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The Use of Naval Forces In Peacetime

Laurence Martin

If *peacetime* is defined generously as virtually every state short of all-out war, the use of naval force in such a state presents a subject of immense scope. For, contrary to some of the more alarmist media, peace—if sometimes a little hot—is the normal condition. Armed forces discharge most of their functions without warfare and, indeed, short of the point at which any shooting takes place. This has certainly been a longstanding characteristic of navies. Writing of his experiences in the Mediterranean in the 1890s, for instance, Vice Admiral H.H. Smith of the Royal Navy declared: “I don’t think we thought very much about war with a big ‘W.’ We looked on the Navy more as a World Police Force than as a warlike instrument. We considered that our job was to safeguard law and order throughout the world, safeguard civilisation, put out fires on shore and act as a guide, philosopher and friend to the merchant ships of all nations.”¹ Paradoxically, the traditional success of armed forces in exercising their influence short of war, encourages the illusion that they are irrelevant.

Particular problems are raised in the nuclear age when one attempts to define peacetime by distinguishing it from all-out war. No such neat distinction can be maintained in theoretical discussion for the dominant task of both strategic thought and practical policy is to ascertain and maintain the limits of such a war. Moreover, even if it is possible to draw a pragmatic line between peace and war, the course and outcome of such a war would inevitably be very much determined by peacetime operations. The habitual tendency of the democracies to begin their wars by being taken by surprise, then devote the early phase of combat to making up lost ground, can scarcely be tolerated in a world where military technology can produce such rapid and decisive results as the present.

The peacetime role of sea power is also complicated by the broad scope of sea power itself. As Admiral Mahan was at frequent pains to indicate, sea power comprises much more than the military navy. Today it embraces, in addition, not merely the merchant and fishing fleets, but the industries of shipbuilding, marine engineering, and electronics, the network of port facilities, and the systems of finance and insurance, many of which are now in

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the service not merely of shipping but of the new off-shore industrial and strategic installations. The Navy then, is the military component of sea power and the maritime component of military power.

Today, however, the Navy is not unchallenged even in this role. Technology has blurred the lines between the typical service organizations originally based on modes of locomotion. Broadly speaking, sailors sailed and soldiers rode or walked. As soon as airmen began to fly, however, and even more when missiles appeared, the seaborne and land-based military forces became able to penetrate deeply into each other's spheres. We need, therefore, to be clear from time to time, whether we are speaking of power exercised at sea or power wielded from the sea.

Possibly even more important than technology in changing the context of sea power has been the evolution of legal and political concepts. Naval power is critically conditioned by the legal status of the high seas, an arena now much eroded both by the extension of territorial waters and the massive expansion in the number of sovereign littoral states. Even more pervasive has been the changing climate of political opinion both domestic and international about the overt use of force. The use of force is still endemic but the aura of disapproval that has developed during this century—as typified in the Hague Conventions, the League of Nations and United Nations—has combined with distaste of affluent societies for hardship and danger to increase very greatly the political costs of resorting to force, at least among the democratic nations.

In such a strategic context, it cannot be assumed that sea power, in its narrower sense of coercive naval power, is politically useful merely because it clearly exists and could be employed. Nevertheless it does seem that naval power, even in our own age, partakes of some enduring characteristics which make it particularly relevant to the contemporary strategic scene. That scene is one in which conflict, at least between the major political blocs centered upon the nuclear superpowers, is both persistent and muted. It is a world in which struggle is conducted in twilight; in which the ultimate terror of nuclear war and, on the democratic side at least, the more general inhibitions about the use of force ensure that the contending parties are remarkably restrained in their response to acts and provocations which in earlier ages would have been almost automatic *casus belli*. In this world, in which action is often indirect and oblique, and in which threats often take the place of execution, some of the qualities of sea power are especially well adapted.

Foremost among these is strategic flexibility. This often noted attribute stems partly from the technical characteristics of naval power and partly from its political context. Technically, the payload of naval vessels combines with their relative mobility and speed to provide an unrivaled combination of range and endurance. The marriage to shipborne aircraft and missiles adds a formidable capacity to reach beyond the shoreline, best exemplified in the

modern aircraft carrier, a package of mobile air power capable of arriving on the scene of action rapidly and ready for action.

