

# Sea Power As A Strategic Domain

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## Abstract:

The author focuses on the unique characteristics of sea power and its strategic utility. In this essay, he defines sea power with reference to Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American historian and naval officer who was an expert on sea power in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He then discusses the characteristics of sea power, its strengths and limitations in the peace to war continuum and its contributions to the Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME) instruments of national power. He highlights that in some cases, sea power is the strategic tool of choice while in others, it is merely an enabler. He goes on to argue that sea power has limitations to be qualified as a strategic domain on its own. In his opinion, the culmination of land-sea-air powers into a combined military power provides countries with better flexibility and options to employ military forces to meet strategic objectives. He concludes that military power, instead of land-air-sea power in isolation, is better qualified as a strategic domain.

*Keywords: Sea Power; Independent; Extension; Capability; Influence*

## INTRODUCTION

Nations rely on all available means to attain their national objectives. These means are instruments of national power, namely Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME). Power represents the ability to influence behaviours of others or events in a manner to support one's own objectives.<sup>1</sup> Military power, under the DIME framework, consists of land power, naval power and air power, skilfully employed individually or collectively to provide a military strategy to attain the strategic goals of the nation.<sup>2</sup> The utility of military power goes beyond winning conflicts. Military power also serves to contain or deter conflicts, influence or coerce other nations to change their decisions in our favour, or to provide assistance to other nations to expand our diplomatic sphere of influence.

Naval history dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC under the Achaemenid Empire against Greek and Egyptian threats.<sup>3</sup> The Southern Song dynasty built a navy to safeguard its prosperity derived from coastal commerce.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the British Empire, with a modest army, was founded on sea power.<sup>5</sup> The Royal Navy was one of the world's most powerful navy, positioning Britain as the dominant world power from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to World War II (WWII).

This essay is motivated by the interest in the unique characteristics of sea power and its strategic utility. Firstly, it will define sea power with reference to Mahan and Corbett. Next, it will discuss the characteristics of sea power, its strengths and limitations in the peace to war continuum and its contributions to DIME. In some cases, sea power is



*HMS Warrior, the world's first iron-hulled, armour plated warship.*

the strategic tool of choice. In others, sea power is merely an enabler. The essay argues that sea power has limitations to be qualified as a strategic domain on its own. Instead, the culmination of land-sea-air powers into military power provides political masters with better flexibility and options to employ military forces to meet strategic objectives. Military power, instead of land-air-sea power in isolation, is better qualified as a strategic domain.

## DEFINITION OF SEAPOWER

Although naval forces have existed for over two millennia, the concept of sea power only materialised when Mahan presented *The influence of Sea Power upon history: 1660-1783*, demonstrating through history that sea power was central to human development and to the rise and fall of great nations.<sup>6</sup> Sea power has

two components, the military naval dimension and the maritime and commercial aspects of seafaring. Mahan's theory emphasised possessing naval power superiority characterised by superior warships, weaponry, tactics, commanders and the freedom of maritime trade for free exchange of material and information. As Mahan said, "*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*", suggesting that sea power is essential to the prosperity of nations and that nations ignore sea power at their own risk.<sup>7</sup>

Mahan's theory includes naval power and peaceful commerce and shipping, with the former securing the latter. Peaceful maritime trade leads to economic prosperity, generating resources to strengthen naval

power, leading to maritime supremacy, which further ensures peaceful maritime trade. Till described the inseparability between maritime power and prosperity as the 'virtuous maritime cycle', (*Figure 1 below*) with the British Empire as the best example.<sup>8</sup> Britain, an island-group state, fulfils Mahan's key elements—geography, physical conformation, extent of territory exposed to sea, population size engaged in seafaring activities and character of the people and government—to become a sea power.<sup>9</sup> Mahan's naval strategy calls for a decisive battle to destroy the enemy's main forces, Clausewitzian-style, for command of the sea. This secures Sea-Lines-Of-Communications (SLOCs) and the freedom of manoeuvre and action against enemy commerce and warships.

