Military Power is not enough

By Isaac Barnett

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Introduction

This paper illuminates the inadequacies of the term "military power". The paper gestures to the shortcomings of defence planning and military strategy that call for little more than the counting of sailors, soldiers, airmen and airwomen and their equipment. Thus, the paper is at odds with the so-called "materiel school", which sees security in terms of firepower, numerical superiority and budgets.

Widely used, the term "military power" epitomises a fetish for mass, the mistake that defence capability might be measured in tanks, or guns or in numbers of soldiers or aircraft. This essay offers a larger perspective to the concept of "military power" and interrogates that idea in the Australian context, where the language of "military power" gives an essentially maritime strategy short shrift.

This paper is in two sections. First, important aspects of Australian defence policy that are ignored by the term "military power" will be acknowledged. These are national power and sea power. In the term "sea power" we recognise both naval power and the larger Australian dependence on the ocean. Second, this paper explains the idea of doctrine and the effect of narrow-minded doctrine upon defence.

What does military power mean?

"Military power" is a commonplace. But the term must be defined. Many scholars use the idea casually, as a descriptor for a nation's armed forces. As a descriptive term, the idea of "military power" has a rhetorical adequacy. As a concept, however, the idea is insufficient and underdeveloped.

Speaking to the industrial-organisational-materiel power of a nation, the British political scientist Theo Farrell takes military power to be "the product of materiel resources and the processes whereby states translate resources into military capability".[1] Economic and explicit, Farrell recognises the importance that must be placed upon the ability of a state to produce as much as possible with available resources.

Taking a turn from Farrell, and moving away from interpretations of military power grounded in statistics and materiel mass, Israeli military theorist Martin van Creveld recognises the power of intangible things. For van Creveld, military power might be defined by this equation: materiel multiplied by fighting will equals "military power".[2]

Recognising materiel as just one facet of a nation's defence capabilities, van Creveld introduced the idea of "fighting will". Beyond computable measure, "fighting will" gestures to ambiguous, intuitive, qualitative ideas of military morale, political will or public opinion.

Corroborating the limitation of materiel as a measure of military effectiveness, the seeming less powerful nation has very frequently claimed victory against a materially stronger adversary.[3] In plain English, real life suggests that the idea of military power is very far from science, though it masquerades as such. Materiel might have had an undisputed relevance in the attrition strategy of the First World War - but the world changes. And beyond the land, war is fought at sea and in the air. In these domains, the materiel measure of military power struggles to find a firm footing.

In short, ideas of "military power" that speak to intuitive ideas of courage, grit or fighting will gesture to a plain truth: it's not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog. In contrast, ideas of military power grounded in the materiel school nod to the aphorism attributed to Stalin: "quantity has a quality all its own". But neither approach to military power properly captures the interleaved nuance and complexity of sea power.

National power and sea power

The commonplace idea of "military power" ignores key elements of national power and sea power. For Australia, a failure to contemplate the nation's relationship with the sea leaves strategy conceptually high and dry, bereft of critical considered depth.

Beyond materiel, sea power demands unceasing investment. Borrowing from the RAND Corporation, national power is obtained from the efficient leverage of resources, from well-ordered and supportive institutions, and from the support of the polity.[4] In this sense, the way that national power is obtained from the supporting social-political ecosystem bears a close approximation to the sub-structures of sea power. Both exist within the broad base of the nation's economic, technical, industrial and social infrastructure.[5] This means sea power demands investment in schools, trade schools, apprenticeship schemes and universities, which are the foundation of a skilled workforce. In short, sea power demands we invest in the ecosystem that underpins the maritime economy. Nicholas Rodger makes the point:

> *Warships were and still are the most complex and advanced of all artefacts. To build and operate them requires a mass of technical, industrial, and professional skills, ashore and afloat, and a sophisticated system of management to mould them into an effective whole. Above all, it requires long term commitment for sea power, which cannot be improvised. Ships can be constructed relatively quickly, but the skill and capabilities which make up an effective navy can only be built up with years of investment.[6]*

The maritime economy, which supports sea power in general, and the Navy in particular, is an intricate system that involves, *inter alia*, seafarers, ports, marine insurance, and the financial and legal systems that underpin the whole.[7] Very often, the foundational social, political, economic and technical ecosystem is unrecognised or taken for granted. The importance of this deep-seated foundation is demonstrated by the example of the Falklands War.