Such technical attributes could not take effect, however, were it not for the freedom of the high seas which renders them a uniquely permeable strategic medium in which rival national forces can legally penetrate and operate amongst each other in peacetime. This offers a freedom of access that can best be appreciated by contrast with the endless problems of overflight in the absence of any aerial equivalent to the concept of peaceful passage.

In combination, these legal and technical characteristics make naval power singularly well-adapted for today's twilight world of maneuver and demonstration. At their most conspicuous, naval vessels are formidable mobile pieces of national territory whose characteristics have introduced "showing the flag" into the English language as the epitome of open assertion. Yet exploiting their capacity to loiter and the vastness and emptiness of the oceans, naval vessels are the ideal "over-the-horizon" force, making their point only to specialized audiences equipped to take it. The range of operations is thus extended from committed forceful intervention, to blockade or mere presence. Moreover the intensity of commitment is relatively adjustable. Less dependent than land or air power on fixed and local bases, less subject because of this to scrutiny as to "force levels" in any particular arena, naval power seems preeminently suited to a period in which the capacity to "hang loose," to tune and retune the style of operation, has unprecedented value.

So far as the United States in particular is concerned, sea power was from the start inevitably a vital element in the life of what was an "island power" in relation to main centers of world politics. After the standoff of 1812-14 ensured a permanent truce between the United States and Great Britain, the Royal Navy served to shelter the Americas from European interference. But once Britain began to lose its naval supremacy, the potential collapse of the European balance of power led many American strategists and statesmen to fear a danger of actual physical threat to the United States from hostile European and Asian powers. American sea power thus became a means to project a forward defense in two World Wars and, in the present era, much the same thinking has transformed the United States into the keystone of an alliance, Nato, that testifies to its dependence on sea power by actually being named after an ocean.

It is true that once a balance of nuclear deterrence arose and the instruments of that balance acquired intercontinental ranges, it could be argued that the only serious physical threat to the United States could be warded off by a retaliating strategic force independent of overseas territory. But to a large extent the threat of invasion or even any significant physical attack on the mainland had always been somewhat mythical, used chiefly as a surrogate menace to jolt American public opinion into forestalling a more

subtle danger: the deterioration of the American "strategic milieu" and the isolation of a democratic and commercially oriented United States in a hostile world of militarism and totalitarianism. A president as early in American history and as repelled by overseas entanglements as Jefferson already found himself sponsoring maritime operations against piracy. George Washington's warning had in any case been merely against the "ordinary vicissitudes"² of foreign affairs and the challenges of the twentieth century clearly transcend that definition.

Consequently the United States finds itself today the chief pillar sustaining a world compatible with American ideals. To this world there are two threats, related but distinguishable. One is the challenge of the other superpower. When a colossus of the land faces a leviathan of the sea, sea power is an essential means for the latter to project its countervailing power. The rapid development of the Soviet Navy, however, has given this colossus a maritime arm with which to extend its own power, so that the competition is now on, as well as at the margin of, the sea.

The second threat is contained in the forces of conflict or mere anarchy that detract from the standards of world order. Like most dominant states, the United States has an interest in order, born partly of the self-interest of a trading and traveling nation, partly of the risk that violence anywhere may spread, with particular danger in a nuclear world, and partly, from a genuinely altruistic benevolence. The latter quality sometimes absent, even more frequently derided, nevertheless does exist to the point, in fact, at which it often complicates and frustrates rational response to the crueler imperatives of the balance of power.

Clearly the two problems, that of the Soviet Union and that of precarious order in the wider world, are linked by the virtue of the latter being an arena for superpower rivalry as well as an autonomous source of problems. Nevertheless the two are different and grave errors can derive from failing to recognize this; in particular to see all the problems of the Third World as episodes in the containment of Soviet communism leads inevitably to over-extension of Western defensive resources.

