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THE POLITICAL APPLICATION OF NAVAL FORCE

by

Edward Luttwak

— A PRECIS —

(This précis summarizes the essential points of part I (82 p.) of a four-part case study on U.S. naval power in the Mediterranean Sea. It is a product of the Naval War College's Advanced Research Program and is required reading in the college's tactics study.)

Like other forms of military power, naval forces have a political function, only more so. And while the combat use of fleets is as intermittent as war itself, the political effects generated by naval forces are continuous. In deciding what kind of fleet to deploy and how large a fleet is needed, we can therefore choose one of two very different goals: wartime "insurance" or peacetime political power. Historically, the United States has designed and justified its forces in terms of the contingency of war, a difficult thing to do when war seems remote as in the current phase of détente. This narrow view of military power was much reinforced by the cost-accountant mentality that pervaded the Defense Department in the McNamara years. Even the Navy appears to have been affected although the Navy was, and may perhaps still be, influenced by the thought of Mahan who

but rather the great elucidator of the political significance of naval power.

The paper here briefly summarized is an attempt to understand and describe the political application of naval force and indeed the political aspects of naval deployment policy as a whole. The analysis is illustrated by historical examples, but the latter are used *only* for the purposes of illustration: history does not *prove* anything, it may at most suggest. For this reason the author has attempted to go back to first principles; the first such principle, apparently trivial, is that in order to function, naval power must be *perceived*. Invisible warships whose existence is kept secret do not encourage friends, deter enemies, or stimulate neutrals to adjust their neutrality in favorable ways. These imaginary warships may be perfect weapons of war, but their political utility is zero. At this point, the next basic question is how do political leaders abroad perceive

naval power? Do they count ship numbers or ship days as if they were so many sheep or goats? Do they discriminate between different kinds of ships? Obviously they do. A rowboat with an MG will not be confused with a CV. But how about a modern U.S. DD versus a *Krupny*? Specialists will compare roles, armaments, sensors, data handling equipment, endurance, speed, reload capabilities, et cetera, et cetera. But all this requires a great deal of technical expertise, and even then, as we know, experts will disagree when it comes to adding these very different kinds of capabilities into a final all-variable comparison. But well before reaching this point, most of the audience, i.e., the leaders of the countries affected by seapower, will have been lost. Take Libya as an example: Who in Tripoli knows enough about modern seapower to compare Russian and American warships? Or, as a more general question, how does the technical ignorance of those one is trying to influence affect the overall political "output" of a fleet? One cannot, after all, send in a team of Navy briefers to prepare the audience for the arrival of a fleet on the horizon.

And then there is the problem of viability versus visibility. This is a major problem of ship design and naval planning for those who are concerned with the *political* use of naval power. Extreme answers, i.e., building cardboard ships or building only the most sophisticated advanced technology warships, are not in serious discussion. But there is the much harder choice between *reasonable* options, and it seems that the Russians have tended to go for visibility while the U.S. Navy has tended to stress viability. Hence the Russians have more ships, and their ships are more impressive on a ton/ton basis. The two navies may now be converging since some new U.S. designs (e.g., the PF) are more visible than sophisticated while

Kara) devote more tonnage to endurance and reload capabilities than was the case in the past with their series of short endurance warships "bristling with weapons" and lacking in endurance.

One of the conclusions of the paper is that the public media are very important in influencing third-party perceptions. What the media carry to the world at large will do more to influence perceptions than anything else except in cases where the observers are the *direct* target of naval deployments. And the media, of course, reflect not only the news but also the *mood* of the country. The present American mood, for example, is one of retrenchment and self-denigration: a mood calculated to encourage adversaries to defy American power and damage American interests. The media also carry *official* statements, and, given the nature of the congressional appropriations process, these statements constantly magnify Russian power while highlighting the inadequacy of American military forces and of their weapons. The Russian media, by contrast, always stress the power of the Soviet Union and the strength of its forces. The endless official U.S. statements (from CNO down) which describe American ships as "old," "obsolescent," "inadequate," et cetera are not duplicated on the Russian side. The Russians instead denigrate American power and especially those forces which would be most impressive to third-party observers (i.e., the carriers—though this is no longer so now that the Russians are building their own carriers).

But the *media* do reflect accurately the overall political mood. And in looking at American naval power, observers are also influenced by the political intent detected in the background. In other words, naval power is injected into the complex world of international politics, and the effects it generates may be very indirect.

Since these effects are indirect and have to pass through the filter of others'

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perceptions, the political applications of naval force require great care. What may deter one party could well simply provoke another; a gesture which some will interpret as backing could be seen by others as a veiled threat. Harmless exercises unwittingly encourage a minor ally to behave more aggressively than it should or provoke the resentment of neutrals. All of this, analyzed in some detail in the paper, suggests that task force commanders require *continuous* and *detailed* political guidance in order to maximize the political utility of naval power. It is suggested, by implication, that an ambassadorial "political adviser" back at the fleet base may not be enough.

Another requirement affects naval operations directly: the tactical conduct of naval forces must be *modulated* to serve political goals and not just left to routine. A table of "political" tactics is presented in the text. Each is meant to produce a specific political repercussion by generating a specific kind of impression. From "port visits" to intrusive reconnaissance there is a whole range of moves that vary in terms of their *coercive/supportive* content; it is suggested in the paper that naval officers should

study such "political" tactics separately and *distinctly* from combat tactics. These and other recommendations all aim at making the Navy a better instrument of national policy in the age of détente without, however, eroding its war-fighting capability.

 BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY


Edward N. Luttwak earned his undergraduate degree at the London School of Economics in 1964; he is currently a candidate for the Ph.D. at The Johns Hopkins University. He has been an instructor in

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Navies are not all for war.

Matthew Fontaine Maury, 1806-1873