The British mobilisation to the Falklands War and the conduct of an expeditionary operation over some 8000 miles is an astonishing testament to the interleaving of national power and sea power, and to the utility of the sea. When Argentina occupied the Falklands in April 1982, the Royal Navy lacked sufficient shipping to sustain a task force for an unknown period at a great distance.[8] The mobilisation effort that followed culminated in a task force of over 100 warships and mercantile vessels.

It was a mobilisation that might not have come to pass.

By 1980, British industry in general, and shipbuilding, ship repair and ship maintenance, in particular, were in a parlous situation. When John Nott, the Secretary of State for Defence, visited soon-to-be-closed dockyards in Portsmouth, he was pelted with work yard tools.[9] Nott's unwelcome visit was the political foretoken of industrial decline. By the time of war, dockyards and other industries could barely support a war effort.

And yet, the maritime ecosystem was so deep-rooted that it was possible to pull ships out of mothballs and to send them to war at short notice. Widely supported by the British public, and enabled by the transparent institutions of the Westminster government, the mobilisation depended upon a deep-seated indigenous civil-military complex, which had only just survived the ravages of economic recession and government belt-tightening.

The 1991 Gulf War sheds a further light on the interplay between national power and sea power.

HMAS Brisbane (II) alongside Dubai in 1991 during her deployment on Operation DAMASK. Image credit: Australian War Memorial.
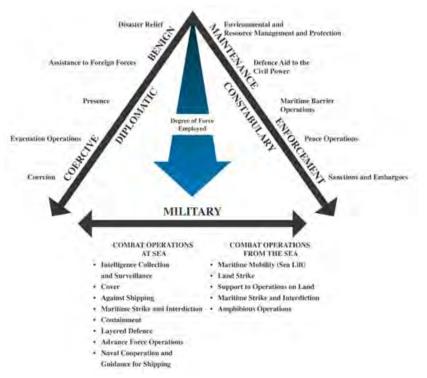
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In 1991, as peaceful options failed, the nations of the coalition turned to their armed forces to "uphold and implement Resolution 660" of the United Nations.[10] Thus, operations were the last resort and the ultimate expression of Western political will, and the fruit of a complex maritime ecosystem. The point is, sea power is about more than just ships. Sea power is deeply and inextricably entwined in the national industrial-political complex. Just as it is not easily extinguished, so is it not easily established nor easily calculated.

Where soldiers can be recruited quickly and trained without much difficulty, and where military materiel might be bought and warehoused against a rainy day, sea power is quite different, and beyond calculation in the unsophisticated terms of "military power".

Australian Sea Power

The Australian strategist T. B. Millar argues that the geography which makes it difficult for a hostile power to invade and conquer Australia also makes Australia dependent upon seaborne trade. In other words, Australia might not be vulnerable to invasion, but it is vulnerable to any hostile power that chooses to blockade our seaborne commerce.[11] Borrowing from British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, the Navy and the sea is the nation's security and safety.[12] The point being, a nation that relies on the ocean cannot let itself be blockaded at sea.

The Span of Maritime Tasks: Australian Maritime Doctrine (Sea Power Centre - Australia, 2010) *p. 100*

Perhaps the casual observer might take Navy to be the fullest expression of the nation's sea power, and warfighting to be the most important naval task. Each assumption would be mistaken. Just as sea power is enmeshed in the deep substructures of national power, so sea power exceeds the narrow frame of naval power.

Following Hedley Bull, we might recognise that "sea power" implicates a larger idea than "naval power" and we see the most interesting, complex and nuanced utility of naval power in the absence of hostilities.

Beyond the narrow terms of naval power, sea power involves the merchant marine, fishing fleets, oceanographic fleets and maritime industry.[13] However, this short paper proceeds on the assumption that sea power is a synonym for naval power, and thus means "military power brought to bear at sea".