This is not the place to debate either the general issue of Soviet expansionism—is it defensive or offensive?—or the more specific question of whether Soviet naval expansion is the product of strategic defensiveness or geopolitical aggressiveness. Probably the strategic-defensive element has been predominant in the case of the Navy. What is undeniable, however, is that the improved Soviet Navy and its potential for the geopolitical role has not gone unnoticed by Soviet leaders. Even if some of Admiral Gorshkov's boasts about the global advancement of Soviet state interests can be discounted as service special pleading, the pledges of such as Marshal Grechko that Soviet military power ensures the irreversibility of socialist gains around the world clearly endorse an "imperial" role for the Soviet Navy which

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recent history well illustrates.³ Since the minor adjustments to the postwar settlement in Austria and Finland, Soviet gains have proved irreversible wherever they have been contiguous to the Soviet Union itself. Where clients have been separated from Soviet territory, as in Egypt and Somalia, reversals have taken place. Clearly the Soviet Navy could, if it became ascendant, offer a kind of extended contiguity that might make such breaks for independence impossible. Be that as it may, the mere presence of the Soviet Navy on all the high seas has radically altered the context within which the United States must consider both the war and peacetime exercise of its own sea power.

In a comprehensive review of the uses of naval force in peacetime the submarine ballistic forces might well rank first in importance. They are the archetype of residual deterrence and, if general war were to take a more protracted form than a single spasm of mutual destruction, counter-SLBM warfare and equivalent defensive measures might well become a major preoccupation. Despite the need to anticipate this, however, the SSBNs fall somewhat outside the scope of this survey.

More difficult to exclude or to evaluate in reference to peacetime operations is the likely scale of maritime warfare in a major European, or Northeast Asian war. At one phase in postwar strategic thought it was believed that, because such a war would be rapid and probably nuclear, such earlier phenomena as the battles of the Atlantic were unlikely to recur. The Royal Navy suffered a well-known fall in morale when the 1957 Defence White Paper admitted that the "place of seapower in future large scale war is uncertain"⁴ and even a much more recent British study of sea power emanating from the Royal Naval College suggested in 1982 that "traditional naval activities seem to be more open to the charge of being irrelevant than ever before."⁵

Such a view is misplaced. The charge is undoubtedly raised both by rival armed services and in pacifist circles, but ready answers are available. In the most general terms, recent political history in the Western Alliance shows there is a clear imperative not to accept the prospect, still less to render it inevitable by our own policies, that a future major war could only be brief and catastrophic. When the whole thrust of Nato strategy for war in Europe is to raise the capability for prolonged conventional defense, the naval component becomes increasingly prominent. This thrust of Western policy is reinforced by the common historical experience in this century that predictions of short wars in Europe are falsified in the event.

Admittedly the questions of how long such a war might in fact be, how it should be fought on the sea, what proportion of our resources should be devoted to preparation and in what form, are all vexed questions which it is fortunately not the task of this paper to answer. On any assumptions, peacetime preparation for such operations will preempt a great deal of naval effort in Nato and by the United States in particular.

In weighing the demands of the big war in Europe against the lesser but more frequently acute requirements for naval operations elsewhere, a prudent answer should take several considerations into account. Among these is the fact that if there is any arena of potential conflict in which nuclear deterrence can be relied upon to discourage aggression, Europe is surely it. While it may be politically unacceptable and strategically imprudent to rely entirely upon such deterrence, it would be equally unwise to ignore it when allocating scarce resources. Europe may be the most important geopolitical stake at issue but war in Europe is also among the less likely contingencies. There is a school of thought that implies that the United States should be willing to run the risk of not deterring, and of losing if they occur, any of a wide range of encounters around the world while keeping its powder dry for the "big one" in Europe.⁶ This not only runs the risk of subordinating likelihood entirely to gravity but also neglects two possibilities: the first, that war in Europe might evolve precisely from some extra-European encounter that gets out of hand and, the second, that the deterrence of aggression in Europe may well be greatly reinforced by demonstrations of will and the readiness to use force elsewhere.⁷

