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COLIN GRAY AND MARITIME STRATEGY—AN APPRECIATION

Geoffrey Till

Colin Gray's ideas about *maritime strategy*—that element of strategy that relates to the sea—were enunciated most clearly in his widely read 1992 book *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War*. They also emerged in his masterly editorial work of 1996 on the writings of Charles E. Callwell—specifically, *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance: Their Relations and Interdependence*, the original of which appeared in 1905. The historical significance of sea power and its continued relevance in contemporary conditions also were addressed in Gray's *The Navy in the Post-Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power*, published in 1994. His conclusions about Mahan “being (mainly) right” appear in his *Modern Strategy*, published in 1999. As a policy analyst, a defense adviser, and (from 1982 to 1987) an employee of the U.S. government, Colin Gray also had the opportunity to see his ideas translated into policy.

THE LESSONS OF THE PAST

Gray's approach was that of a historian commenting on the past, the present, and the future, but not the kind of historian who devotes all his time to delving in dusty archives; instead, his was a work of constructive synthesis, putting together and developing a corpus of ideas about maritime strategy that was based on innumerable secondary works read voraciously. He did indeed demonstrate a “heroic mastery of the relevant literature.”¹ He was, above all, the kind of historian who was intent on finding recurring patterns in the behavior of states, rather than one solely concerned with exploring the unique and unrepeatable event. Echoing Mahan in believing that “[h]istorical instances, by their concrete force, are worth reams of dissertation,” Gray's version of history is not an antiquarian retelling of events but an analysis of why things turned out the way they did and what this might mean for the present and the future.² The leitmotif in his work

is the connected propositions that “superior sea power has provided leverage critical for success in strategy and statecraft” and that this remains the case in the conditions of today and the likely ones of tomorrow.³

By *sea power* (or *maritime power*, for he tended to use the two phrases interchangeably) Gray

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meant the capacity to deliver strategic effect by what one does at or from the sea. He was clear that this is not an absolute quality but instead a relative one that countries or coalitions have to a greater or smaller degree in comparison with other countries or coalitions. Sea power is not the polar opposite of land, or continental, power but instead its complement. In their preparations to fight (or, one hopes, to deter) major conflicts, countries need to acknowledge that their overall strategy will be a mixture of land and sea elements. This is because the desired strategic effect has to be delivered on land, since that is where people live and the destinies of nations ultimately are decided. In this, as in much else, Gray adhered strongly to the approach of Sir Julian Corbett, who famously had made the essential point in 1911. “Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what armies can do against your enemy’s territory and national life, or else by fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.”⁴

Accordingly, sea power was rarely if ever executive, or capable of deciding strategic outcomes on its own; instead, its critical leverage came from its enabling capacity. To a greater or smaller degree, power at sea privileged the countries that had it in their attempts to determine strategic outcomes; without it, countries were correspondingly disadvantaged. It was as simple as that.

In his *Leverage of Sea Power*, Gray showed how this had worked in the past—and was likely to do so in the future. He focused only on what he called ten “major wars,” ranging from that between Persia and the Greeks (of 480–479 BC) to the Cold War. He was particularly interested in wars between powers that were (mainly) sea or land powers; he accepted from the start that nearly all states are mixtures of the two, but thought its geography and cultural proclivities to be the best distinguishing marks of the state that is a Sea Power—with capital letters. “There is ample ground,” he admitted, however, “for dispute as to where the domains of sea power and land power should be judged to meet.”⁵

Echoing Corbett in worrying about people focusing too much on simply winning battles at sea, Gray argued that, once sufficiently secure there, maritime powers had to stay on the offensive to be strategically effective in war. Typically, they resorted to one or more of six sea-based strategies against their (more) continental adversaries to prevail. (1) They could seek to exhaust their enemies financially, or blockade them from the supplies they needed. (2) They could engage in large-scale operations on land, or (3) support allies in doing so, or both. (4) They could launch peripheral attacks from the sea, (5) conquer their adversaries’ overseas territory, or (6) forge a continental alliance. Gray provides examples of all these strategies.⁶