The question thus arises, what is the utility of sea power? In reply, there are three broad answers: to secure seaborne trade, to secure marine resources and to project power. Aside from warfighting, the projection of power is in diplomatic influence, or presence.

The need to secure seaborne trade was noted by Alfred Thayer Mahan, who saw the sea as a "great highway" or "wide common" which provides nations with a cheap and efficient means to trade, and a valuable means of military transport. On Mahan's account, navies protect trade - ensuring trade routes, the so-called "sea lines of communication", remain available. In other words, navies protect merchant ships.

Three centuries earlier, the Elizabethan adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh previsioned Mahan's central tenet: "he that commands the sea commands the trade, and he that is lord of the trade of the world is lord of the wealth of the world".[14] In a 1745 speech to the House of Lords, Lord Nugent was direct:

> *Let us remember, we are superior to other nations, principally by our riches that those riches are the gifts of commerce, and that commerce can subsist only while we maintain a naval force superior to that of other princes...[If] our trade be lost, who can inform us how long we shall be suffered to enjoy our laws, our liberties, or our religion. Without trade, what wealth shall we possess?[15]*

We are reminded of the British theorist Julian Corbett, who says war will be won only by "strangling the enemy's national life",[16] which is done by sinking merchant ships. Corbett states:

> *If the object and end of naval warfare is the control of communications [commerce] it must carry with it the right to forbid, if we can, the passage of both public and private property upon the sea. Now the only means we have of enforcing such control of commercial communications at sea is in the last resort the capture or destruction of sea-borne property.[17]*

We see an example from the Second World War. While the allied Navy's surface fleet steamed towards Japan, allied submarines sank merchant traffic, cutting off Japan from oil supplies and reducing the population to near starvation.[18] The similar vulnerability of the Australian economy to blockade at sea is plain in the Australian dependence on imported refined liquid fuel. Were an

adversary to interdict - or even threaten - fuel shipments, the adversary would dissolve the defensive advantages of Australian geography.[19]

The second objective of sea power is in the need of states to acquire, enlarge or secure their share of the sea's resources. The deep reason for this claim is in John Selden's *Mare Clausum* (1635). Selden wrote: "Yea, the plenitude of such seas is lessened every hour, no otherwise than mines of metal, quarries of stone or gardens when their treasures and fruits are taken away".[20] From Selden, we might grasp the sea's strategic significance as a source of limited food and industrial raw materials. This significance was made plain in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which entitles coastal states to an exclusive economic zone, 200 nautical miles from the coast. In this zone, a state has a sovereign right to marine resources and the right to control distant water fishers.[21] Recognising the ecological and economic value of fish, the need to regulate legal fishing, and the need to suppress illegal fishing, the UNCLOS points to the need of the Navy to patrol and thus to secure Australian fisheries for Australian fishers.

HMAS Ballarat (II) patrols past a large offshore gas platform off the north-west coast of Western Australia, 2020. Photographer: AB Connor Webber.

Similarly, the Navy offers the security that makes it feasible for the nation to profit from offshore oil and gas.[22] Were an adversary to force a halt to oil and gas production and export, the effect on the Australian economy would be severe.

In 2019, production of Australian crude oil and condensate[23] reached 429,000 barrels a day. Real earnings from Australian crude oil exports are expected to peak at around A$11 billion in 2021.

In 2019, Australia exported 77 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas, worth A$49 billion, a sum that almost matched the entire goods and services revenue of Victoria for the same financial year.

By way of further comparison, revenue from coal for the same period was a record high of A$26 billion. Revenue from iron ore was A$79 billion.

Beyond the security that makes it feasible for nations to profit from maritime trade and marine resources, navies exert diplomatic influence or presence.

Navies can make a political gesture, which is beyond land-based forces to make[24] since the deployment of soldiers or land-based aircraft entails a political commitment. Ships gesture by the conduct of port visits, or passage in the adversary's or the client's zone of observation, or "freedom of navigation exercises" with battle ensigns flying. Ensigns are not merely pieces of cloth. Ensigns and flags stand for nations and their interests.[25] Ships gesture when they transit at speed, manoeuvring with hard turns instead of with standard wheel, when they operate embarked helicopters or fire-control radars.