However, Corbett argued that command of the sea is untenable and warned against the reduction of maritime strategy for a blind pursuit of a decisive battle for command of the sea. While Mahan advocated the concentration of forces for decisive battles,

Corbett believed that this would not guarantee a major engagement.<sup>10</sup> Enemy fleets could avoid and maintain *fleet in being* status. Instead, Corbett proposed sea control to ensure one's own forces' shipping access whenever necessary and sea denial to deny enemy access. Napoleon wrote, "*Let us be masters of the Straits (of Dover) for six hours, and we shall be masters of the World.*"<sup>11</sup> Command of the sea denotes an ideal situation when a nation dominates the seas unchallenged. This is indeed untenable today with the proliferation of anti-access anti-denial (A2AD) technology and asymmetric warfare. As such, sea control is more plausible.

Corbett believed that great issues between nations at war were almost always decided on land. Following Clausewitz, that war is a continuation of *politick*, Corbett stressed that maritime strategy should focus on what the fleet enables the army to achieve on land towards national objective(s). Fisher sees the army as a "*projectile to be fired by the Navy*", where

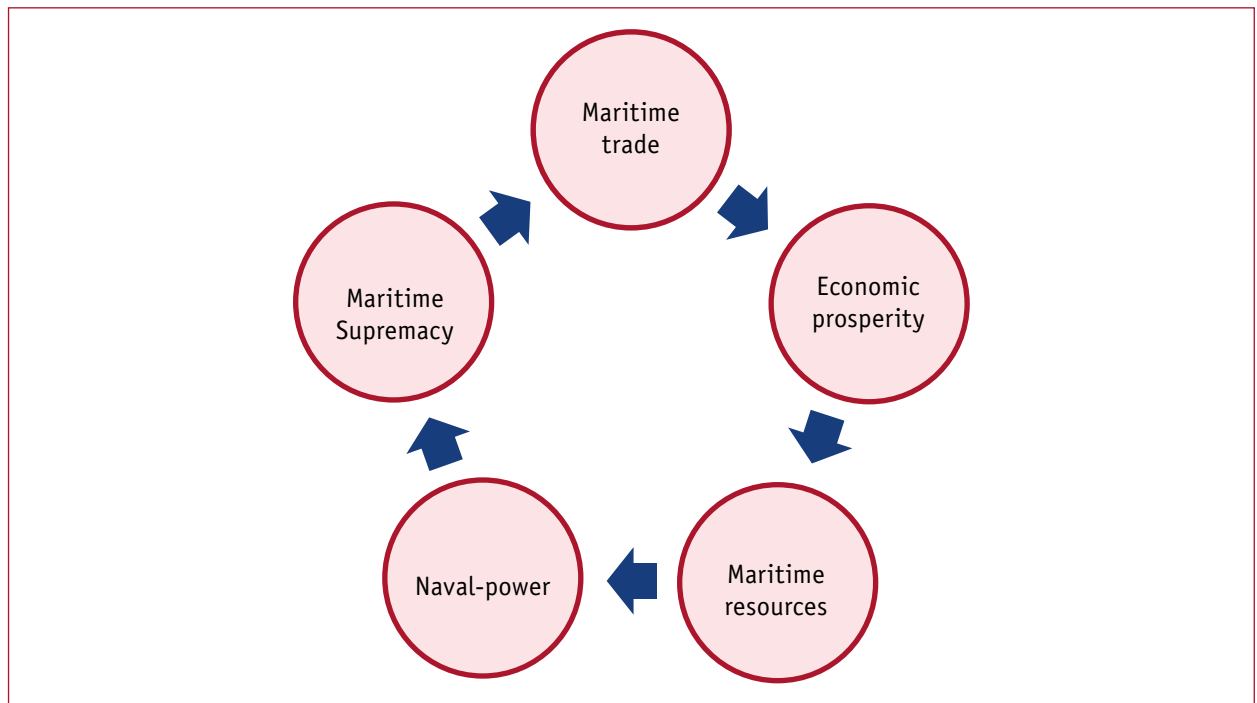


Figure 1: Adapted from Till's *Virtuous Maritime Cycle*<sup>12</sup>

the Navy's worldwide accessibility gave it "*inordinate power far beyond its numerical strength*."<sup>13</sup> Gray added that while sea power merely enables a conflict to be won by air and land forces in some circumstances, it was instrumental in others, referring to the Pacific Campaign against Japan in WWII.<sup>14</sup> Hart produced the *British Way of Warfare*, stating that Britain avoided direct confrontation on continental European land through the command of sea while securing the aid of allied land powers, an excellent example of Hart's 'Indirect Approach' to war.<sup>15</sup>

