# THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF NAVAL POWER: REFLECTIONS ON DEFENCE, SECURITY AND POWER PROJECTION OF SEA FRONTIER

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## Introduction

The seas, oceans, rivers, and other water bodies have played critical roles in the advancement of human civilisation. The sea, or the water bodies generally, constitute one of the frontiers that are available for humanity to advance development and security interests. Other frontiers are land, airspace, and outer space. Beside the land, which is a natural habitat, the sea is the second oldest and most explored and exploited frontier to support human survival and progress. This does not come as a surprise, given that 71 per cent of the surface of the planet Earth is covered by oceans and seas, and the only 29 per cent that are covered by land are widely divided by these large water bodies (Luard 1977). Until the recent advancement with aircraft and space-based or supported communication technologies, maritime transportation and communication provides exclusive (and have continued to serve as a major) means to transcend this planetary divide across ages (Oyewole 2015). Accordingly, the act of advancing strategic interests, such as transportation, commerce, mining, food production, defence, security, power projection, prestige, research, and communication through the water bodies cannot be taken for granted. These among other things can be referred to as elements of sea power.

The sea is a strategic frontier with numerous potentials for the developments and security of states that share boundary, have access, and

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capacity to utilise and control, it. Therefore, it is a frontier in power politics, that is, the struggle for power among nations in international relations (Jung-pang 2012; Mahan 1890; Synge 2010; Wescott 1918; Willmott 2009). These among other things have necessitated the development of specialised military forces to operate at sea, that is, the navy, which is expected to defend and promote the interests of the sponsored state, most especially when they are contested by or in conflict with other states. However, the rise of air, nuclear and space powers in the 20th century has affected the roles and relevance of naval power in defence, security, and power politics. Yet, naval power continues to retain its relevance.

This article seeks to examine this military dimension of sea power, that is, naval power, and its enduring relevance for defence and security strategies as well as power projection and politics. This is expected to bridge the gap between distance and recent history of naval power and capture its changing dynamics amidst the rise of air, nuclear and space powers. To this end, this article is further divided into five sections. The next section provides the conceptual clarification of naval power as an integral part of sea power. The second section examines the instrumentality of the navy by state. The third section focuses on the evolution of naval power up to its golden age, while the subsequent section examines its enduring relevance amidst the rise of air, nuclear and space powers. These are followed by a section that provides concluding thought of the paper.

## The Concept of Naval Power in the Framework of Sea Power

The concept of sea power has several meanings.  It has been defined in military, economic, and political terms. Sea power has been associated with shipping, maritime force, shipbuilding, ship-repairs, ports, fishery, offshore-based industry, hydrography, oceanography, and the activities resulting from them (Chang 2012; Edgerton 2013; Herbert-Burns et al. 2009). It therefore represents an interlocking system of sea utilisation, for civil and military purposes, which has the potential to advance the interests of a state, including contribution to the power capability of the sponsored state (Grove 1990; Mahan 1890). Sea power is synonymous with maritime power and represents one of the many instruments in the orchestra of power that states use in the pursuit of their national interests. Elements of sea power, in strategic terms, consists of flourishing commercial fleets with effective naval forces, bases, harbours, ports, and an oceanographic fleet.

An important aspect of sea power, most especially for the student of

military and strategic studies, is naval power, which simply means fighting power at sea (Mahan 1890; Wescott 1918). This is the military power that is deployed and employed at sea or from the sea. Naval power has been associated with navigation, exploration, commerce and its protection, military campaign and power projection at sea across ages (Cumings 2009; Gilbert 2008; Jung-pang 2012). Advocates of naval powers in 18th and 19th centuries largely believed that the navies have two major purposes: the protection of commerce and the acquisition of stations, colonies, and bases in distant lands (Mahan 1890; Wescott 1918; Synge 2010). Naval power is also critical to national and empire defence, and colonial policing in early 20th century, as well as strategic deterrence during the Cold War (Willmott 2009). As it will be shown in this study, however, the missions of a navy broadly cover military, diplomatic and policing functions (Booth 1977; Kraska 2011).

