Examining the Sino-Indian Maritime Competition:
Part 2 - Seapower

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Key Points

- States exist in an anarchical system so must develop the ability to survive in it.

- They can only rely upon themselves, so they develop their military abilities.

- One outcome of this development is their desire to acquire Seapower.

- Seapower enables states to project influence.

- Combined with its inherent military capacity, Seapower thus becomes an offensive instrument.

Summary

This section of the study will analyse seapower, its components, and the desire of states to possess it. It will demonstrate that seapower derives from the Realist tradition and that it is an instrument that permits states to project their influence.

Analysis

Realism is, arguably, the most widely-held tradition in International Relations[20] based on three core assumptions: 1) that politics takes place within and between groups since people require the cohesion provided by "groupism"; 2) when individuals and groups interact

politically, they are motivated by self-interest, or "egoism"; and 3) groups are invariably characterised by inequalities of power between them; some possess more than others, i.e. power-centrism.[1] These assumptions lead to the main realist argument: these three qualities cause conflict unless a higher authority exists to enforce order. Minus that authority, groups will exist in a state of anarchy wherein any one can use force to achieve its goals. Even if a state is certain there is not another which can or will use force today, it cannot be sure that the same situation will prevail indefinitely.[2] Therefore states arm themselves against this contingency.

The term "classical realism" is used to denote realism in its entirety up to the 1970s. Its major influence was Hans J Morgenthau's work, *Politics Among Nations*, which brought realist arguments to illustrate issues of war, peace, international law, diplomacy, alliances, etc.[3] A lack of cohesion in the argument, however, led to several sub-schools of thought, the most prominent of which are neoclassical realism, defensive and offensive realism. Kenneth Waltz, an American political scientist, writing in *Theory of International Politics*, sought to clarify earlier realist ideas using a top-down realist framework which eventually became known as "neorealism".[4] Defensive and Offensive realism emerged in the 1990s based upon Waltz's theory. Defensive realists held that under common conditions, the ability of anarchy to cause war is reduced. They argued that, based upon groupism, the stronger the group identity, the harder it is to conquer or subjugate other groups;[5] the harder to conquer, the more secure all states will feel. Offensive theorists argue that anarchy lends itself to conflict, that minus authority, an evolved peace today may not hold in future. Further, even if technology engenders peace today, there is no guarantee it will continue to do so.

The basis of Realism is power.[6] Bull posits states exist in an anarchical environment and must be self-reliant in order to survive.[7] They require power to protect themselves from other states. Defensive and Offensive Realism differ on the issue of the quantum of power a state desires. Defensive realism holds that the international system provides little incentive for states to obtain additional increments of power, encouraging them instead to maintain the existing balance of power. It is the preservation of power rather than the acquisition of more which is the goal of a state.[8] Offensive realism, though, postulates that *status quo* powers are rarely found in the real world. It holds that the international system provides incentives for states to obtain power at the expense of its rivals.[9] Corbett interprets this as,

> The political theory of war… give[s] us two classifications. … [I]f our aim is to wrest something from the enemy – then our war … will be offensive. If, on the other hand

> … we simply seek to prevent the enemy wresting some advantage to our detriment, then the war … will be defensive.[10]

In defining his theory of offensive realism Mearsheimer makes five assumptions about the international order, viz. 1) states are the principal actors in international politics, i.e. there is no higher power, so they exist in an anarchical system; 2) the principal goal of states is to survive; 3) no state can be sure of the intention of other states; 4); all states have offensive military capability; 5) states are rational actors. Collectively, these five assumptions produce three forms of behaviour: 1) states feel fear for two reasons: a) another state could have greater offensive capability, or b) that state could have malign intentions towards it; 2) if there is conflict, there is no higher body a state may turn to in the international system, requiring states need to rely upon themselves; they thus acquire the means to do so; 3) the best way to survive in this anarchical system is to acquire great power, i.e. to be a regional hegemon. To do this, states need to take two actions: a) ensure they have the power to be a regional hegemon and b) ensure they do not have a peer competitor.[11] The steps states take to defend themselves, however, are often seen as offensive by others, leading to a cycle of suspicion and counter-measures. This, says Mearsheimer, is the tragedy of great power politics.

