

MARITIME POWER IN THE 21st CENTURY

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There are two questions that those of us who are privileged to lead our nations' navies must constantly ask ourselves.

What does 'maritime power' really mean in the 21st century, when a new set of power aspirants is emerging?

And how much of that power should we aspire to, on our nations' behalf?

And let there be no mistake: how we answer these two questions directly affects our nations' ability to defend and promote their security interests.

As the eminent British historian Niall Ferguson so amply demonstrates in his study *Empire*, the mass and global reach of the Royal Navy was the guarantor of British economic power in the 19th century.

Some of us may hanker for the 'good old days' – all a bit before my time, I'm glad to say. And some of us may lament the fact that we no longer have massive fleets and tens of thousands of enlisted men at our disposal.

But was mass ever the defining characteristic of maritime power, or was it, as I intend to argue, something more dynamic, more agile, more responsive to unanticipated change and more flexible in the hands of skilled leaders?

What I wish to do today is to explore the nature of maritime power in the 21st century.

I wish to identify its critical components, especially the strategic effect of being able to impose unacceptable costs on potential adversaries, and them knowing this to be so.

I will touch upon the critical role of leadership and decision-making in the exercise of maritime power, and the growing significance of strategic manoeuvre as the critical driver of effective alliance operations, both joint and combined.

For, as I shall argue, interdependence and partnership will be the bedrock of both decisive and distributed lethality as the guarantors of maritime power.

Two months ago, I gave a presentation at the Sea Air Space conference in Washington.

My speech was titled *Mahan and Turner Restored: Naval Power and the Democratic State in the 21st Century*.

In it I examined the contemporary relationship between maritime power and the decision-making powers of the state focusing on the proposition that ‘war is the continuation of policy by other means’.

My central thesis was that any state that has its survival and the protection of its citizens in mind MUST retain sufficient lethality to preserve the peace and prosecute war when necessary.

You will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to repeat that speech here.

Rather, what I intend to do today, is to take that central thesis to its logical conclusion.

Chiefs of Navy everywhere are grappling with the consequences of cost pressures as modern democratic governments find themselves under increasing pressure to reduce their public sector expenditures.

As our governments confront the ‘the accelerating cost of services (including the armed services) and demand for more social spending, we find ourselves under increasing pressure to do more with less’.

Resource pressures affect the Royal Navy in the same way that they affect the Royal Australian Navy – more is expected from less, and less is constantly replaced with less still.

On their current trajectories, by 2040 our two navies will not differ much in size, yet we will both be expected to meet current tasks as we take on new ones.

Our historical links are intimate, indeed in my own case genetic. My father was a RN officer, and I was christened aboard HMS *Victorious*.

Like many Australian naval officers, my antecedents are Royal Navy.

Just as the Australian Navy’s doctrine has derived from that of the Royal Navy, the further development of doctrine by both navies will continue to be joined at the hip.

It is our collective duty as leaders of our armed services to revisit periodically, the fundamental concepts and principles that underpin the legitimate retention and use of armed force by the modern democratic state.

These concepts and principles provide the basic legitimacy, authority and credibility of the individual armed services.

And as Chief of the Navy of a middle power that has conducted joint and combined operations with the Royal Navy for over a century, it is my responsibility to ensure that contemporary naval power is understood in the context of the contemporary requirements of government.

Our navies work under very similar political systems.

And given the nature of our historical antecedents, we are uniquely positioned to assist each other to address current and prospective issues and to develop the conceptual architectures that give meaning and purpose to our naval endeavours.

Both the UK and Australia have navies that are perfectly able to operate independently when circumstances so demand, and at the same time to operate in combined and joint operations with each other and with the US Navy.

To the extent that my thinking is of use to the Royal Navy, I am delighted to share it.

And I definitely want yours.

Setting the Scene

To set my thinking in context, I would like to take a bird's eye view of where we have come from over the past century as the relationship between naval power and strategic maritime power has continued to evolve.