In turning to the occasions on which sea power is called upon to act in contingencies other than a major East-West encounter, we find that they have been both numerous and demanding. The bulk of active peacetime maritime operations and almost all the actual spilling of blood since 1945 have occurred in "third world" contingencies. Two well-known and substantial studies have clearly established both the frequency with which armed force has been employed and the preeminence of naval power in such events. Leaving aside such major conflicts as the Korean and Vietnamese wars and excluding the numerous actions of such medium powers as France and the United Kingdom, US armed forces alone were employed no less than 215 times between 1946 and 1975; 177 of these operations involved the US Navy and 100 were conducted solely by the Navy. Aircraft carriers participated in 106 incidents and amphibious forces in 71; the US Marine Corps was committed twice as often as Army units.⁸

For comparison, 190 peacetime uses of Soviet armed forces have been identified between 1944 and 1979. In these the Soviet Navy was involved only 43 times but, significantly, it was deployed in two-thirds of the incidents that were not contiguous to Soviet territory.⁹

It is perhaps worth noting that the study of American operations, conducted by the Brookings Institution, concludes that three-quarters of the employments of US forces were "successful" in achieving American political objectives and that half could be regarded as successful even over the long term. While many such peacetime operations can be on a small scale, they are potentially demanding. There is, of course, the intrinsically difficult task of bringing force or the threat of force effectively to bear on political situations.

From the solely military point of view, the rapidly increasing quantity and quality of armed force at the disposal of local and regional powers poses problems for would-be interventionists, even if instances of this being exercised are not yet numerous. The Argentine performance in the Falklands war is perhaps a precursor of things to come while any thought of intervention in the current conflicts in the Persian Gulf must inevitably be conditioned by a healthy respect for regional military potential.

In all regional situations the Soviet Navy has now also become a factor with which to reckon. Merely by existing with a demonstrated capability to operate in any ocean and with a widespread permanent presence, the Soviet Navy affects the strategic calculations of not merely the United States but of any other parties that might be affected, positively or negatively, by American naval operations. In all limited operations, prudence requires anticipating what the outcome would be if the incident escalated to higher levels. Thus, ideally, one should enter a nonbelligerent demonstration with the ability to prevail if it evolves into limited war and limited war with the confidence of winning any larger conflict that might result. This is the preferred condition for dominating the process of escalation, even if in practice states frequently act on a riskier basis. "Gunboat diplomacy" had its full efficacy when behind the gunboat was known to lurk a cruiser, and behind the cruiser a formidable battle fleet. By posing a new and added dimension to the possible evolution of any naval operation, the Soviet Navy is thus a latent factor in any responsible strategic calculation, however cautious its behavior has been hitherto.

Any general consideration of the use of naval power in peacetime must take into account the powerful and well-founded inhibitions against any use of force to resolve political problems. These inhibitions can be derived from both altruism and self-interest. At least among the Western democracies there is an admirable though by no means always decisive reluctance to inflict injury, or to override with brute force the self-determining political processes of others. Such reluctance is reinforced by that element in democratic political theory that persists in believing, admittedly sometimes contrary to experience, that the political settlements reached by peaceful self-determination are more stable and lasting than those attained by forcible coercion. Further and perhaps more effective inhibitions arise from the multiple costs and special element of unpredictability that are involved in military action—characteristics that arise both from the actual course of operations and the reactions of governments, politicians, media and public opinion. There are consequently powerful motives to contemplate political and economic measures before resort to the military.

Nevertheless, force has qualities as a political instrument that make it uniquely relevant to some contingencies. While politico-economic means do operate by influencing the behavior of others, often over a substantial period

of time, force can often execute an immediate physical transformation. This was achieved in the *Mayaguez* rescue and equally dramatically not achieved in the attempted rescue of the Teheran hostages. Force is often the only quick and direct way of prevailing against the force of others and anyone who is known to be wholly adverse to and utterly inhibited from acting on that principle is handicapped even in the exercise of lesser sanctions—the effective defiance by Mussolini of League sanctions in the thirties being an often cited broad-brush instance of this.

In calculating the costs of employing US naval power in the present era, it is not possible to ignore the risk of collision with the Soviet Union, most probably though by no means necessarily in the form of the Soviet Navy. Whatever level of naval investment the United States may choose, it will not be possible to restore the virtual monopoly of capability for power projection that excluded this danger in the past. However, it would be going to extreme to be so inhibited by the danger of encounters between the two superpowers as to confer an effective monopoly on the Soviet Union.