Naval power is the operationalisation of military power on, above or underneath the sea. Navies have been radically transformed with a series of advancements in technologies of warfare at sea. Navies across ages have operated on the sea and landed troops (army or marine forces) onshore with various surface ships. However, the advent of aircraft carrier and associated naval air power in early 20th century first make it possible for navy to operate in air above the sea (Bowman 1999; Gates 2003; O'Brien 2015). At the same time, the invention of submarine makes it possible for them to operate underneath the sea. Sea platforms have equally grown in their delivery capacity. Prior to the 20th century, naval platform can only deliver surface to surface bombing. In this case, the surface is usually a nearby targets, mainly sea platform, and the land, most especially coaster community and associated facilities like ports, bases, and industrial complexes. The advancement in missile technology with long range trajectories and guidance system have made it possible for navies to expand the reach of their operations on the land and at sea beyond the limit of their immediate location, as well as registered their presence in air and space (Camille 2011; Klein 2006; Van Riper 2004). Amidst these, there are now orbital launcher from sea platforms. Radar and anti-radar technologies as well as navigation satellites equally gave naval power its cyber and space dimensions. Accordingly, naval power has been interlocked with air, cyber, land and space powers, even as it maintains it roots in sae power.

Naval power is one of the factors that has enabled individual states to advance into the ranks of great powers. The sea remains, as Mahan (1890) wrote, "a great highway... a wide common over which men may pass in all directions." Peter the Great of Russia once said: "Every potentate who has only ground forces has only one hand, yet whoever has a navy too, has both hands

(Wood 2007)." Accordingly, General Henry Hithles of the United States Marine Corps affirms that "the pathway of man's journey through the ages is littered with the wreckage of nations which, in their hours of glory, forget their dependence on the sea (The Nigerian Military 1988)." Pandit Nehru, the great Indian political thinker, once said that "to be secured on land you must be supreme at sea" (The Nigerian Military 1988). In the sixteenth century, Francis Bacon had contended that "he that command the sea is at great liberty and may take as much and as little of the war as he will (Wescott 1918)." The doctrine of sea power is built on the assumption that any nation which derives benefits from the sea cannot simply turn its back on it (Mahan 1890; The Nigerian Military 1988).

## The Navy as an Instrument of State Power

The need to have a powerful navy is consequent upon the geographical position of a nation and its desire to influence the behaviour of other states and thereby achieve their national interest and objectives. The source and significance of national power lies in the political, economic, and strategic importance of sea utilisation, which necessitate a nation to have a navy. Most littoral states have developed, and to a large extent depend on, their maritime environments to enhance their economy prosperity. Accordingly, many countries, most especially the littoral ones, have developed their national interests to cover their secure navigation of their immediate waters. The national interests of more powerful countries ranged from secure passage, exploration, exploitation and in some cases control of the sea in their immediate region/s or globally (Cumings 2009; Borressin 2004; Jung-pang 2012; Mahan 1890; Synge 2010; Wescott 1918; Willmott 2009).

Navy generally serves the state as an instrument of statecraft and contribute to its power capabilities through military, diplomatic and policing functions. Consequently, naval forces are usually organised strategically to serve these purposes. Different specialisation and sub-specialisation are often designed, and training of personnel are often tailored accordingly, after the initial general training. Similarly, different platforms and weapon systems are designed, designated, and deployed for different types of warfare among other operations. The concept of a balanced fleet presupposes that a navy has an assortment of platforms to engage in different forms of operation, depending on perception of threats, the resources available and the level of risk a nation is prepared to take by providing adequately for eventuality (Borressin 2004). The ability to exercise required naval power of a nation is largely premised on a 'balanced navy' (Grove 1990).