In the centenary year of the ANZAC landings – the biggest amphibious landings of the First World War, it is important to recognize the crucial role played by the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy in the Dardanelles Campaign, and the tactical and operational innovations that introduced new forms of naval power, submarines and the prototype aircraft carrier.

As the Australian submarine *AE2* was operating in the Sea of Marmora, *HMS Ark Royal* provided the aerial surveillance and terrain mapping that enabled both effective Naval Gunfire Support and ground operations.

I shall return to *HMS Ark Royal* in a moment. But the evolution of naval power in the 20th century went far beyond the development of battleships and heavy cruisers, the ability to mount complex amphibious operations, or to mount submarine operations on the scale of the Kriegsmarine under von Tirpitz – incidentally one of Mahan's most serious devotees.

Naval Power becomes Maritime Power

For what we observe is that between the Battle of Jutland and the Battle of the Coral Sea, naval power evolved into maritime power.

While some naval historians have described the Battle of Jutland as 'indecisive' or 'a stalemate', it was undoubtedly a strategic success for Britain and the Royal Navy.

Scheer's High Seas Fleet withdrew, and was not seen again for the duration of the war.

As a contemporary American columnist summed it up, "The German fleet has assaulted her British jailer, but remains in prison".

Jutland was the last set engagement between battle fleets, depending, of course, on your definition of battle fleets.

As the Royal Navy's losses suggest, mass at sea was not the determinant. The costs imposed on the High Seas Fleet were simply unacceptable from a strategic perspective.

The German fleet lost its capacity for strategic manoeuvre.

Many of you will be familiar with Andrew Gordon's penetrating analysis of the Battle of Jutland in his outstanding study *The Rules of the Game*.

He concludes his book with a set of twenty-eight 'Blinding Glimpses of the Obvious' – the lessons learnt.

They are all gems. But the one that I, as the person responsible to government for the effective employment of the Navy in time of war, find the most disturbing is the twelfth 'BGO'.

I quote: "A service which neglects to foster a conceptual grasp of specialized subjects will have too few warriors able to interrogate the specialists."

Self-doubt and the consequent self-examination are critical attributes of the warrior.

An inherent scepticism and a constant questioning of doctrinal mantras are the essential tools of strategic and operational relevance.

Warfare is always a contest of political will where the crucial weapon is the mind.

The true test of our leadership is our agility of mind and the efficiency of our decision-making.

Our capacity for strategic manoeuvre rests in our ability to ensure that our doctrine that gives effect to strategic intent is clear, up-to-date and properly understood by our fighting men and women.

In the most fundamental sense, war at sea in the First World War truly was "the continuation of policy by other means".

And that is what we must remember in contemporary strategic circumstances.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest sea battle in history, bringing new dimensions to naval power, such as operations research, joint and combined sea and air operations, to enable the Royal Navy ultimately to break the U-boat threat, thereby achieving the strategic outcome of blockading Germany and maintaining supplies to Britain.

The significance of the Battle of the Atlantic was not lost on Britain's wartime Prime Minister.

As Churchill said in 1941, “. . . can you wonder, that it is the Battle of the Atlantic which holds the first place in the thoughts of those upon whom rests responsibility for procuring the victory?”

(Churchill’s radiobroadcast, “Report on the War”, 27 April 1941.)

I do not know the origins of US Fleet Admiral Ernest King’s anglophobia and his apparent antipathy towards the Royal Navy, especially the RN’s preference for convoying merchant vessels rather than leaving them at the non-so-tender mercies of the German U-boats

Something unpleasant clearly happened to persuade him to affect the white pocket-handkerchief!

But the mathematics of operations research demonstrated that, for any given number of ships, travelling in a single convoy rather than in smaller convoys - *optimized* success.

Maybe Admiral King was a latecomer to mathematical methods.

We also discovered that Long Range Maritime Patrol aircraft, operating with destroyers and corvettes, could counter and defeat the U-boats.

Like Jutland, it came at a tremendous cost, but its strategic outcome was undeniable.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war in Western Europe.

Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea or in the air - depended ultimately on its outcome.

In the Pacific, the Battle of the Coral Sea began the defeat of Japan.

This was the first naval battle in history where the opposing fleets could not see each other, at sea level.

Yet they inflicted massive damage on each other, with the tactical advantage appearing to lie with Japan.

Yet the strategic advantage clearly lay with the allies.

Because of the damage inflicted on two of the Japanese carriers (one was structurally damaged and the other lost many of its aircraft), the Battle of the Coral Sea set the scene for the allied naval victory at the Battle of Midway (where the air assets of the opposing sides were more evenly matched).

More importantly, the Battle of the Coral Sea was the necessary precursor of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, perhaps the greatest naval battle in history.

The defeat of the Imperial Japanese Navy was critical to MacArthur’s recapture of the Philippines.

Of course, there was a fundamental difference between the war in Europe and the war in the Pacific.

Whereas the European theatre was fundamentally a continental war, the Pacific theatre was fundamentally an archipelagic war.

Without in any way detracting from the strategic and logistic brilliance of the amphibious landing in Normandy, the fact is that the United States and Australia conducted over forty amphibious landings together during the Pacific war.

Our joint operations with the US Navy during the Pacific War set the scene for our consequent alliance with the US.

But more than that, it hard-wired partnership and interdependence into our maritime DNA.

And for one of my earlier predecessors, Vice Admiral Sir John Collins, partnership straddled both the Royal Navy and the US Navy.

As captain of HMAS *Sydney*, he participated in the Battle of the Mediterranean in 1940, and was then commander of the combined Australian-US Task Force 74 in HMAS *Australia*.

He was badly injured as a result of the first kamikaze attack in the Pacific War, when HMAS *Australia* was hit in the lead up to the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

For both the UK and Australia, the trajectory of our respective learning curves between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second World War was as transformative as it was steep.

Our navies moved from a focus on platforms as the key components of our fleets to a concentration on the integration of capabilities to generate strategic naval systems.

And this is where I return to Gallipoli and HMS *Ark Royal*.

Within a period of just over four decades, naval power evolved into maritime power by incorporating both air power and submarines as intrinsic components of both force projection and fleet protection.

And it also saw interdependence and partnership emerge as the defining strategic advantage over adversaries that sought to constrain and curtail the freedoms that define our nations and our societies.

The Nature of contemporary Maritime Power

The world has moved on inexorably since 1942.

While the Battle of the Coral Sea brought into play a totally new dimension of maritime power, the air battle, it was, like HMS *Ark Royal*'s deployment to Anzac Cove, experimental.

The Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Falklands War and the first Iraq War saw the ability of navies to dominate the under-, on- and above-sea domains.

Technological developments, especially in missiles, communications and stealth technologies, now afford tactical and strategic options that Vice Admiral Fletcher of the USN and Rear Admiral Crace of the RAN could only have dreamt of in 1942 as they confronted the Imperial Japanese Navy.

But while the United States Navy remains the dominant naval and maritime power, other navies are catching up.

The Russian navy remains a powerful and constantly modernizing force. The Indian Navy is growing in both capability and reach.

And the Chinese Navy has already demonstrated its ability to project power at long range.

The Chinese Navy's deployment early in 2014 of an amphibious assault ship and two guided missile destroyers into the Indian Ocean was a palpable reminder of how ambition and reach are coming together in China.

But as we reflect on our actions in the conduct of war, the blinding glimpse of the most obvious is that reality has the terrible habit of testing theory.

As we continue to build on the doctrinal assumptions of the past, we must be vigilant in ensuring that they remain fit for purpose.

The Battle of the Nile and the Battle of Trafalgar are glorious in the annals of the Royal Navy.

But we would not for a moment contemplate resurrecting the doctrine on which Nelson based his victories.

So we must also think deeply about the strategic utility of concepts such as sea control and sea denial for contemporary and prospective naval and maritime power.

The fact is that sea control, as taught in our staff colleges, is increasingly out of the reach of modern navies.