He does the same for the six strategies that continental or land powers can employ against (more) maritime adversaries. (1) Land powers could exploit their continental hegemony to develop their own forms of sea power. (2) They could use this power at sea for direct amphibious assaults on their maritime adversary's home territory, or (3) try to whittle away at the adversary's dominance at sea by a strategy of ambush on sections of its main fleet. (4) Most likely they would resort to what Gray called the classic strategy of attacking their enemy's seaborne commerce. (5) They also could seek to close continental markets to the sea power's trade. (6) Finally, they could seek sea power allies.⁷

The rest of *The Leverage of Sea Power* is devoted to a discussion of how all this theory has played out in practice in the ten major wars mentioned earlier. The critical area is where both land and sea powers are fighting out of their natural elements, as they need to if they seek a strategic decision. This is because "sea power cannot be defeated on land, just as land power cannot be defeated at sea."⁸ Accordingly, for either contender to prevail it has to develop at least some of the strategic characteristics of its adversary, and its success in doing so is likely to be critical in shaping the outcome. Gray is skeptical about the geostrategist Halford Mackinder's claim that "it is easier for landpower to take to the sea than for sea power to take to the land," concluding in fact that, despite the great costs of sea power and the practical problems of generating it, experience showed that maritime powers generally had prevailed.⁹ "[T]he cumulative dramatic increase in the absolute strategic power of the land has been more than offset by the increase in the absolute power of the sea. . . . [L]and-oriented aspirants for continental, and eventually global, hegemony have enduring strategic problems that may not be resolvable in the face of competently managed sea power (and air power)."¹⁰

Gray avoided the trap of basing this conclusion solely on the experience of the British and then the Americans, although he did think that the first was particularly "relevant" because it "yields a rich haul of strategic history for careful exploitation by theorists."¹¹ Accordingly, he also made extensive use of Greek, Roman, Turkish, Venetian, French, and German experience in balancing what was a frankly Eurocentric approach; there was, though, a little treatment of the Arab world and Japan and the sea.

However, the fate of Carthage at the hands of Rome showed that historically the success of maritime powers was conditional and far from automatic. Sea powers had strategic vulnerabilities that land powers with sufficient sea power of their own could exploit, not least their absolute dependence on supplies arriving by sea. Producing first-class battle fleets was uniquely expensive, preparing them took a lot longer than did preparing armies, and the practical problems

of exploiting fleets fully were legion.¹² Above all, everything could go wrong for maritime powers if, in Clausewitz's words, they did not "understand the kind of war on which they are embarking" and failed to settle on an appropriate grand strategy and the necessary statecraft to deliver it.¹³ In particular, their natural antimilitarist or "commercialist" outlook could endanger them, as it had Carthage, by resulting in their making inadequate preparations for their own defense, even at sea.¹⁴

SIGNIFICANCE FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

As a pattern-seeking historian, Colin Gray was keen to seek out the implications of all this for the twenty-first century, especially as "history suggests that a new menace to the balance of power in Europe and Asia will arise, and the traditional pattern of maritime-continental conflict is too marked to be dismissed, without evidence, as conveniently *passé*."¹⁵ Gray was too modest to issue them as explicit commandments, but at least three conclusions and recommendations seem naturally to emerge from his work.

The first recommendation is that we should reject the naysayers and accept the continuing strategic importance of sea power. Gray traced the declinist narrative about the reducing importance of sea power back to the Western experience of the First World War, and to some extent to common misinterpretations of what Mackinder actually had written about the changing relationship between land and sea power. To some extent, also, it probably was linked to the relative strategic decline of Britain—for Mahan and Corbett, the quintessential maritime power—as had been dissected powerfully in Paul M. Kennedy's seminal work of 1976, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*.¹⁶ It was all too easy to misinterpret Kennedy's work and confuse the perceived decline of *a sea power* with that of *sea power in general*, and so "sea power has not attracted the balanced approach it deserves."¹⁷ Instead, the importance of sea power was more likely to increase than decrease, especially in a period when full-scale war between the great powers was less likely and maritime characteristics so suited the special needs of the United States as the only superpower of the time.¹⁸

To some extent, though, sailors were the authors of their own misfortune in the fashionable underrating of the importance of sea power. Gray echoes Corbett in providing an evergreen and often much-needed warning for naval planners that they should not be so preoccupied with the business of securing, maintaining, and exploiting sea control against their adversaries at sea that they neglect the essential *enabling* characteristic of sea power and the strategic effect it should aim to deliver. At the beginning of the first chapter of his *Leverage of Sea Power* he approvingly quotes Dudley W. Knox. "The supreme test of the naval strategist is the depth of his comprehension of the intimate relation between sea power and

land power, and of the truth that basically all effort afloat should be directed at an effect ashore.”¹⁹