So far the pattern of military intervention in Third World areas has not significantly involved direct confrontations between the superpowers. Rather the pattern has been of action against local powers or insurgent forces, sometimes the clients of a superpower and sometimes not. The task of Western forces is to hold the ring against the Soviet Union while either conducting operations against local opponents or, much more satisfactorily, letting allies, local or not, deal with the local situation. The inhibition of one superpower from intervening where another takes action is, of course, derived ultimately from the whole range of superpower military capability that weights the risks of war between the two. But both theories of crisis management and the pattern of power projection so far in the Soviet-American rivalry suggest that there is particular value in what might be called locally relevant power. Because, in the nuclear age, local issues are dwarfed by the potential consequences of an ultimate war between the superpowers, one tends to concede a monopoly of directly wielded force to the other according to which appears to have the greater stake and commitment. An established local presence, the capability to create one, to escalate within the local context rather than by broadening the conflict, and to achieve prompt success may be the most significant ways of establishing the right to prevail. As a force characteristically able to display such qualities in distant theaters of conflict, sea power is thus relevant not merely to immediate operations but to the wider political context that sets the rules for particular conflicts. Many dimensions of sea power that may not seem directly relevant to a strategic problem may thus play an important latent part. It may well be, for instance, that the massive potential of American aircraft carriers dictates the outcome of crises in which their actual deployment has never been needed or contemplated.

The delicate relationship of Western public opinion to the use of force constitutes a special reason for the value of locally relevant power. Peacetime operations, however fuzzily defined, always fall short of those contingencies in which national survival is clearly at stake. The less direct and dramatic the challenge, the more room there is for dissension as to the wisdom of meeting it, let alone in what manner that should be done. There is a free rein for debate both internationally and domestically, between government and opposition and among the agencies of government itself. Politics tends not to stop at the water and the record of solidarity among the Western allies on Third World issues is not encouraging—Suez, Vietnam, the Falklands and Grenada all offering illustrations of varying degree.

While there may be no adequate basis to assert that moderate and limited action minimizes costs in this complex political arena, there are times when rapid, decisive and overwhelming action may produce a *fait accompli* that stills debate. Also governments see the merit and value the capacity to tailor their responses to the political climate and will frequently find it useful to deal with problems so far as possible by local measures that are clearly appropriate to the challenge. This further brings into question the idea that the provision of forces capable of meeting challenges “in their own terms” can be obviated by the concept of horizontal escalation.

Whatever course is ultimately chosen, the political inhibitions of national leaders about the use of force typically impose additional difficulties on military commanders who are frequently asked to act later than would have been optimal, under burdensome rules of engagement, and after far less than maximum advantage has been taken of political and strategic warning. Political leaders often ask military commanders to achieve more than is reasonable and the commanders frequently demand wider margins of safety than the politicians can afford.¹⁰ In this respect, better mutual understanding is much to be desired. To cite once again that distinguished voice from this college, Admiral Mahan wrote: “diplomatic conditions affect military action and military considerations diplomatic measures. They are inseparable parts of a whole: and as such those responsible for military measures should understand the diplomatic factors and vice versa.”¹¹ If it cannot be said that military leaders always display political sophistication, it is at least undeniable that their colleges and journals pay frequent attention to the problem; it is far from clear that political leaders devote similar effort to comprehending the nature, capabilities and limitations of the military tools at their disposal.

Obviously the flexibility of sea power, its range, speed, size and variety of payload, and its capacity to loiter offshore or strike deep inland are qualities well-suited to help political leaders orchestrate the application of force to fit specific contingencies. To maximize such qualities requires effort and choices about the level of investment in forces and in bases or in the capacity to do without them. Moreover, in the perpetual struggle to meet strategic needs on

limited resources, decisions must be made about priorities, for flexible though they are, naval forces are not infinitely adaptable. Today particularly difficult choices have to be made between quantity and quality; one of the most important being whether a smaller number of carrier forces tailored for the most demanding requirements of the North East Atlantic should be preferred to a greater number of less heavily supported ships for the "global policing" role.

