

Book Review: Seapower States - Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World

Andrew Lambert
Yale University Press
ISBN: 978-0-300-23004-8

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This meticulously researched and illuminating examination of what constitutes a Seapower State, what it means to be one and why it is different to other types of States is as relevant today as it has ever been. The respected and revered naval historian, Andrew Lambert, has written a fascinating and insightful book defining the thesis of seapower and how it has evolved.

The book focuses on European Seapower States to demonstrate the ongoing evolution and development of the concept through societal change and the progression of international trade by sea between the interconnected countries of the continent.

Lambert posits that most nations are “continental” in outlook, favouring the holding of land and resources whilst repelling the “corrupting sea”, reticent to open their communities to the unpredictable influences of outside traders arriving from across the oceans. He describes the thalassocracies - coastal and archipelagic states, on the periphery of the continent, that had the courage and the vision to exploit international trade by sea and become seapowers.

The author reaches back 3,000 years to the Phoenician and Greek sea cities in the eastern Mediterranean as the starting point and considers the ways in which seapower was “a socio-political response to the unique circumstances” at the time. His analysis of the Ancient Greek world is very detailed, which at times slows the momentum of the story. However, it was these important foundations, established by the European classical civilisations, that formed the basis of the seapower culture, which was re-amplified in turn by the Carthaginians, Venetians, Dutch and British into the twentieth century.

Lambert ably demonstrates that the seapower theory is based on emphasising the primacy of trade by sea, and the secondary and supporting role of warships to conduct constabulary tasks protecting the merchants’ ships. Fundamental to the priority of trade is the adoption of an open and progressive political system, designed to champion maritime trade, giving the “oligarchs” or commerce, significant influence in the designing of legislation to prioritise the maritime abilities and capabilities of the seapower. Within this business model, the cost of trade protection from rival states or pirates, by an effective navy, had to be subsumed within costs.

He explains how the movement of raw materials from source to manufacturers, was easier, cheaper and quicker by sea. Initially, this was conducted across the Mediterranean but, as more of the globe became accessible by sea to Europeans, it grew into the phenomena of globalisation. The development of maritime trade was the catalyst for the use of coins as a convenient way to pay for items, whilst also extending strategic presence of the seapower. The establishment of banking systems and marine insurance prompted by maritime trade was the root of modern international commerce.

After a millennium, Venice emerged as the first modern seapower at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Mediterranean states were dominated by monotheistic faiths that deeply distrusted the

ocean and the uncertainty of what it might introduce, in the way of new peoples, cultures, ideas and faiths via their ports. However, Europe was also exploring the renaissance and consequently opportunities abounded for the worldly Venetian entrepreneurs, trading exotic goods from their increasingly prosperous and grandiose hub in Venice. However, as seapowers are characteristically small states punching above their weight, they are vulnerable to hegemonic continental powers and it was conflicts around the periphery of the Napoleonic empire that finally destroyed Venetian trade and defeated them as a seapower.

As Venetian seapower waned, the Dutch embraced and revitalised many of the concepts and ideas developed by Venice from the classical civilisations and exploited them from outside the Mediterranean, taking full advantage of new trade routes to exotic new ports around the globe. Amsterdam became the Venice of the north, taking seapower to a new level. The Dutch promoted themselves as the dominant global maritime trading nation by continuously extending their trading tentacles out to Southeast Asia and publicising their pre-eminence by using some of the greatest maritime artists to illustrate their primacy and promote commerce.

Focussing on the openness of seapowers to new ideas, the book examines the Portuguese and Spanish as accomplished navigators, explorers and mariners who were unable to exploit their global discoveries and presence, due to the dominance of the catholic church and their “terrestrial ambition, aristocratic privilege, monopolistic economic models and a sustained contempt for seafarers, oceans and new ideas” - diametrically opposed to basis of the successful seapowers.

The development of England as a seapower state took over 200 years. The foundations were established by Henry VIII who, having severed the links with the catholic church, and as sovereign of an island nation, saw opportunities for the country to fully take advantage of the oceans for trade, power and influence. He established the foundations of the Royal Navy, building dockyards to produce ships, funded by the dissolution of the monasteries. This momentum continued into the Elizabethan age with the emerging influence of the City of London as the centre of trade and the engine of the economy. The defeat of the Spanish Armada by Drake and Shakespeare’s use of nautical terminology intoxicated the British public who perpetuated the idea of England being a seapower. The establishment of a constitutional monarchy at the end of the 17th century left the way clear for the City of London to drive forward change and promote trade by sea. The influence of commerce was unprecedented; “The navy served the City, and the City provided the necessary funds.”

Britannia ruled the waves as the seapower state until undermined by an unlikely adversary. The USA was the emerging global, continental power of the twentieth century. Lambert postulates that it was the Americans, that undermined Britain’s seapower status, having ensured their bankruptcy by the end of WWII. Victorious, but financially ruined, Britain emerged from the war with its Empire breaking up, its global trading network dismantling and a shrinking merchant navy, which negated the requirement for a large navy.

Despite 90 percent of all trade moving by sea today, the global population is largely “sea blind” and look upon the sea as “little more than a leisure opportunity.” According to Lambert’s thesis, there is no “Seapower State” today. The US may be the largest global economy, but it has no ocean-going commercial fleet, extremely limited shipbuilding capacity, a decreasing navy, and utilises a continental rather than seapower strategy. Whilst the Chinese may have one the world’s largest ocean-going commercial fleets, and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is growing in size and technological capability, the country retains the continental focus of its strategy and lacks the open and progressive political system essential for a traditional seapower.

This fascinating and very readable book will appeal to those linked to the sea by trade, profession or interest. It provides an excellent history of seapower with incisive examination of the philosophy’s

evolution over three millennia and places the emphasis on maritime trade. It finishes however, by raising several concerns about our current neglect of seapower strategy, the absence of a naval presence, constabulary or otherwise, and posing pertinent questions about the future as we move into a century that will be more about seascape than landscape.

Peter Cook

Peter Cook is a well-respected maritime security professional with extensive knowledge and a founding director of PCA Maritime Ltd. Peter was a student at the London Nautical School where the foundations of his understanding of the Merchant Navy and shipping industry were laid. He then served for 24-years as an officer in the Royal Marines, for more than 8 years he was involved in maritime security related roles. He was a founder and CEO of the Security Association for the Maritime Industry (SAMI), the international representative and regulatory body for private armed guards on ships. He is now based in Australia, establishing a new consultancy and lecturing post graduate students on maritime security at Universities around the globe. Peter is also the Indo-Pacific Editor of the IJMCS.