Arguably it was because they paid less attention to this than they should have done that Cold War sailors in the West encountered periods of real turbulence in which the contribution of sea power to the achievement of strategic objectives was neglected. This was perhaps especially true of the United Kingdom, Gray’s own country. Instead of emphasizing the contribution they could make to strategic success, too many sailors focused simply on dealing with an apparently ever-more-powerful Soviet navy, operationally and tactically. The apparent result was that NATO’s SACLANT seemed to be intent on fighting a war different from the one that dominated SACEUR’s thinking—and it was the latter that really mattered.²⁰ Such naval preoccupations included the prospect of an early and sustained Soviet attack on reinforcement and resupply shipping coming across the Atlantic. We now know that the skeptics of the time actually were right in suspecting that the Soviets accorded this mission a much lower priority than did their prospective victims. Such naval preoccupations often seemed much less pressing than either holding back the Soviet Third Shock Army on the central front or responding appropriately to the nuclear threat that the Soviet Union’s bombers and missiles posed. Illustrating the point, the British defense white paper of March 1957 fatally declared that the role of the navy in a total war was “somewhat uncertain.”²¹

It was, though, nothing like as difficult for navies to present a good case for themselves in conditions short of full-scale war with the Soviet Union, when the first question to be asked often was, “Where are the carriers?” The problem was that such out-of-area commitments seemed nothing like as important to many politicians, strategists, and—significantly—the people with the money. The result of all this uncertainty for the Royal Navy was a period of continual downward budgetary pressure. The trend applied more generally to other Western navies too. This in turn led to the wounding but telling joke of the time, in which one Soviet field marshal drinking his celebratory vodkas in the smoking ruins of NATO headquarters at Mons asks the others, “Oh, by the way, what happened at sea?”

It was accordingly with some relief that Western navies welcomed the appearance of a sufficiently convincing narrative for the role of navies in a general war, in the shape first of some kind of substrategic and limited engagement on Europe’s northern flank through the 1970s, and then of the U.S. Navy’s *Maritime Strategy* of the early 1980s. This also effectively was adopted as NATO’s concept of maritime operations.²² With the successful conclusion of the Cold War, the essential naval narrative switched back to the intellectually easier, because more obvious, enabling role of sea power in conditions well short of all-out war. Here

the response was to “go expeditionary,” limited only by residual expectations of a peace dividend and the competing requirements of the other services. The U.S. Navy again, eventually, supplied the basic narrative in its original 2007 version of *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, although in this case Colin Gray’s work provided much less guidance, since preparing for less-than-major-war contingencies was not its major focus.²³

The appearance of the much-amended second version of the *Cooperative Strategy* in 2015, however, reflected a major shift in thinking back toward great-power competition.²⁴ Because of this, Gray’s ideas about the strategic effects that sea power can enable and deliver have come into prominence once more. Their contemporary value lies not so much in the answers that Gray came up with but more in the questions that he asked and the emphasis he gave to the need to focus attention on what sea power actually was for. Above all, he thought sailors and navalists needed to be clear about the *strategic* effect that preponderance at sea could deliver, rather than just the immediate operational and tactical requirements of maintaining or securing it. In a period when so much intellectual effort, perhaps understandably, is devoted instead to military-technical (to use an old Soviet term) and operational/tactical issues—such as how to deal with “carrier-killing ballistic missiles,” cyber attack, hypersonics, and the role of artificial intelligence—Gray’s emphasis on the need to focus on the endgame in all its facets hardly could be more relevant.