*However, in the Royal Navy's review, maritime power remains relevant, with the ability to access crisis areas with mobility and resilience, sustain reach and lift capacity in joint campaigns, versatile posturing for diplomacy, and capacity for expeditionary operations.*

Some doubted sea power's strategic effectiveness against a continental power with access to resources; together with air power theories and preoccupation on land control, Jan Breemer declared that "Naval strategy is dead."<sup>16</sup> However, in the Royal Navy's review, maritime power remains relevant, with the ability to access crisis areas with mobility and resilience, sustain reach and lift capacity in joint campaigns, versatile posturing for diplomacy, and capacity for expeditionary operations.<sup>17</sup> In the *U.S. Naval Operations Concept 2010*, influencing of events ashore, as Corbett said, remains the central idea of the United States Navy (USN). Indeed, sea power's unique characteristics allow it to transcend across all the four dimensions of DIME in today's world (*Figure 2*).

Essentially, sea power is the ability to influence people's behaviour or events by what we do at or from sea, in support of national interests. It covers the peace to war continuum and both dimensions of naval forces and maritime commerce. Unlike the army and air force, whose combat power is related to that of potential adversaries, the combat power of a navy is determined by the maritime assets and interest to safeguard. In this sense, sea power is a broader concept than land or air power, as neither includes the economic elements (maritime assets and commerce) of national interest to the extent that sea power does.<sup>18</sup>

## CHARACTERISTICS AND STRATEGIC UTILITY IN THE PEACE TO WAR CONTINUUM

Over 70% of the planet's surface is covered by sea and about 75% of the world's population live in littoral zones within 200 miles from the sea. The cost-effectiveness of sea transportation enables over 90% of international trade, by volume, to be conducted via sea.<sup>19</sup> These features give sea power its unique characteristics and strategic utility.

Firstly, 'freedom of the high seas' allows naval forces to navigate peacefully to gain access to most parts of the world.<sup>20</sup> This allows nations to show a presence of force that can be logistically self-sustaining anytime. This can be done either to support troubled allies, or to coerce or deter hostile nations, without the need of a host nation. Besides having a quick response to show a presence of force, naval deployment offers controllability to calibrate the level of commitment 'on-the-fly', while maintaining an exit strategy. Such strategic utility of naval forces was demonstrated on numerous situations.

