coast is well protected), then a hostile naval power has very limited ability to exercise seapower. Moreover, a naval power may choose not to seek seapower. A navy, for instance, can limit its operational range to littoral protection or commerce raiding, which constitute threats to another state's command of the sea but do not replace it.<sup>2</sup> In other words, to generate seapower, a navy must not only deny the enemy freedom of movement on the seas but also be capable of controlling it and translating this control into political influence.<sup>3</sup>

In brief, the navy is a weapon and a tool in the state's arsenal; seapower is a goal and a potential outcome.<sup>4</sup> To put it more broadly, naval power is tangible and can be easily quantified by the numbers of ships, their tonnage and firepower, and so on. Seapower is more ethereal, a "shadow,"<sup>5</sup> and is measured by the ability of a state to influence the behavior of others through maritime control. The "movements of warships alone" are not sufficient to determine whether a state has seapower or not.<sup>6</sup>

The second clarification concerns the line of causation or influence. In its simplest formulation, my argument is that the five sets of geography-related features shape the ability of a state to generate both naval power and seapower. For instance, the vulnerability of a naval power to an attack on its land borders weakens its seapower because its attention and resources are likely to focus on the continental realm (and in fact, it may even undermine its desire to develop a navy in the first place). Indeed, for a power with long and unstable land borders the development of a navy is a luxury, not a necessity, and the commitment of resources to the maritime realm may weaken its overall security.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, reality is more complex. Some of the geopolitical conditions described below are themselves shaped by a state's ability to project naval power. As a result, there is a danger of a circular argument, in particular when dealing with the last two sets of geographic variables (the architecture of overseas bases and chokepoints and the strategic mindset). In fact, naval forces are almost always necessary to develop and sustain distant bases (unless these bases are acquired through continental expansion), which in turn make the projection of naval power feasible and more effective. Similarly, the possession of a "blue-water" fleet may create incentives to think in seafaring terms and alter the strategic mindset of policy-makers. For simpler, geological features, such as the nature of a coastline, the risks of such circularity are minimal. The moment we start to deal with conditions that are more geopolitical, namely, that are themselves a product of power including naval power, the argument increases in complexity. The five geographic conditions that follow are therefore organized roughly in an order moving from the purely geological (coastlines) to increasingly more geopolitical ones (e.g., land borders, bases).

### **The coastline: access to sea, unity of naval power, easy defense**

The most immediate geographic condition necessary to develop naval and seapower is access to the sea. Without a port, a state simply cannot develop a navy. Not surprisingly, many naval powers sought to limit their competitors' access to the coast because a hostile power, deprived of coast, cannot present a maritime threat. For instance, Great Britain was keenly attuned to who controlled the main shipbuilding ports in Europe, and at the 1815 Congress of Vienna the most important European ports were given to British allies.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases, control over the coastline of closed seas (e.g., the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Baltic) can be the main source of seapower. The Roman Empire maintained maritime primacy over the Mediterranean in large measure by controlling its entire coastline. Given the relative ease with which a power could develop a navy, as the Romans themselves proved in the second Punic war, to avoid naval competition it was necessary to prevent the rise of independent coastal locations. To a degree, therefore seapower was achieved through coastal control, rather than only through naval force.<sup>9</sup> The loss of the North African coast to the Vandals in the fifth century AD meant also the gradual development of a naval opponent that raided Italy. It has to be noted that coastal envelopment can be a successful strategy for some of the smaller seas but it is an impossible feat on the oceans.<sup>10</sup> A lengthy coastline is insufficient to extend control over the oceanic waters.

Three additional characteristics of the coastline are important for developing and managing naval and seapower. First, access to the oceans has to