Chief among the roles of a navy is military function: war engagement to defend the homeland against targeted enemy and attack a target to defend the interests of sponsored state. Naval capabilities can be deployed and employed in limited ways or its totality, depending on the stake for the national interests of concerned state party. Equally, naval capabilities can be deployed and employed independently or in collaboration with other services of armed forces, as a joint task force, in warfare. In any case, the goals of any navy in warfare are to defeat the enemy through destruction of its forces as well as their material capabilities and associated fighting will. Naval operations are therefore planned to advance tactical interests, which are in turn expected to advance military and then strategic national interests of the state (Bartholomees 2008; Elleman 2004; Gray 2002).

Ideally, the attainment of military objectives should promote and entail the achievement of national objectives, but in many cases the national objectives require the integration of military success with non-military instruments of national power through politics (Bartholomees 2008; Gray 2015; 2016). Apparently, war is a continuation of politics by other means: it is preceded and succeeded by politics (Clausewitz 1982). This involves grand strategy; 'grand' because it integrates all relevant military and non-military elements of national power, and 'strategy' because these elements of national power are marshalled within coherent and carefully planned and implemented policy framework to achieve the specified national objectives (Gray 2015; 2016; Morgenthau 2006). Accordingly, naval interests are a component part of military objectives that are usually subsumed into national interests, which often cover issues of development and security trajectories, and their implications for domestic and international orders, including regional and global distribution and balance of power (Morgenthau 2006; Yakubu 2010).

Although the primary role of the navy is warfare, it has found many other roles in peacetime. Naval power is one of the essential instruments in deterring the outbreak of armed conflicts, in exerting influence and pressure on a target as part of diplomatic activities to influence other actors and secure concession and enforcing developed corpus of international law and regulations that prevents the maritime environment from dissolving into chaos (Grove 1990). In peacetime, navy usually place emphasis on enhancing capabilities, including personnel strength through training as well as the maintenance of existing and acquisition of new platforms and supporting assets. These are critical to maintain the preparedness of the force and deter potential threats of war. Most of the navies around the world often perform policing and constabulary duties. This can occur in absence of specialised institution for coast guards and in suppressing internal insurrection among

other support for civil or any other constituted authorities. Amidst these, navy also serve the state as instrumental of national development through its research as well as patrol and protection of sea lain and associated trade against bandits or sea robbers and pirates, within maritime jurisdiction and international waters respectively.

As an instrument of diplomacy, navy is used in a non-military sense to advance the political objectives of a state. Naval diplomacy involves creating generally favourable and military-specific image abroad and establishing a state's 'right' in areas of interest, providing reassurance to allies and friendly nations, influencing behaviour of other governments or groups indulging in sea-borne crimes or other forms of strategically threatening maritime activities (Cable 1994; Camille 2011). Amidst these, gunboat diplomacy refers to the use or threat of limited naval force in order to secure advantage or avert loss, either in an international dispute or against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their own state (Cable 1994). The concept became popular in 19th century, and it was associated with sea control, projection of power ashore by amphibious means, and naval presence. These were prevailing ideas behind the missions of navies up to the end of World War II, and their relevance endure till date (Willmott 2009).

The general decline in major wars and the rise of Cold War uncovered a new dimension of naval diplomacy, with emphasis on deterrence. The concept can be further expanded in post-Cold War era to include friendly visit, joint training, and capacity building. However, the popularity of naval diplomacy does not diminish the primary place of warfare in naval strategy, which has equally undergone a series of transformation across time and space. It is against this background that the next section will briefly examine the evolution of sea power with emphasis on the navy.

## Evolution and the Golden Age of Naval Power

The role and importance of sea power to nation-state and its equivalent across history cannot be underestimated. The history of sea power can be traced back to the ancient Egypt about 6,000 years ago. This ancient civilisation was built on the capacity to explore and exploit River Nile for basic sustenance of human community, which is essential for the development and security of the ancient Egyptian kingdom (Gilbert 2008; Hall 2005). However, the military dimension of sea power, naval power became more popular much more later. The Athenians, Persians, Romans, Chinese, English, Spanish, French and Americans among other peoples that have developed into great empires or

power status built renowned naval power capabilities at various time across history.