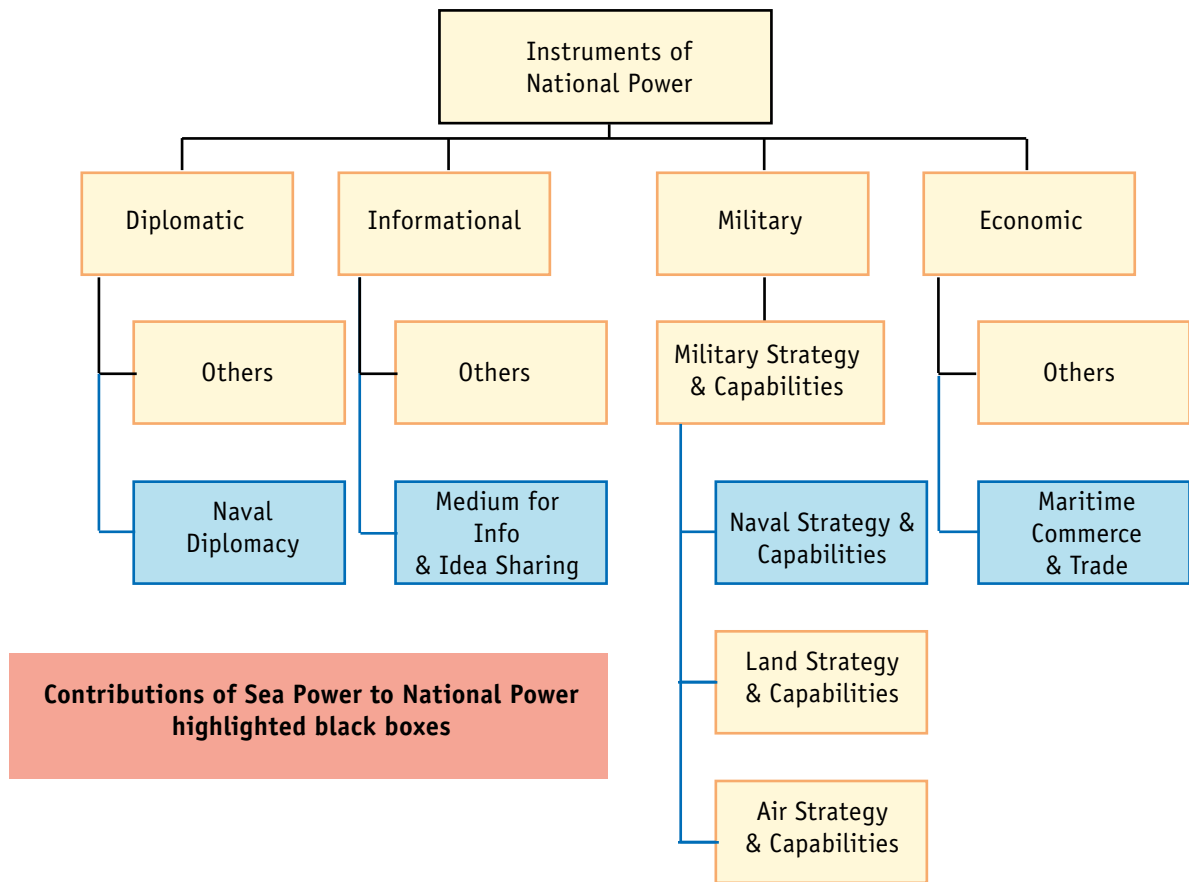


Figure 2: Adapted from Till's *Seapower* <sup>21</sup>

## TENSIONS AND CRISIS ESCALATIONS

During the Falklands War, Britain did not have an immediate contingency plan for Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands. Nevertheless, a British Naval Task Force (NTF) was deployed within two days after the invasion. The deployment showed Britain's claim of sovereignty over the Islands and her resolve to recapture them by force.

While the NTF was en route to the Falklands and while a military strategy was being developed, Britain spared no effort to contain and resolve the crisis through other instruments of national power, diplomatically

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through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and economically through sanctions, with the support of the European Economic Community (EEC), against Argentina.<sup>22</sup>

Cable wrote, "maritime conflict is easier to limit and control than it is on land or in the air. It also inflicts lesser collateral damage. Warships ... can pose a threat and sustain it without a single warlike act. They can deploy on the high seas without commitment, wait, and gain time for diplomacy. If prospects look poor, warships are easier to withdraw."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the NTF deployment allowed





*The Argentinean Light Cruiser, ARA General Belgrano, sinking during the 1982 Falklands War.*

political leaders to exert military pressure, buy time for peaceful resolutions and yet offer a ready exit strategy depending on how the crisis developed. The ability to deploy the NTF within two days of the Argentinian invasion and navigate towards the Falkland Islands uninterrupted by hostile forces offered Britain the policy space to contain the crisis escalation and an exit strategy thereafter should diplomacy succeed.

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, after discovering Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, the US Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) proposed several possible courses of actions including diplomacy, air strikes at missile sites and a full invasion of Cuba.<sup>24</sup> While the Kennedy administration pursued diplomatic solutions, both a full scale invasion and an air-strike were eventually rejected as the former would escalate the crisis into a conflict and the latter could not assure destruction of all threat missiles due to incomplete intelligence. Eventually, a naval blockade

(or 'quarantine' to avoid an act of war connotation) was elected as the US assessed that this was the only military option with better controllability of crisis escalation, while preventing more nuclear missiles from reaching Cuba. While the crisis was resolved diplomatically, naval force was the only viable military option available to the US with the lowest risk of escalation and provided an exit strategy for the US and the world from a major nuclear conflict. The blockade was a viable option as the USN had command of the sea and that the most likely means of missile freighting was via the seas.

"To subdue the enemy without any battle is the ... most supreme strategy."