The same is true of the second and closely related recommendation that emerges from his work—namely, given the need to focus on the effects of maritime preponderance *on the land*, that sailors should remind themselves constantly that sea power is, with very few exceptions, no more than part of an overall package. True, its ubiquity, adaptability, flexibility, and mobility make it a particularly valuable one, but without synergistic integration with all the other levers of power its strategic effect often is much less than total. Gray emphasized what he called the “unity of warfare” and the need for a combined-arms and joint approach in which there is true mutual support among the several dimensions of military power.²⁵ His review of Callwell’s work underlined the point that land power and sea power usually had proved of mutual benefit to each other, and that land power well could contribute to the achievement of higher levels of maritime preponderance.²⁶ The same was, and remains, true of air power too. Far from leading to a decline in the relative importance of sea power, air power—in the shape of aircraft and missiles (and now unmanned systems?)—“paradoxically ha[s] made great navies greater still,” because air power enhances their effectiveness at sea and against the shore.²⁷ The same might well be true of space power and, nowadays, of cyber power too. Gray echoes Corbett again in his stress on

the need to ensure that naval strategy properly reflects and clearly supports the country's strategic aims and is integrated efficiently with all the other, nonkinetic instruments of national power that can be used to achieve them. Gray's overall emphasis on a rounded and comprehensive approach to statecraft and to the preparation for and conduct of war has a special salience now in an age of multidomain operations.

Colin Gray's concluding recommendation is perhaps less obvious and is particularly aimed at the United States—in effect, his adoptive country for several decades. Quite simply, it is that great sea powers need allies to become and remain great. Historically, this was especially obvious in their need for allies capable of helping to deliver the military power on land that was necessary for a sea power to come to grips with, and ultimately defeat, a major continental adversary. The bulk of Colin Gray's maritime writing came when the United States was about to enter its unipolar moment in world history, but things have changed since then.²⁸ Now what he called the day “after tomorrow” has arrived, and so has the salience of the question he raised of “how might the current naval hegemony of the United States be challenged effectively and perhaps eroded or offset?”—and, by extension, what should be done about it? Clearly, American naval planners should not assume “that the contemporary preeminence of U.S. naval and air power is permanent and irreversible.”²⁹ Gray emphasized the dangers of the kind of strategic complacency that led to the downfall of Carthage and the unwisdom of the United States neglecting its naval defenses. Now, with the rise in the maritime power of an increasingly self-confident China alongside the reemergence of a truculent Russia, the capacity of the United States to maintain its interests at sea and globally is under great challenge; accordingly, it will need its allies (both maritime and continental in their outlook) more than ever. To win and retain those allies surely will be as important a focus for conscious, sophisticated, and rounded statecraft for the United States as history has shown it was for Britain and other sea powers in the past. The problem is, as Gray observed, that “[d]emocracies are not in the habit of thinking strategically” and need all the help they can get in trying to do so.³⁰

Whether or not one agrees with everything that Colin Gray wrote or the conclusions to which he came, there can be little doubt that his various explorations of maritime strategy made—and, importantly, continue to make—a huge contribution to our understanding of sea power. Since the rest of the twenty-first century is touted widely as being a maritime one, Colin Gray's work, and the proper appreciation of the nature and importance of sea power that it promotes, hardly could be more relevant to our current and future concerns.

NOTES

1. Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), p. x.
2. A. T. Mahan [Capt., USN], *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), p. 161.
3. Colin Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. ix.
4. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longman, 1911), p. 67.
5. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–55.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1994), p. 39, quoting Martin Wight’s interpretation of Mackinder; Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, p. 89.
10. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, p. 90.
11. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World*, p. 27.
12. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, pp. 157–58.
13. Clausewitz, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 154.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 115.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
16. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 1976).
17. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World*, p. 106; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, pp. 4, 9.
18. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, pp. 179–81.
19. Dudley W. Knox [Cdre.], *The Naval Genius of George Washington* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932).
20. SACLANT stands for Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic; SACEUR, Supreme Allied Commander Europe. These terms were in use through 2003.
21. Minister of Defence, *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, March 1957, Cmnd. 124, p. 6, para. 24.
22. For the background to this, see Sebastian Bruns and Sarandis Papadopoulos, eds., *Conceptualizing Maritime & Naval Strategy* (Baden-Baden, Ger.: Nomos, 2020).
23. J. T. Conway, G. Roughead, and T. W. Allen, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington, DC: 2007); repr. *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 7–19.
24. J. F. Dunford, J. W. Greenert, and P. F. Zukunft, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready* (Washington, DC: 2015).
25. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World*, pp. 57–73.
26. C. E. Callwell, *Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance: Their Relations and Interdependence*, with an introduction and notes by Colin S. Gray (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), p. xiv.
27. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World*, p. 28.
28. The important relationship among unipolarity, multipolarity, and maritime power is explored well in Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson, eds., *Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2020).
29. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World*, pp. 164–65.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 61.