Edward Luttwak illuminates the political purport of warships. Where James Cable describes the unambiguous blackmail of gunboat diplomacy as "the use or threat of limited naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, in order to secure an advantage or to avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their state",[26] Luttwak contemplates what he calls "suasion" - the inexplicit, subtle gesture of warships.

Ships, says Luttwak, have a significance by virtue of their capabilities, and by virtue of their status as a significant asset and symbol of government. By their presence ships communicate a political interest and a political will that obtains from their possible use.[27] In short, warships exert influence without resorting to force.[28] For example, when the Australian frigate HMAS *Parramatta* (IV) was deployed to the South China Sea in 2020, it sent a political and military message to China. As reported by the media, HMAS *Parramatta* (IV) was in the region with United States Navy forces to "help strengthen the stability and security of the region".[29] Similarly, HMS *Defender*'s transit of the coast of Crimea in July 2021 shows the way a navy might communicate a political signal. Luttwak makes plain the importance of this sort of political radiation. He states:

> *Because this is the era of undeclared conflict brought about by the new and significant inhibitions to the overt initiation of war that have become manifest since 1945 - the term "peacetime" now defines only the absence of general hostilities conducted at a high level of intensity. It follows that no firm dividing line can be established between the use of threats and the actual infliction of damage albeit in small doses. As long as the purpose and context of the use of force remains political, i.e., intended to evoke suasion effects rather than to destroy enemy forces of value, it cannot be arbitrarily excluded from the range of political instrumentalities provided by naval forces in "peacetime."[30]*

In short, sea power is far more than the numbers game implied by the idea of "military power". The Australian Defence Force would be unwise to ignore the complex utility of sea power, and to become distracted by comparisons to larger and more economically powerful nations. If so, Australia is likely to become embroiled in a zero-sum arms race. Australia should be wary of the naïve, aimless acquisition of materiel for its own sake.

Royal Canadian Navy frigate HMCS Calgary, foreground, sails in company with United States Navy amphibious assault ship USS America, left, and Royal Australian Navy frigate HMAS Parramatta (IV), right, off the coast of Queensland, during Exercise TALISMAN SABRE 2021. Photographer: Corporal Lynette Ai Dang.

Why this matters

The failure to understand sea power is unlikely to be of any real consequence unless the failure seeps into the thinking of the armed forces. The unreasonable narrowing of perspective might be expected to find its unconstructive expression in military doctrine, and in the habits that obtain from doctrine.

Put simply, doctrine is central to military professional knowledge and sets a precedent for the conduct of the armed forces in the pursuit of national objectives and security.[31] As a result, doctrine demands a dogmatic, cult-like following as it seeks to provide "infrastructure around which organisational confidence can be built".[32] However, considering that "armies choose doctrines, and not the other way around", one could conclude that the adoption of a flawed doctrine is representative of a flawed military culture.[33] Therefore it should be appreciated that doctrine is both a mirroring of and influence upon military culture. As the "bedrock of military effectiveness", a culture that manifests itself within an impaired doctrine is representative of an institutionalised and faulty rationale.[34] If doctrine becomes hinged upon set equations and outcomes, then military planning will no doubt become a discipline devoid of creativity and entirely lacking any malleable characteristics.

Art and Science

Ultimately, the conversation on "military power" boils down to the debate between art and science, conservatism and progressivism. In the context of military strategy, this debate has historically occurred between two major theorists and schools of thinking. As a more rigid descriptor of war, Antoine-Henri Jomini described four fundamental principles of war that continue in an unchanging fashion. By way of outline, Jomini foresaw an undivided army that set upon fractions of the enemy's force and strategically threw its mass against decisive points of interest (choke points, bridges, cities, and so forth).[35] On the other hand, Carl von Clausewitz described war's unchanging nature and its free-flowing characteristics. He saw that war was inherently an extension of politics; however, the manner in which it is fought can quickly change and evolve. With regards to military thinking, Clausewitz asserted that "knowing" is something different from "doing" and that in "doing", creativity is of the utmost importance.[36] If science is embodied in "knowing", it cannot be achieved without art, the act of "doing". In short, artistic endeavour becomes science when it concludes in the establishment of a fundamental truth. The science of war cannot be oblivious to the art. While materiel is important, materiel offers an insufficient foundation for strategy.