– Sun Zi<sup>25</sup>

Next, onto naval diplomacy. Besides peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) missions, land or air forces' deployment might be

portrayed as an act of hostility or aggression. However, a naval force is more versatile and not necessarily hostile. Turner called the *“Naval Presence mission ... the use of naval forces, short of war, to achieve political objectives.”*<sup>26</sup> Gorshkov agreed that navies *“made it possible to achieve political ends without resorting to an armed struggle... (and) instrument of policy...important aid to diplomacy.”*<sup>27</sup> Navies operate in an international medium with opportunities for both cooperation and competition. This dual possibility made navies the most suitable military component to be used as a state foreign policy instrument to meet national objectives.

In 1971, the US sent NTF74 to the Bay of Bengal to influence and prevent the Soviet-backed Indian military from further offensives on West Pakistan.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the USSR reportedly deployed submarines to shadow NTF74 to deter the US from unilateral offensives against the Indians. There was no further escalation of the crisis after the deployment of both the American and Soviet navies to the Bay of Bengal. During the Cold War, the very existence of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) somewhere in the vast ocean and invisible, unlike Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and strategic nuclear-bombers that can be tracked, allowed both superpowers to maintain second-strike nuclear threat credibility, increasing the nations’ nuclear deterrence. Such ‘gunboat’ (albeit by submarines) diplomacy has arguably allowed both superpowers to maintain a sensible balance of both offensive defence and defensive defence, ensuring mutually assured destruction that very much prevented a nuclear war.

## Conflicts

In war, superior sea power improves the chances of sea control and A2AD, providing military power with the flexibility of options for surprises and manoeuvres

via the seas. According to Hart, *“amphibious flexibility is the greatest strategic asset that a sea-based power can possess.”*<sup>29</sup> This characteristic provides strategic and operational advantages for the projection and sustenance of land or air power and strategic strike options at enemy’s Centre of Gravity.

At Operation Overlord, the Allies maintained a near total control of the sea throughout the campaign to ensure the successful crossing of the English Channel and to sustain the operations (troops and logistics) after the Normandy Landing.<sup>30</sup> Sea control was possible through the negation of the German surface fleet and the subsequent denial of the ‘U-boats peril’ in the Battle of the Atlantic. Although the Allies air superiority was also credited for the successful Normandy Landing, sea control at the Atlantic had allowed the following:

- (1) The strategic sealift of troops and equipment from the US;
- (2) Import of war materiel to the starving British industry;
- (3) Continued sustenance of land campaign, which was regarded as a war of attrition; and
- (4) Decoy operations convincing the Germans that the landing would be north of Pas-de-Calais.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, sea power does not take the full credit for the success of Operation Overlord.

Operational manoeuvre from the sea is best exemplified by the Incheon Landing during the Korean War, where United Nations (UN) forces travelled over 1,000 miles for invasion. The UN landing cut off the North Korean’s lines of communications and recaptured Seoul, strategically reversing the situation in favour of the UN until China’s intervention. Sea

control achieved by superior sea power enabled the UN the freedom of manoeuvre, delivering strategic surprise to the North Koreans. However, this is where sea power's influence on land ceased. While the navy continued to support the land campaign, it was helpless in resisting the advance of the Chinese Army from recapturing Seoul again.

In the WWII Pacific Campaign against Japan, the navy was instrumental in enabling the 'island-hopping' strategy, bringing Japan within the reach of the US Air Force's strategic bombing. Gray argued that the campaign against Japanese merchant shipping was instrumental and decisive in bringing down the Japanese war economy.<sup>32</sup> Japan occupied Southeast Asia for resources, especially petroleum, to feed their war economy to sustain war efforts in East Asia.<sup>33</sup> The US' submarine campaign against the Japanese SLOC resulted in the tremendous loss of Japanese merchant shipping and consequently imports, which had an 85% drop from 1941 to 1945.<sup>34</sup>

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Japanese Navy doctrine was heavily influenced by Mahan's command at sea, with naval campaigns targeting decisive battles but neglecting *guerre de course* and defence of their own SLOCs.<sup>35</sup> Without sea control and sea denial, Japan failed to safeguard its



*Launch of a Tactical Tomahawk cruise missile from the USS Stethem.*

Centre of Gravity—the war economy in this total war. Nimitz concluded that, “with our sea power ..., we gave Japan the choice of surrender or slow but certain death.”<sup>36</sup> The campaign against Japanese shipping greatly affected Japanese military power generation and its turn-around capabilities.<sup>37</sup> The blockade created ‘an excess of plant capacity’ in the Japanese factories even before strategic bombing commenced.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it was eventually the combination of air bombing, naval blockade and atomic bombing that coerced Japan's capitulation.