States, Mearsheimer further informs, possess latent and military power. Latent power is a state's economic capacity, comprising the quantum and value of its assets, resources, and the size of its population. A state may draw from these elements to build military might and fight wars. The potential includes resources, money, skills and expertise inherent in its land and people. Its military power lies in its capacity to project force and in how that capacity compares with the military force of other states.[12] It is the ability of a state to force another to do something.[13] Dahl states this as: "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."[14]

Implicit in the foregoing is the fact that the more powerful states (the great powers) seek to maximise their share of the power available on the world stage. They do this by achieving regional hegemony and maximising their wealth.[15] Although great powers ideally prefer to have global hegemony, this goal is blocked by other powers and the fact that the globe is covered by large bodies of water. Oceans make it difficult for a state to dominate overseas regions which can only feasibly be reached by ships. Thus, though the USA is a great power, it seeks alliances with Japan and South Korea in order to influence East Asia. On the other hand, great powers do not need alliances in their own region to dominate it. The USA dominates North and Central America through sheer economic and military power.

Mearsheimer also notes that an army is the main instrument of power projection, asserting,

> A state's power is largely embedded in its army. Simply put, the most powerful states possess the most formidable armies. Therefore, measuring the balance of land power by itself should provide a rough but sound indicator of the relative might of rival great powers.[16]

Sir Julian Corbett, the eminent British naval historian and geo-strategist of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, agrees, stating, "… it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone."[17]

Nevertheless, navies and seapower are perceived in realist terms as "a measure of hierarchy and as instruments of state competition".[18] Mahan aside, writers such as Robert Gilpin, George Modelski and William Thompson identify access to the sea, the control of trade routes and the development of port hinterlands as keys to the rise of states and empires.[19] This realistic perspective is underlined by literary works on coercive naval diplomacy, crisis management, presence, poise and showing the flag from a realist-centric perspective.[20] In the same vein, navies are realistically seen as instruments of national power and prestige *par excellence*.[21] In fact, so highly regarded were navies as individual entities of national prestige that it took close to twenty years from the creation of NATO to the establishment of the integrated Standing Naval Force Atlantic in 1968, and even more time for its full effectiveness to be developed.[22]

Still viewing navies as instruments of realist policy, we observe that their ambits extend past those of armies and air forces. As Commodore Alam of the Bangladeshi Navy observes,

> Unlike the army and the air force, whose size and firepower have to be related to that of potential adversaries, the size of the navy is determined by the quantum of marine assets and interests that you have to safeguard.[23]

He adds that while armies and air forces have distinctly military functions, the navy's remit extends into the economic sphere. While Corbett could not have envisaged the degree of globalisation and its impact on the international system today, Mearsheimer has largely ignored it in his *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Till, though, has no doubt as to its centrality in the world economy. He opens his treatise on seapower with,

> Because of its effect on the state, and state practices, globalisation is the central fact of the strategic environment of the early twenty-first century. … [T]he present and future shape of globalisation is and will be a major determinant of the shape and nature of world politics of states. Governmental … attitudes to globalisation will in

turn be a major determinant of strategy and defence and naval policy and therefore of the size, shape, composition and function of navies.[24]

If a state cannot easily project its influence across oceans, it must employ a navy which enables it to do so. Since seventy per cent of the Earth's surface is covered by water and the land area is not contiguous, a state wishing to project its influence must create a navy which can fulfil that function. While Mearsheimer is correct about the sea's stopping power on armies, however, it also possesses attributes which permit power projection.

The Sea's Power-Projection Attributes

The sea is the primary medium of transportation and trade, facilitating 95 per cent of world trade. Sea-borne trade has existed from ancient times. In the Indo-Pacific region, the Cholan Emperors of South India conducted maritime trade with kingdoms in South East Asia from around the First Century CE. Prior to that, there is some evidence of Mauryan Emperors conducting trade by marine routes in the Third Century BCE as part of their quest for gold bullion.[25] Further East, the Makassars sailed from Indonesia to Northern Australia as early as 1640 AD in search of sea cucumber which they sold to China.[26] Similar trade occurred in the Atlantic Ocean, the Asia-Pacific region, and the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas leading to exchanges of goods, news and ideas. Trade led (and still leads) to wealth and power.

Sea-borne trade grew from 2.6 billion tons in 1970 to nine billion tons in 2013 and could reach 19 billion to 24 billion tons by 2030.[27] In contrast, rail and road account for 6 per cent of world trade, pipelines 9 per cent, and air 0.3 per cent.[28] The sea offers faster, cheaper and safer transportation than land. Adam Smith, the economist, writing in 1776 asked rhetorically,

> What goods could bear the expense of land-carriage between London and Calcutta? Or if there were any so precious as to be able to support this expense, with what safety could they be transported through the territories of so many barbarous nations? Those two cities, however, at present carry on a very considerable commerce with each other, and by mutually affording a market, give a good deal of encouragement to each other's industry.[29]

He could have asked that question of globalisation today. If economic power leads to military might, the sea offers the most direct route to acquiring it.