It is a historical fact that naval power played critical role in the military power capabilities and status of Athens, Persia, and Rome as Mediterranean powers between 500BC and 300AD. Amidst these, naval power is important in the Greco-Persian wars of 4th century BC, as evident with the victory of Athens against Persia in Salamis (Thucydides 1928). In the Punic Wars (264BC-146BC), Roman navy greatly contributed to defeat of the Carthaginians who were deny the use of sea power and could not give support to Hannibal's troops on land in Spain due to the Roman blockade of the Mediterranean Sea. The Roman control of the sea forced Hannibal to long and perilous march through Gaul, where more than half of its troops were lost. The naval battle of Ecnomus (256 BC) stands out as one of the decisive battles of this era; it was the death blow to Carthaginian naval power, with sixty-four vessels and their crew captured and twenty-four sunk, the Romans won the war, and the supremacy of their naval power was established (Silburn 1912).

With the decline of Roman Empire, which started in 3rd century AD, sea power became less pronounced in major wars and power dynamics of the then international politics of Eurasia until the tail end of the Middle Ages (between 14th and 15th centuries). In the far east Asia, however, China developed its maritime capabilities for commerce and military purposes to become a major sea power during the Southern Song and Yuan periods, between 12th and 14th centuries. Naval power played important role in Chinese invasions of Korea and Japan among other neighbouring entities in 12th and 13th centuries. The decline of Chinese sea power, which first started with the death of Qubilai Qan in 1294 attracted subsequent Japanese invasion of 1304 and the rise of maritime piracy in mid-14th century. Subsequently, the efforts to rebuild Chinese sea power was marked with a series of explorations cum commercial and naval expeditions, some of which reached the East coast of Africa, especially between 1400 and 1433 (Jung-pang 2012). These established China as a leading sea power in Eastern Pacific and Indian Ocean during this period.

At the tail end of the Middle Ages, the strategic relevance of sea power gained currency among the emerging nation-states of Europe, most especially England/Britain, France and Spain. Amidst these, Britain emerged as the greatest sea power the world ever knew before World War II. Spain and Portugal had over a century head-start over Great Britain in maritime expedition, the same way that both Holland and France took off in the quest for sea power before the British (Mahan 1890; Silburn 1912). The reign of Elizabeth was however a turning-point in the development of British sea

power. One of the major indicators of the ascendancy of British naval power was the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (Chadwick 1915; Mahan 1890; Silburn 1912).

Naval power played critical roles in the conquest and territorial ambitions of the British Empire in Americas, Asia, and Africa. Equally, British's victory against France in North America owed a lot to naval power, although the supporting roles of the French navy for American revolution also caused the Great Britain to relinquished sovereignty over the thirteen colonies that formed the United States of America in the 1770s. The British navy was also a major actor in the effort that made the great expansionist policy of France under Napoleon the "baseless fabric of a vision" (Muhan 1890). Remarkably, the British navy defeated the combined forces of France and Spain in the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. These among others made the Great Britain a global sea power of 19th century, a status that gave the country an edge over its continental rivals (Lambert 2004).

It is against this background that there was major struggle for sea control among major powers in the wake of 20th century. This was more salient to protect line of communications for those that relied on the sea for their basic supplies, especially food, fuel, ammunitions, and raw materials. The need to maintain sustainable relationship with overseas territories for military mobilisations and economic survival (sources of raw materials to run production lines and markets for finished goods) also raised the strategic importance of the sea lanes and their control as subject of defence and power projection (Grove 1990; Lambert 2004; Till 1987; Willmott 2009). These among others were evident in the political dynamics that lead up to the World Wars. Prior to this, however, the United States of America and Japan joined the exclusive club of sea powers that were dominated by European powers (Cumings 2009; Patalano 2015; Willmott 2010). At the same time, the golden age of sea power, when naval power is a decisive factor in war and associated power politics, started to decline (Willmott 2009; 2010). The two World Wars subsequently questioned the classical notion of naval power and sank the glory of many emperies that were built across the seas. The rise of air, nuclear and space powers alter the decisive notion of naval power, which were largely held in war and power politics until early 20th century. Yet, the strategic relevance of naval power endured as Cold War replaced World War II.