But when sea denial delivers decisive lethality as the ultimate sanction against the adversary's attempt to access focal areas, the desired strategic effect is achieved.

And decisive lethality, as generated by the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy, is the necessary precursor to the distributed lethality that is the operational focus of the United States Navy today.

Moreover, the ability of both our navies to operate asymmetrically – especially with respect to our submarine operations – delivers sea denial as critical strategic effect.

So what does ‘sea control’ mean for our two navies?

When Stansfield Turner coined the term, he was recalibrating and providing contemporary meaning to Mahan’s more ambitious concept ‘command of the sea’.

This was a static concept that, in Mahan’s day, did not address the increasing dynamism of the war at sea afforded by new technologies and new operational concepts, both driven by new and different political purposes.

Turner intended a “more realistic control in limited areas and for limited periods of time”.

As he said in 1974, “It is conceivable today to exert air, submarine, and surface control temporarily in an area while moving ships into position to project power ashore or to resupply overseas forces”.

Importantly, conflicts such as the Falklands demonstrated that a static approach to sea power was no longer viable, if it ever was.

Capabilities able to exploit the sea for their own purposes in one domain (for instance the Royal Navy’s SSNs in the underwater domain) denied the Argentinean forces their ability to exploit the sea in their selected domain (that is their surface forces), ultimately confounding Argentina’s political decision making.

As the late Admiral Sandy Woodward pointed out, Britain’s SSNs were influential in the outcome of the Falkland’s Campaign well before the Belgrano was sunk.

The Argentineans were planning to invade the Islands in the spring of 1982.

But when a British SSN departed Gibraltar earlier in the March of the same year, Admiral Anaya believed the British had caught wind of the invasion plans and that, once the SSN was stationed in the South Atlantic, the Royal Navy had a sufficient force structure that they could sustain a permanent SSN presence indefinitely forever foiling an Argentinean invasion plan.

So they went early and the rest is history.

Woodward’s example truly captures the essence of sea denial, as decisive capability impacted the political mind.

As an aside, Admiral Woodward wryly noted the British SSN dived on exiting the Mediterranean and turned north!

Such is the advantage of stealth—it plays with the enemy’s mind.

The lens through which we need to view sea control is the lens of domain exploitation for maximum strategic effect – capitalising on the adversary’s vulnerability in order to deny or defeat the adversary.

The essence of my argument is the need for us to maintain our focus on strategic effect – deterrence and domination of the adversary – rather than on the various tools by which we might achieve that effect.

I do not believe Admiral Stansfield Turner ever envisaged sea control as the static domination of maritime spaces by overwhelming naval force, not least of all because that force itself becomes the victim of spatial control rather than controlling the dynamics of the battle at sea.

But for many commentators and writers, ‘sea control’ has become a strategic end in itself rather than a tool for victory.

As Andrew Gordon might put it, ‘sea control’ is the rational concept, deriving from a long period of peace rather than the empirical concept necessary for winning the war at sea.

This is not to recommend that we dismiss concepts such as ‘sea control’. Rather, we need to give them contemporary application.

That is twofold:

- First, we need to retain the ability to exploit and manipulate the strategic advantages deriving from our ability to project power at sea.
- And second, we particularly need to look to our strategic capacity for allied and coalition operations, to ensure that we have the mass and the flexibility to gain and hold control of the sea.

This is where interdependence and partnership come into their own.

It is absolutely critical that we maintain our focus on the cardinal capabilities that enable us to apply lethal force at the adversary’s point of maximum vulnerability, where the application of that lethal force makes the greatest strategic sense.

These cardinal capabilities continue to be:

- First, force projection at a distance (the Battle of the Coral Sea)
- Second, the imposition of unacceptable costs (the Battle of Jutland)
- Third, targeted and decisive lethality (the Falklands War, and the first Iraq War)
- Fourth, agility, by which I mean the ability to take decisions quickly, to manoeuvre naval force with speed and flexibility, and to enhance survivability

by ensuring that our war-fighters are able to adapt doctrine and tactics to meet the needs of the moment (the Battle of Leyte Gulf).