The sea is equally important a medium for the exchange of ideas. The spread of cultures has strong maritime connections. Christianity spread via sea routes from Rome to Northern Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, and from there to the Americas, the Indian Ocean Region

(IOR) and the Far East. Islam spread along trade routes around the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and Indonesia. Prior to these, Hinduism and Buddhism spread from India to South-East Asia, China and Japan.[30] The sea also facilitated scientific enquiry. Captain James Cook, for instance, assisted cartographers by mapping sea coasts and navigation in general by measuring the transit of Venus across the sun from Tahiti.[31] It facilitated strategic interest, enabling Great Britain, for instance, to acquire Norfolk Island pine wood and Australian hemp, reducing its dependence on the Baltic region.[32] If ideas and technology are the currency of power, the sea is the most important medium of projecting those.

A third attribute of the sea is its propensity as a medium for dominion. As Till observes, the Romans, for instance, conquered Britain by sea in the First Century AD. Trade took the Portuguese to India in the Fifteenth Century and, later in 1492, the Spanish to the Americas. To protect their assets, the Portuguese, for instance, established military outposts at strategic points. However, when the Dutch and the British navies outgrew Portugal's, it went into decline a century and a half later.[33] The British Empire which supplanted the Portuguese in the IOR was, similarly, based on seapower. To British strategists, the empire was one vast region divided by bodies of water. They needed to control these waters in order to control the land areas; they needed to control the seas.[34] It is precisely this thinking that underpins the USA's naval strategy in the twenty first century, even if there is no formal empire to protect.[35] The USA's conception of control of the sea as depicted in US Admiral Vern Clark's policy document, *Sea Power 21: Projecting Decisive Joint Capabilities*, which envisages projecting power inland, follows Mahan's dictum that,

> Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world … [and] is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations.[36]

It is critical, therefore, that any state which desires to become a great power must possess the capability to project power via the sea; it must possess seapower. In order to ensure it does possess seapower, a great power aspirant must understand what that is.

Seapower is, essentially, the measure of a state's capacity in its maritime trade and commerce, its control of ocean resources, and its ability to project military force into and from the sea.[37] Accordingly, it is more than a solely military issue. Till perceives seapower as a set of inputs and outputs. The inputs are navies, coast guards, the marine and civil-maritime industries and the contributing land and air forces. Its outputs are its capacity to influence the behaviour of other people or things by what it does at or from the sea.[38] He

believes it is the capacity to determine events both at sea and on the land, reiterating Corbett's observation,

> 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 your army 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.[39]

Corbett's view is reflected by US Admiral Vern Clark's policy document, *Sea Power 21*[40] as are those of Bruce and Dahl.[41]

Till alleges seapower is more than merely building warships.[42] This observation closely reflects Chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergey Gorshkov's, that "The military aspect of seapower is of but transitory importance".[43] Seapower also considers the influence the army and air force can have on events at sea just as it must consider the influence of the navy on land and in the air. It also comprises non-military aspects of the use of the sea, such as ship-building, merchant shipping, fishing, ship repair, training at sea, etc.

Moreover, seapower is an exercise in relativity. Whereas most nations have a degree of seapower, some have more than others. The US, for instance, has a well-developed ship-building industry and is commonly seen as the greatest sea power at this time. South Korea, though, has a large ship-building industry but is not generally perceived as a sea power. The relativity of seapower implies that its effectiveness depends on an adversary. Therefore, while India's Navy may have overwhelming strength against, say, Pakistan's, the distinction is not as clear when compared to China's. Also, seapower may enable the army and air force to win a conflict, as in the India-Pakistan War of 1971, while being the decisive instrument of war as in, for instance, the USA's Pacific war against Japan during World War Two.