More generally it would seem that modern technological trends could, if consciously exploited, contribute considerably not merely to the overall enhancement of naval force but specifically to its suitability for discharging the politically sensitive tasks of peacetime. Improved means for command, control and intelligence should do something to offset the tendency to act late and to demand close political control of operations. Modern techniques for target location and precise delivery of weapons are combining to produce an era in which military forces should be unprecedentedly able to achieve the exact effects they intend. This should permit a "strategy of intended effects" which cuts costs on all sides, and it must be recognized that in limited operations it may be almost as desirable to circumscribe enemy losses as one's own. Without in any way drawing conclusions from the specific example, it must surely be that if President Kennedy had asked today's Air Force about the practicability of a "surgical" strike on the Cuban missiles, he would have received a more helpful answer.

The payoff from limited operations becoming more practicable may not be merely a direct and obvious contribution to the solution of particular problems. It may also, by permitting demonstrations that force is still usable in discriminating ways, enhance the credibility of action, which is the main criterion of success in deterrence and may, therefore, paradoxically reduce the need for continued actual use.

To suggest both that force remains a useful instrument of policy and that it can be rendered even more so, is not to assert that it should be used lightly. If President Kennedy had received a more optimistic technical answer, it does not necessarily follow that he should have availed himself of it. Force remains a costly tool from many points of view. There is a danger that because it has some capacity to cut political knots, it may be employed merely because no satisfactory solution can be reached by diplomatic or other coercive means. Force can by no means be relied upon to resolve such impasses satisfactorily. It cannot bail out failed politicians or make a success of ill-conceived policies. Equally, a failure of force to succeed should not be over-interpreted, as has sometimes been the tendency in the democracies, as a wholesale and permanent demonstration that force is useless or irrelevant. The Soviet record with regard to interventions in the Third World shows a resilient capacity to shrug off failure and, while that example is certainly not one to follow blindly, it evinces a certain realism about what can and cannot be achieved that merits reflection.

Nevertheless, the hope that democratic governments and peoples can develop a mature and realistic appreciation of the place of military force in serving the national interest cannot require the democracies to abandon the values that make them worth defending. Nor—though we may hope to see some of the more excessive self-indulgences of the mass media disciplined by public taste—can we expect that military operations will ever again be conducted by democracies except under intensive public scrutiny as well as proper political supervision. This will be particularly the case with peacetime operations. Never, then, has it been more important to foster that mutual understanding between the politician and the military man for which Mahan pleaded. The broadly based work of the Naval War College has consequently never been more close to the heart of strategic debate than today.

Notes

1. H.H. Smith, *A "Yellow" Admiral Remembers* (London, 1932), p. 54; quoted in A.J. Marder, *British Naval Policy, 1890-1905* (New York: Putnam, 1940).

2. Italics added.

3. Admiral Gorshkov's thesis is well known as embodied in *Seapower of the State* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976). He makes the "state interests" point on p. 292 and elsewhere. Marshal Grechko's view was expressed on one occasion as "At the present stage the historic function of the Soviet Armed Forces is not restricted merely to their function in defending our Motherland and other socialist countries. In its foreign policy activity, the Soviet state actively, purposefully opposes the export of counter-revolution and the policy of aggression, supports the national liberation struggle, and resolutely resists imperialist aggression in whatever distant region of our planet it may appear." Quoted in H. Gelman, *The Politburo's Management of its America Problem* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1981), p. 24.

4. *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, Cmnd 124, 1957.

5. Geoffrey Till et al, *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 181.

6. An eloquent expression of a view which seems at times to come close to this is Robert W. Komer, *Maritime Strategy or Coalition Defense?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Books, 1984).

7. In Norway, for instance, the role of the Royal Naval Commandos in the Falklands is regarded not as an unfortunate diversion of resources, but as evidence not merely of their professional competence, but also of the fact that they do indeed deploy and fight when needed.

8. Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force without war: US Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1978).

9. Stephen S. Kaplan, *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1981).

10. An interesting study illustrating this problem is Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

11. Quoted in Till, p. 209.

An adaptation of a lecture given at the Naval War College's Current Strategy Forum.