## Naval Power in the Age of Air, Nuclear and Space Warfare

The rise of air power, and subsequently nuclear and space powers, from the first decade of 20th century, marked the end of the Golden age of naval power. Air power is the ability to perform strategic functions in the airspace. The advent of modern aircraft, and its military adoption and utilities in warfare, from early 20th century, signify the ascendancy of air power. The Italians made history for their record of using modern aircraft for reconnaissance and bombing against Ottoman forces in Tripoli in 1911 and 1912. Prior to these, other European powers like Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia have developed army and naval aviation (Gates 2003). In the wake of World War 1 in 1914, Germany had acquired 232 military aircraft, while Russia had 264, France had 165, Britain had 63, Austria-Hungry had 48 and Belgium had 16 (Creveld 2011). Air power played important roles in the World War I, inter-war armed conflicts and the World War II. The relevance of the air frontier has further endured the rise of nuclear and space powers during the Cold War, and the asymmetric warfare that dominated post-Cold War era. Amidst these, air power is operationalised with air airstrike, interception, transportation, as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR).

The rise of air power considerably undermined the strategic importance that is attached to sea power prior to the 20th century. Compared to sea power, air power provides unique opportunity to operate over the land and the sea. This is connected to the prospects of using air assets for transportation, deep penetration of hostile territory, insertion and evaluation of troops and logistics in/out of theatre of operation, bombing of hostiles, ISR, and interception. These encouraged some scholars to argued for air power as a veritable instrument that can deliver decisive victory independently, or as forerunner of the joint forces (Harding 2005; Till 1987). On December 7, 1941, for instance, Japanese air campaign in Pearl Harbour had great destructive impacts and challenged American sea power in the Pacific. However, the effectiveness and prospects of air power have been undermined by the rise of air defence systems, which have land, sea, and air components. Amidst these, sea power is critical to area denial and national security of coastal states (Murfett 2003; Pugh 2005). Besides, the concept of naval sea power, which is largely connected to aircraft and recently helicopter carriers, retain the relevance of naval power in the age of air power.

The rise of nuclear weapons and associated power from mid-1940s became another major factor that questioned the relevance of naval power as conceived by its classical proponents. The destructive power of nuclear weapon is like noting that human has seen before. Its prospect in wiping out

tens and hundreds of thousands of people became evident in Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and its further advancement and testing thereafter. The invention of this weapon played critical role in fast-tracking the conclusion of the World War II, especially in the Pacific, and made direct military confrontation irrational between/among the superpowers and some of the great powers during the Cold War. As a result, the weapon became an object of deterrence, enhancing bargaining power in diplomacy, and means of communicating a nation's intentions strategically to potential adversaries (Kissinger 1990; Hosti 2001).

Considering the destructive impacts and potentials of nuclear weapons, some observers have argued that war can be won by a state with this capability without the participation of the navy and perhaps other services of the armed forces, either by deployment or mere threat of the weapon (Gorshkov 1974; Seigei 1979). Meanwhile, the critical roles of aircraft and missiles in delivery of nuclear weapons covered early advantage on air power in the age of nuclear power. However, naval power retained its relevance in relation to nuclear weapons, most especially with the prominence of submarine. Besides, naval power became a major factor in balance of power or terror, given the critical role of submarine-stocked nuclear weapons in ensuring Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) between the superpowers during the Cold War. The advent of nuclear bunker buster raised the threats of total destruction of home territory with limited retaliatry capacity.

Amidst these, naval power make it possible for nuclear powers to deter ambitious advsary from resorting to first strike, as martime domiain provides the opportunity to maintain second strike capability, which guarantee retaliation in case of destruction of home territory. Although the limitation of this option has been with the advent and advancement in submarine/ underwater tracking systems, it remains a critical dimension of the complex system of deterrence mechanism adopted for defence, security and power projection by nuclear powers.