Seapower's Proponents

The two main Western proponents of seapower were the American, Mahan, and the Briton, Corbett. Their Soviet counterpart was Gorshkov. Mahan noted that command of the sea was a dominant theme of European history. He perceived the world ocean as a single highway facilitating the world economy. Having served in the US Navy during the American Civil War, he was aware of the power of naval blockades. Mahan foresaw a world where trade was global, requiring access to the sea. He also saw the USA as a maritime power, given that it traded more with Europe at the time than it did with Canada or Mexico.[44] Consequently, nearly all the large US cities were on the Atlantic coast, and thus vulnerable to attack by European navies. Therefore, the sea had to be controlled to ensure European powers did not

use it to attack the US, as the British did against Washington in 1814 and their blockade of the Mississippi River delta. In his view, the American War of Independence (1775 – 1783) did not end due to American strategy but because the British were exhausted by their war against Napoleon.[45] He also saw the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 as one fought for profit.[46] Combining the sea's characteristics with those of commerce, Mahan saw the need for merchant ships to travel in convoys guarded by warships in case an enemy attacked the convoys. This required strong battle fleets to protect merchant shipping.

Corbett, though, sought to use seapower to gain leverage in land wars. He saw seapower as a means to prevent a continental European power from gaining so much strength that it could dominate the land and sea and threaten Great Britain. Thus, in general, British policy was to back the second-greatest European power so as to balance any possible threat to British interests. As long as Great Britain could use the sea around Europe, British troops could be landed in a place which would cause a continental enemy the greatest loss. Corbett was therefore interested in how seapower aided Great Britain's coalition partners ashore.

According to the USSR, history was a conflict between different political and economic systems: essentially Capitalism and Communism. Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev observed that nuclear deterrence made an all-out nuclear war between the USSR and the West unlikely. He created a merchant fleet mostly to connect with Third World liberation movements, believing that by doing so the West could be deprived of the resources of the Third World upon which they depended.[47] Gorshkov believed Soviet fleets could interpose itself between the liberation movements and the West. He pointed out that Western governments which attacked liberation movements on land, as in Vietnam, were reluctant to attack Soviet ships. He also noted in his work, *The Sea Power of the State*, that in war time a strong Soviet navy could help shape events. He believed that even if a conflict between the USSR and the West, which eventually led to nuclear war, was to occur, Western naval forces would attack Soviet nuclear-armed submarines in the pre-nuclear period of the war – just as the Soviet Navy would do. Thus, a strong surface fleet was required to dominate sea areas (bastions) in which the submarines could operate.[48] Gorshkov attempted to demonstrate that a navy could offer advantages independent of a land force but, like Corbett, conceded that the Soviet Navy was an extension of the army.

Despite these reservations, all three saw the navy as an essential part of power projection; differing only in the degree to which they perceived its use and role.

States and Navies

Approximately seventy per cent of the world's population lives within one hundred miles of a coastline[49], and only twenty nine states do not possess a coastline. The oceans are the major means of transportation, a source of food, and a means of sustaining life. On the other hand, their misuse, including environmental damage and unlawful impediment to transport, is seen as a threat to a state's security. Effectively, the oceans have become political instruments and subject to political control. Navies thus evolved as a means of a state to control the oceans or those oceanic areas of strategic interest to them. As instruments of state policy, navies function in five ways: they uphold national and international laws governing the use of the oceans; they protect trade and provide for self-defence; they can be used to maintain control over bodies of water or land; they can be used to compel, coerce or intimidate other states to accept a particular outcome or policy; and they act as a method of conducting diplomacy.[50]

The first four of these functions involve the threat or use of force. To demonstrate force, a navy makes use of the ocean's attributes, including tracklessness and surveillance, its depth and the ability to attack the land from the sea, which lend themselves to that function. Oceans, by their nature, permit ships to travel at will with no set paths or highways. They are "trackless". Given its size, it is difficult to find a ship despite today's sophisticated technology. The mobility the oceans offer encourages an indirect approach to war. An enemy's strategic flanks become targets; the forces available cannot be spread widely enough to cover them all. The West's strategic deterrent during the Cold War is an example of this. Minus naval force, its bombers could follow fairly well-defined routes either across the Arctic or through the "Iron Curtain" in Europe, permitting Soviet forces to concentrate their defences along these routes. Once the West developed its naval power and could access the Mediterranean Sea, the problem for the Soviet forces grew exponentially since there were no longer defined attack routes. Similarly, surveilling an entire ocean is difficult if not impossible. Naval ships use these attributes to "disappear" if they do not wish to be seen. Conversely, they could attack ships or even littorals by surprise. Submarines add to the problem. They travel beneath the ocean's surface to wherever they choose, appearing without prior notice. Essentially, the oceans lend themselves to seapower.[51]

