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# The Ever-Increasing Importance of Sea Power

It's simple, says Eric Grove. If a state wants to influence global events from a distance, then it must be an acknowledged sea power. Today, he explains why navies remain the most formidable demonstration of a state's geopolitical and security prowess.

By Eric Grove for ISN

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If one wishes to shape the contemporary security environment to reflect one's own and allies' geopolitical interests one has to be a major sea power or a significant contributor to a maritime coalition. The reason is simple enough. While we call this planet 'Earth', it is hardly an accurate name. If one looks at us from space we inhabit a blue planet, two thirds of which is covered by water. 'Oceania' would be a more accurate description.

Throughout human history our capacity to use the sea for moving goods, people and resources has been vital. Until mechanical land and air transport was developed (and even after it) sea lanes were the main arteries of global communication, thereby fundamentally shaping human history in the process. Indeed, even in an increasingly globalised world ships still carry the vast majority of global trade. That said, sea transport is still quite often taken for granted - so much so that 'sea blindness' is a common affliction among the world's political elites. Yet without safe and secure sea lanes, the global economy would collapse. No more oil and gas; no more imported coal or iron ore; few foreign built road vehicles; major reductions in food supplies. Accordingly, our dependence on the sea is as great as ever and the capacity to project sea power in the name of safeguarding economic security and geopolitical interests remains essential.

## The Sea Power Jigsaw

So what makes a state a bona fide frontline sea power? Part of the answer lies in the anecdote that the first question US presidents ask during times of crisis is 'where are the carriers'? The aircraft carrier is a uniquely flexible, deployable and self-sustaining air base. Currently, the United States' Navy leads the way with its 11 aircraft carriers. However, given the pressures of sequestration it currently can only sustain two carriers on deployment, the USS George H W Bush in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Harry S Truman battle group in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, given the American tilt to Asia one must entertain doubts about such a concentration in the future.

Beyond the United States and its Western allies (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) other countries also clearly recognize the geopolitical importance and significance of aircraft carriers.

India's carrier capability is well established and China is undoubtedly catching up. Despite its constitution, Japan is developing 'helicopter destroyers' that look remarkably like small aircraft carriers. Brazil intends to maintain its carrier and Russia is talking about increasing capabilities in this area. The logic of geography overwhelms land-based myopia.

In addition, the ability to effectively deploy other amphibious forces is also an essential feature of modern sea power. Despite the absence of carrier strike capabilities, the United Kingdom has nevertheless retained a 'Response Force Task Group' based around an amphibious transport dock (LPD) and helicopter carrying amphibious transport (LPH - in recent years its last carrier in its alternative role). Such vessels allow a wide level of flexibility, thereby making them useful across the whole spectrum of naval tasks. Hovercraft and tilt rotor aircraft have also done much to transform the capabilities of the best equipped amphibious forces. And where the West leads, the 'rest' quite often follow. China, for example, is currently building amphibious vessels with longer reach than previously, as have South Korea and Singapore.

### **The Three Sides of the Triangle**

If a state can demonstrate that it is capable of deploying the abovementioned platforms, then it is well on its way to projecting itself as a sea power. Indeed, projecting such capabilities is in line with a British maritime doctrine that defines the three naval roles as the sides of a triangle. At the bottom, supporting the whole edifice is the military/war fighting capability that makes a navy what it is rather than being a mere coast guard. There has been an unfortunate tendency of late to underrate this role but as the rise of China and the bellicosity of Russia brings international politics 'back to normal' things are changing. For instance, there is now much discussion of China's anti access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities and their potential to deny the United States its capacity to use its potentially dominant sea power to secure its allies in the East Asian littoral.

The next side of the triangle is 'international engagement'. Naval diplomacy can be coercive 'gunboat diplomacy' (although one needs more than 'gunboats' normally to carry it out) or cooperative, in terms of combined exercises, capacity building and 'showing the flag'. Naval forces have a unique capacity for what the British call 'poise': that is keeping options open by remaining in international waters but within range of intervention by air or amphibiously. Thus interest can be demonstrated and possible contingencies covered without the commitment implied by ground or land-based air forces.

Finally, there are constabulary tasks whereby navies join with coastguards in attempting to combat piracy and the misappropriation of the oceans' natural resources. This is the one side of the triangle where small-to-medium powers can make their influence felt on the tenets of sea power. That's because many of these states are only able to afford maritime constabulary forces and specialist coastguards. But that's not to say that some smaller states are capable of playing a more influential role beyond the littoral. Denmark once had a navy that was orientated to short reach coastal operations and longer range coastguard duties. However, the arrival of the 'Absalon' type general purpose ship has allowed it to play a much larger role in global maritime operations.

### **At the Cutting Edge**

Yet, despite such developments a tendency remains in some quarters to dismiss navies and their role in safeguarding shipping as somewhat old fashioned. Nothing could be further from the truth. Technological advances help to keep sea power at the forefront of attempts by major powers to influence geopolitics and the global security landscape. For instance, ship-based missile systems now provide anti-ballistic missile defense for nearby land masses, as evidenced by the permanent

deployment of American destroyers with these capabilities in the Mediterranean Sea.

For more than half a century nuclear power and stealth have combined to allow submarines to move global distances at high speed in great secrecy. Indeed, the potential of such craft to affect matters ashore has never been greater. While conventional land attack cruise missiles and fast and long ranged guided torpedoes remain a threat to surface ships, the latest diesel electric submarines now have air independent fuel cells that greatly increase their underwater endurance, if only at slow speeds. Such assets are of great use in sea denial operations in war and intelligence gathering in peace. And let's not forget that long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles continue to provide the invulnerable core of the deterrent capabilities of the UN P5 and, increasingly, other emerging powers.

### **An Assured Future**

Accordingly, navies remain an essential feature of attempts made by leading powers to shape geopolitics at a distance. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council are major naval powers, four of the second rank and one of the first. Their capability to use the sea is a vital attribute for nations with global interests and status. India is also emerging as a major second rank navy with control of the Indian Ocean as its objective. As this is crossed by shipping vital to China's economic security the scope for Sino-Indian conflict is clear and this in an ocean vital for the many nations who rely on shipping plying its waters. Naval activity might well be required to protect, for example, Japanese oil supplies.

Given the chastening experience of Iraq and Afghanistan, the era of large scale land interventions by Western countries in trouble spots around the Middle East and South Asia appears to be at an end. This, in turn, opens up possibilities for more distant maritime interventions of the type witnessed in Libya. Back in 2011, naval forces played a key role in blockade, bombardment and enforcing the no fly zone. And while land based air forces were also important, they were not as responsive as elements of sea power. Indeed, their presence was only possible through host nation support. The US-led intervention into Iraq in 1991 depended on such assistance although carriers still contributed to the air campaign and amphibious forces provided a key diversion.

Moreover, Libya followed the initial Afghan example in 2001 of using sea-based assets to support local forces. Such was the reach of the coalition maritime air power in the first part of Operation Enduring Freedom that a landlocked country was subjected to a decisive campaign by local forces backed by naval fighters. It was proof, if such was needed, that the reach of sea power both strategically and tactically has never been greater. Deployed in the most extensive geographical medium available, which it is able to exploit better than ever, maritime forces are neglected by significant nations at their peril.

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