The advent of space age opened up some new challenges and opportunities for naval power. Space assets have been used in conflict, competition and cooperation with different terrestial assets. The launch of Spotnik, the first articifical satellite of the Earth, into orbit by the Soviet Union, in 1957, marked the beginning of the space age. Space exploration and exploitation raised the prospects for militarisation and weaponisation of the highest frontier. Although this was not actualised, the threat of deploring nuclear weapons in orbit was raised with space race between the superpowers during the Cold War. This could have created unpopular third frontier of nuclear retaliation. Militarisation of space commonly appears in form of

support for military command and control via computers, communications, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR). These made it possible to track, monitor and connect with military formation and assets anywhere they are across the world, be it in the air, on the land, and on or under the sea (Dawson 2018; Klein 2006; Mowthorpe 2004). Accordingly, space support has further undermine myth and invisibility of military powers, including at sea, while it enhanced naval C4ISR. Equally, the advent of sea platform for orbital launch and tracking as well as recovery of reentry spacecrafts are key indicators of the enduring relevance of naval power in the space age.

## Final Remarks

The relevance of traditional conception of naval power is open to question with the advent of air, nuclear and space technologies. In the light of these, the term 'sea control' has gained currency instead of 'command of the sea' that popularly used by earlier naval thinkers such as Mahan and Corbett. Sea control is intended to describe a more realistic operational control in limited areas and for limited periods. It is conceivable today to temporarily exert air, submarine and surface control in the area while moving ships into position to project power ashore or re-supply overseas forces during wartime (The Nigerian Military 1988). The command of the sea was modified into theories of 'control' or 'dominance' of those parts of the sea that were necessary for the fulfilment of any particular objective; hence, 'battle' was not something that necessarily needed to be sought but must be prepared for with the prospect of success (Richard 2006). Sea control, equally continued to emphasise the concept of protected shipping, with at least the principles of convoy widely accepted and provided for, even if they did not follow in full the precepts and 'laws' (Grove 1990). In classical thinking, command of the sea had always had an obverse quality: denial of its use to the enemy; in sea control, denial still has a place (Richard 2006). The argument here is not that the enemy cannot do anything, but that the enemy cannot interfere with or succeed in undermining the objective and goals of the operations so seriously as to affect the overall strategy of the war and policy, and that it cannot carry on with its own operational objectives and goals except at such risk and hazard to its own implemented strategy.

Sea control recognises the limitations on ocean control brought about by the development of the submarine, airplane, the nuclear age and even the laws governing sea use. However, the concept of 'battle space dominance' is more important to navies in the 21st century than sea control. This concept ensures a more permanent presence of one's own naval forces off the enemy

coast to enjoy all the benefits accruing from denying to the enemy the use of the coast (Raja 1998). The object of naval warfare directly or indirectly remains to secure the control of the sea for the advancement of sponsored state's strategic national interests, and to prevent the enemy or potential adversaries from securing it or using against such state and its interests. It is against this background that this article presented the enduring relevance of naval power in changing strategic environment, which marked by the advent of air, nuclear and space powers since the 20th century.

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## ABSTRACT

The sea/maritime domain is a critical frontier of human exploration and exploitation for food production, transportation, commerce, research, communication, mining, defence, security, power projection and prestige in international system. These made it a frontier of strategic cooperation, competition and conflict. Consequently, the sea has been militarised by littoral states, which have led to the rise of naval powers, across time and space. Naval power is strategically relevant in defence, security and power projection, as evident in its roles in warfare, deterrence, policing, and diplomacy across history. This is even more pronounced during the golden age of naval power, when the roles of the navy were decisive in outcomes of war, territorial defence and conquest, empire building and maintenance, bargaining, industrialisation, commerce and global policing. However, the strategic relevance of naval power has undergone notable changes with the rise of air, nuclear and space powers. Against this background, this article examines the enduring strategic relevance of naval power over the last century, vis-à-vis its challenges and prospects among other instruments of force and frontiers of defence, security and power projection that have emerged.