The fifth function, diplomacy utilising the navy or naval diplomacy, leaves unstated the naval threat factor. John Stuart Mill stated, "Our diplomacy stands for nothing when we have not a fleet to back it."[52] This was expanded upon by Gorshkov, who believed navies could:

> [D]emonstrate graphically the real fighting power of one's state. Demonstrative actions by the navy in many cases have made it possible to achieve political ends without resorting to armed struggle, merely by putting pressure with one's own potential might and threatening to start military operations. Thus, the navy has always been an instrument of the policy of states, an important aid to diplomacy in peacetime.[53]

Gorshkov was referring to the coercive power of navies. Also referred to as coercive inducement, coercion comprises deterrence and compulsion. Deterrence seeks to prevent a state or, in this context, opposing navy from doing something because the implicit costs will outweigh any potential benefits. Compulsion, however, aims to induce a state or navy to adhere to the will of another state or navy. This aligns with Dahl's observations on power.[54]

Maritime Population and Geography

A maritime populace is conducive to seapower. Whereas some people would not readily go to sea - witness ancient India's Brahmin community and ancient China's ruling elite – others like the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and British saw the sea as a means to commercial wealth. Over time, the sea-farers accrued a wealth of knowledge of and experience at sea that led to further advancements in marine technology and, eventually, a greater maritime ability which could be used in times of peace and war. This was the root of seapower.[55] Thus the sea became a major trade medium, sea-faring a tradition, and navies were established.

Mahan wrote that a country's trade and its maritime power are so intrinsically bound that,

> The necessity of a navy springs from the existence of peaceful shipping and disappears with it, except in the case of a nation which has aggressive tendencies, and keeps up a navy merely as a branch of the military establishment.[56]

Other factors such as ship-building, ship repair, ports, land-sea communications, marine insurance, etc. constitute maritime commerce which is, in turn, an element of seapower.

As noted, the sea's size and tracklessness give ships flexible mobility, which makes the act of finding an enemy fleet central to naval warfare.[57] Nevertheless, the sea creates its own SLOCs. Sail ships followed wind patterns according to the seasons. Today, ships usually follow the shortest distances between ports. Thus, geography determines the routes ships take. SLOCs can be blocked by land masses. There is a finite number of routes leading from one ocean to another. The most strategic in the context of this paper is the Strait of Malacca. China imports most of the energy it requires from the Middle East by tankers across the Arabian Sea and through the Malacca Strait to the South China Sea. An opposing navy could blockade this strait making it a strategic choke point.[58]

Geography is also closely associated with sea control – the ability of a navy to control large areas of the sea, thus denying opposing navies access to or passage through those areas. For instance, Great Britain's navy was dominant in the nineteenth century because Britain lies amid the sea routes from Northern Europe to the rest of the world. The Royal Navy could block access to the Atlantic Ocean from the North and Baltic Seas and the English Channel.[59]

Geography also leads to the sea base. Mahan wrote on this aspect of seapower.[60] Sea bases are the principal centres of naval activity in a given region.[61] A strategically-situated base that can accommodate many naval assets, like the USA's base at Guam, can be a major asset in wartime. A fleet may return to its base for repair and replenishment and not to its home country, saving time and retaining its presence in the area. Sea bases enable combat reach, allowing a fleet to carry the conflict to an enemy's territory. Thus, a base "offers significant advantages for deployment, manoeuvre and redeployment of one's fleet forces."[62]

Naval power, however, is only one facet of seapower, which itself derives from a state's desire for security. While Mahan defined this concept in economic and naval terms, Corbett saw seapower as an aid to a continental strategy, and Gorshkov to a political one. Mahan too later admitted that seapower "is but the handmaiden of expansion; it is not itself expansion".[63] Concomitant with that view, Baer states,

> Central to the theory of seapower was the expectation of conflict. When a nation's prosperity depends on shipborne commerce, and the amount of trade available is limited, then competition follows, and that leads to a naval contest to protect the trade.[64]

According to Mahan, Corbett and Gorshkov, seapower has martial overtones. It derives from a state's maritime population, experiences and endeavours, its maritime industry, and from the sea's characteristics. These attributes lend themselves to power projection. Therefore, a state which seeks to project its influence abroad must possess seapower to a greater degree; as a corollary, a state which desires seapower usually seeks to project its power beyond its borders. By extension, seapower is in the main an offensive concept aligning closely with Mearsheimer's offensive realism.

This principle will be applied in the next part of this study which examines China's naval growth and maritime activity.

Notes

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