- And finally, the ‘exploitation’ and ‘manipulation’ of the sea as the dynamic *contemporary meaning* of the traditional static concept of ‘sea control’ (which is what the RN achieved in the Battle of the Atlantic).

For both our navies, we need to look beyond the constraints imposed on our ability to retain and acquire advanced systems by rising technology costs and the increasing demands on the national exchequer.

This, it seems to me, is the critical test of leadership – the ability to inform and strengthen our governments in setting clear strategic direction and providing the wherewithal to achieve that strategic direction, and to empower our fleet commanders and the captains of our warships to exercise their imaginations and initiative within the framework of clear strategic direction.

And, as we celebrate the eight hundredth anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, we need to remind ourselves of what war is all about.

It is ultimately about deterring, resisting and defeating any attack on the values that define us as nations.

And, in this sense, as we saw with the 9/11 attacks on the US and the current activities of the IS forces in northern Iraq, an attack on any one of the allied democracies is an attack on all of them.

So for those of us who are the descendants of Westminster – Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and the US if I might make free with some aspects of colonial history – we need to see that our ability to act in the common defence of our values goes to the heart of 21st century naval power.

In 2002, the Australian Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie, issued a ‘pam’ titled *The Australian Approach to Warfare*. It says:

The Australian Defence Force is an important national institution in Australia. Its core function is to defend Australia from armed attack. In carrying out this and all its other functions, the Australian Defence Force is dependent on the support of the Australian people, is governed by the rule of law, and is subject to the direction of the Commonwealth Government as the civil authority.

The UK Chief of the Defence Staff could just as well have said this. An attack on any country upholding these principles is an attack on all countries that uphold these principles.

The Australia UK Ministerial Talks conducted in February this year reconfirmed the closeness of our ties at both the political and military levels.

While the talks focused on the current problem of foreign fighters and their participation in combat initiated by terrorist groups, they reaffirmed our ongoing cooperation in the development of maritime capability and emerging defence technologies.

Conclusion

For both the UK and Australia, maritime power will continue to be a core component of our strategic posture over the 21st century.

This power rests on core (and shared) national values that determine the unstinting support of the nation.

And it also rests on the continuing ability of our navies to work together to achieve a common strategic purpose.

It is appropriate that I conclude with an observation made by Winston Churchill, whose death 50 years ago we commemorated in January.

Reflecting on the Agadir crisis of 1911, when imperial Germany deployed SMS *Panther* and SMS *Berlin* to sanction the French army's expansion into the Moroccan interior.

Churchill condemned the creeping complacency of peacetime.

He was attacking what we in Australia know only too well as “she’ll be right, mate”.

He wrote with withering irony:

So now the Admiralty wireless whispers through the ether to the tall masts of ships, and captains pace their decks absorbed in thought.

It is nothing. It is less than nothing.

It is too foolish, too fantastic to be thought of in the twentieth century.

Or is it fire and murder leaping out of the darkness at our throats, torpedoes ripping the bellies of half-awakened ships, a sunrise on a vanished naval supremacy, and an island well-guarded hitherto, at last defenceless?

No... it is nothing. No one would do such things.

Civilization has climbed above such perils.

The interdependence of nations; in trade and traffic, the sense of public law, the Hague Convention,

Liberal principles, the Labour Party, high finance,

Christian charity, common sense have rendered such nightmares impossible

Are you quite sure?

It would be a pity to be wrong.

Such a mistake could only be made once—once for all.”

(The World Crisis, vol. 1, 1911-1914, pp. 48-49.)

When he wrote this in 1923 with characteristic resonance, Churchill was looking back at Agadir through the lens of our joint experience of the First World War.

And perhaps now it is even more the case that maritime power resides at the heart of our ability to remain independent and free.

Independence and freedom are the values that underpin our democracies.

They are also the values on which our alliances are built.