In the Falklands War, after diplomatic efforts and economic sanctions failed to prevent the war, British forces gained sea control shortly after the sinking of the Argentinian cruiser ARA General Belgrano, keeping the rest of the Argentinian fleet at bay thereafter, thereby eliminating Argentina's naval threat and ability to project air power through aircraft carriers. Although Argentina's air force continued to pose a serious threat against British ships with limited anti-aircraft defence, the Royal Navy's control of the sea



allowed air power projections to conduct air-raids and land power projections for the amphibious landing on the Falklands.<sup>39</sup> While the Royal Navy was not the key contributing factor for the recapturing of Falkland Islands, its contributions in both air and land power projection were essential for the military campaign.

In recent conflicts, the advent of precision cruise missiles launched by naval forces enabled additional strategic options. The extensive use of the Tomahawk cruise missile, launched from warships and submarines at great stand-off (over 1,000 miles), in both the 2003 Iraq invasion and the 2011 intervention of Libya's civil war, demonstrated the complementary utility of sea power and air power for destroying strategic and operational targets. This is useful to either obviate the need to commit ground forces, as seen in the 1998 attacks on terrorist facilities in Afghanistan, or to improve the success rates for the next phase of operations by land-forces (Iraq invasion).<sup>40</sup> Such strategic attacks are possible only with sea control through superior naval-power. This transformed how the navy could directly influence the events and outcome of a war, both at sea and on land.

### Peace and Troubled Peace

The last characteristic would be the versatility of naval-forces. Maritime security is the primary mission of naval forces in peace and troubled peace (Virtuous Maritime cycle). This responsibility is important for any nation with maritime trade. Since SLOC are interconnected worldwide, sea power ensures freedom and security of trade in this highly globalised world and it is increasingly the responsibility of the navies.

A navy's strategic reach and power projection ability for expeditionary operations are expected to be the key utility of military operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Increasingly, the international community is cooperating to enhance global maritime security for the benefit of international trade. This includes cooperation against terrorists, pirates and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), working beyond the immediate borders of their own country for the common global good. For example, the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), under the 25-nation coalition maritime force, was set up to counter piracy attacks off the coast of Somalia. The strong participation from numerous nations beyond the immediate vicinity of the Gulf of Aden, where CTF151 operates, signifies the strategic importance of free and peaceful maritime trade.

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Besides ensuring maritime security, the flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness and reach of navies to project power allows the conduct of expeditionary operations

to impose good order from the sea in operations other than war (OOTW), such as HADR. Such operations contribute to international and regional stability from the sea and reconstruction after state failure or natural disasters, such as the UN mission in East Timor and Tsunami disaster relief and reconstructions.<sup>41</sup>

### Strategic Utility of Sea Power

Sometimes, sea power is just a strategic 'enabler', such as its role in Operations Overlord, or a strategic tool to expand policy space before the Falklands War. At the Pacific Campaign, sea power was instrumental in strangulating Japan's war economy, leading to Japan's

capitulation. The more maritime-oriented a country, the more significant maritime power projection against it can be.<sup>42</sup> For Corbett, the objective of a naval war was control of maritime communications for diplomatic, military and commercial purposes (three instruments under DIME). With command of the sea, one could:

- (1) Attack opposing forces;
- (2) Undermine war economy via blockade or *guerre de course*;
- (3) Coerce strategically.

In peacetime, sea power contributes to global maritime trade and security. Sea power is more than an extension of land power. However, sea power alone does not offer all the military options for political masters to meet strategic objectives in all circumstances.

## MILITARY POWER

What about land power and air power? Numerous long lasting empires (e.g. the Mongol empire) originated from land power. The need for soldiers on the ground to capture and secure territory in most conflicts translates to the indispensable need for land power. From Odierno's observation of the evolution of strategic environment and characteristics of conflict, land forces are almost always required as their presence is necessary to prevent conflict, shape the environment and restore peace.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, the strategic and enduring utility of land power in satisfying national objectives, in the past, present and future is undisputable.