The risk of doctrine is in the suffocation of flair. Admiral Thomas Cochrane epitomises the need for flair, and the risk of doctrinaire bureaucracy, where managers superintend a pointless paper world.

Commanding HMS *Speedy*, a sloop he described as "a burlesque of a vessel of war", Cochrane prevailed against all odds. In the span of a year he sank or seized over 50 Spanish vessels and

captured 534 prisoners. Using tactics which might be described as reckless or reprehensible, Cochrane proved that it is not just the number of guns and sailors that factor in success. In one of his most famous and self-described "brilliant actions", Cochrane captured the 32-gun Spanish frigate *El Gamo*. Cochrane hoisted an American flag (since the United States was not involved in the war, an American ship was regarded as neutral) and got under the Spanish frigate's arc of fire. Unleashing a devastating broadside, Cochrane forced the surrender of a frigate with a broadside weight three times that of his own ship.

Strong in spirit, decisive in action and the practical master of sea-fighting, Cochrane - like Nelson - demonstrated an innate sense of leadership and foresight. He fostered a common-sense, initiative-taking culture that was the perfect foundation for action. He did not need a doctrine to speechify on the need of aggression, innovation and courage.

So what is the utility of doctrine?

If not in prescription, perhaps the answer lies in the provocation of ideas, debate and modernism. Has there ever been a time in human history when the perpetuation of tired old ways and established myths was a recipe for success? Meaningful doctrine - doctrine that offers more than hot air - will inform professional practice, and professional thought. Useful doctrine will help us to understand firepower; numerical superiority and budgets are merely minor details that help achieve strategy, not a strategy within themselves.

Both van Creveld and Farrell present a narrative upon which doctrine can be built. By initiating the conversation at the level of materiel, each asks us to question the course and substance of military discourse. However, these narratives are microscopic when considering the broader implications of strategy.

Conclusion

"Military power" is insufficient as a strategic mainstay. Mistaken for materiel, or construed in terms of fighting will, the idea of military power fails to account properly for the complexity and nuance of the maritime ecosystem.

Beyond the political-economic-industrial ecosystem that supports Australian sea power, the idea of military power is blind to the nuance and implication of Australian geography - a geography that, to recall T. B. Millar, offers protection from invasion at the same time as it makes the nation vulnerable to blockade at sea.

Endnotes

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[7] Till, G., *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 98.

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Millar's argument is notarised by Paul Dibb in: *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities: Report to the Minister of Defence* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1986), pp. 67, 68, 69.

Norman Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy: Navies and National Interests* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), pp. 94, 95. Blockade will involve a combination of sea power and economic measures. Blockade will be mitigated by internal lines and by the adoption of substitutes.

Threats to Australian shipping would likely be from submarines and sea mines. Any mid-ocean submarine threat would be addressed – and *perhaps* diminished – by convoying and by the evasive routing of shipping away from major Indian and Pacific Ocean approaches to Australia. Sea mining or the threat of mining would be employed against the northern approaches and especially against the ports of Dampier, Port Hedland, Darwin, Gove and Weipa. Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities: Report to the Minister of Defence*, p. 69.

[12] Till, G. (ed.), *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan Ranft* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

[13] Bull, H., "The New Environment: Sea Power and Political Influence", in Jonathan Alford (ed.), *Sea Power and Influence* (Osmun, Sweden: Gower and Allanheld, 1980), p. 3. Bull cites Admiral Gorshkov to make the point that civil maritime activities are ingredients in a nation's ability to exercise military power at sea. For example, merchant ships might carry soldiers and supplies, while trawlers and scientific vessels might gather intelligence.

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[23] Condensate is light oil, primarily pentane and hexane.

[24] For example: Friedman, N., *Seapower as Strategy: Navies and National Interest* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 1: "At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the U.S Navy is the foremost instrument of U.S. military diplomacy". To emphasise this point: note the word "foremost", which means explicitly places the Navy in front of the army, air force and Marine Corps as a military instrument of diplomacy.

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