Air power strategist Douhet, a believer of *Total War*, advocated the employment of air power for strategic bombing to destroy 'vital centres' of the

enemy and break the people's will. The 1999 Kosovo war exemplified how strategic bombing achieved the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) objective of Yugoslavia's early capitulation. Although RAND argued that the increasing likelihood of a NATO ground invasion contributed to Milosevic's acceptance of a peace settlement, Hosmer concluded that NATO's strategic bombing created a political climate amongst both the populace and political leadership that was conducive to ending the conflict.<sup>44</sup>

Sea power, land power and air power cannot work in isolation and fulfil all strategic objectives of a nation. From the various case studies discussed earlier, the Normandy Landings, the Pacific Campaign, the Korean War and the Falklands War, all three constituents of military power played a crucial role and had to work jointly to achieve the military end-state with maximum efficiency and minimum costs. In the contemporary world, the distinctions between sea, air and land power are increasingly blurred, with increasing strategic imperatives to bring all three constituents onto the battlefield in a cooperative and integrated fashion.

The inability of cross-service integration for joint operations would lead to the sub-optimisation of military strategies. In Operation Desert Storm, the lack of integration and mutual support between the United States Navy's Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Joint Force Headquarters led to an inability to deal with the Iraqi mine-laying operations that produced so much trouble subsequently.<sup>45</sup>

Smith proposed that the future utilisation of the military in any political confrontation or conflict has four functions: to ameliorate, to contain, to deter or coerce and to destroy.<sup>46</sup> Smith argued that inter-

state industrial wars, where armed forces battled on a field, no longer exist. Instead, future conflicts would be a strategic confrontation between a range of combatants, not all of which are armies and not all of which are state actors. While it is too presumptuous to write off inter-state conflicts in future, recent trends indicate that military force is increasingly utilised in a growing spectrum of requirements from counter-terrorism, anti-WMD proliferation, peacekeeping or peace-making, resource protection to HADR, etc. In this dynamic and complex world with growing uncertainty, no single domain, i.e. land, air or sea in isolation, is capable of meeting all the strategic objectives required by the political leadership. All constituents of military power, for example, land power, air power and sea power have to be available and skilfully integrated and employed in an optimal configuration to ensure the success of meeting political objectives.

## CONCLUSION

Sea power is more than an extension of land power. Sea power can be an enabler of land or air power to support a military campaign. It can also be the decisive and executive power in some circumstances. On its own, sea power is a strategic tool of choice. While sea power contributes to all four instruments of DIME, on its own, it has limitations in answering to all strategic objectives of a nation. Sea power is better classified as a strategic tool and not a strategic domain.

In Thomas' definition of fourth generation warfare, "all available networks - political, economic, social and military" – are used to impose our will on the enemy.<sup>47</sup> Land, sea and air power are instruments of military power, while military power is one of the four instruments of national power (DIME). The full potential of sea power can only be unleashed under the

ambit of military power, where all three dimensions of land, air and sea powers are integrated in harmony and synergised, giving a multiplier effect of military power to the nation. This provides political leaders with the flexibility of options to wield its military power, amongst the other instruments of national power to achieve desired national objectives. Thus, military power is better qualified as a strategic domain to serve national interests. 🌐

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## ENDNOTES

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6. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*.
7. Ibid.
8. Geoffrey Till, *Sea Power, A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, (2013).
9. Ibid. This is also described by Till (2013) as the constituents of Sea power.
10. In Clausewitz's theory of limited war, he recognised that the enemy's army was no longer the center of gravity, and the optimal strategy was not a search for a decisive battle.
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19. Based on United Nations Conference on Trade And Development's (UNCTAD) "Review of Maritime Transport 2012", world seaborne trade continues to grow steadily by 4% in 2011 to a record of 8.7 billion tons.
20. Based on the 1982 UNCLOS, Article 47, high seas are open to all states, both coastal and landlocked, where ships have freedom of navigation, and no states may validly purport to subject any part of high seas to its sovereignty. Also, based on Article 95, warships on high seas have complete immunity from the jurisdiction of any other state other than the flag State.
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