

## SEAPOWER: A GUIDE FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

---

*Geoffrey Till*

London: Routledge, 2009 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

409 + xxi pages

Index, list of illustration

ISBN: 978-0415480888 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-0415480892 (Paperback)

\$154,37 (amazon.com hardback)

With the publication of *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* Geoffrey Till has set the standard for publications on all things maritime. The updated and expanded new edition of the book is an essential guide for students of naval history and maritime strategy and provides essential reading for those interested in the role of seapower in the twenty-first century. Till notes in the preface to the second edition of the book (p. xv) that he specifically aimed at providing a broader international context for the discussion of the role of navies. The naval policies of China, Japan, India and the United States are used as case studies of general naval developments around the world. In addition, the analysis highlights the "... post-modern preoccupations of today's navies" (p. xvii) including *inter alia* the maintenance of good order at sea, coalition operations, and multilateral terrorism. The central hypothesis of the book is rooted in the notion that the sea is central to the prosperity and security of all nations, and even more so since the emergence of an increasingly globalised world trading system. Till argues in *Seapower* that the fate of nations is closely link to the sea as a source of resources and as a means of transportation, information exchange and strategic domination in all human development.

The most outstanding feature of the publication is the structured approach followed in the analysis of seapower. As a consequence, the book provides a very clear holistic breakdown: firstly, of the nature and constituent elements of seapower;

secondly, the nature of command or control of the sea and how it is secured; and thirdly, the exploitation of command of the sea in the conduct of expeditionary operations and naval diplomacy and the maintenance of good order at sea. Most of the chapters are accompanied by a figure that provides a structural overview of the discussion of the particular topic. The discussion of the constituent elements of seapower (pp. 83–113) is a good example in this regard. A figure is used (p. 84) to provide a concise breakdown of the different constituent elements of seapower and their relation to each other. Another figure (p. 113) provides a breakdown of the components of maritime fighting power. These figures are extremely helpful in the use of the book as a prescribed text book. The most outstanding feature of the publication, though, is the way in which Till has succeeded in supporting the analysis of seapower with historical and contemporary examples. The skilful use of the laboratory of history is superbly demonstrated by Till in *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*.

The book also benefits from an introduction focusing on contemporary tendencies in seapower in a globalised world, the use of the Asian-Pacific region as a case study in the theory and practice of seapower, and a conclusion that provides a glimpse of forthcoming attractions in the maritime and seapower domains. The introductory chapter is specifically used to provide a broader international and historical context to the role of navies in a globalised world. In this regard, Till draws a distinction between the contemporary existence of pre-modern, modern and post-modern states. He then proceeds to outline the nature of post-modern and modern navies in the contemporary world, their missions and the security implications thereof. Though the author highlights these two competing paradigms, he also underlines the reality that they coexist in the international system.

At the same time, the author notes that pre-modern navies "... verge on being a contradiction in terms since adverse circumstances mean they struggle to exist or to do anything other than symbolise their country and its problems, while perhaps providing at best a sporadic defence of some of its key interests" (p. 2). He may be partially right in this argument, albeit from a conventional perspective. Looking, for example, at the widespread manifestation of piracy in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea at present, a question arises as to whether a reconsideration of a new form of pre-modern naval power is not necessary? Considering the current problem of piracy in these regions from this perspective may provide some interesting insights, specifically the implications thereof for a globalised world and its defence. What, for example, is the impact of pre-modern seapower on the dependency of globalisation on the free flow of sea-based shipping?

The author explores some interesting and fundamental questions in the theoretical chapter titled “Who said what and why it matters”. This includes a discussion on the value of theory in maritime operations and the distinctive nature of maritime strategy. The author points out that the nature of the forces engaged in maritime operations has their special characteristics. At the same time, though, he argues, Alfred Mahan have not called his dog Jomini for nothing – maritime theory and strategy has evolved, not in a vacuum, but as a subset of general strategic studies. The author proceeds to provide an excellent outline of development of strategic theory from the earliest times. Three particular observations about the development of maritime theory provide food for thought – that Western expositions of maritime theory are the most well known, that most maritime theorists had a broad world view that were by no means limited to narrow maritime concerns, and that maritime theory covers the broad spectrum from the narrowly tactical and technical concerns to the comprehensive strategic.

The notion that maritime power is a technologically-driven instrument of power (*vis-à-vis* armies, for example, that is personnel-driven) underpins the discussion of the important link between navies and technology (pp. 114–144). The existence of seapower is dependent on the availability of (new) technology. Of particular interest, though, is the author’s outline of the need for and nature of a strategy of innovation to ensure the technological competitiveness of navies. Most of the factors highlighted as part of this strategy of innovation reflects a recognition that, historically, good men with poor ships are better than poor men with good ships (p. 143). In a similar vein, the author’s understanding of command (or control) of the sea is rooted in the ideas that command (or control) of the sea is a relative term that is as relevant to small navies as it is to big ones (p. 150). This, of course, is reflected in the use that small navies may make of sea denial. Indeed, the author points out that new technological development has stirred renewed interest in sea denial because of the capacity to inflict asymmetrical harm on powerful forces.

The discussion of maritime developments in the Asian-Pacific region provides an interesting case study of the considerable increase of cooperative naval and maritime endeavours both at and from the sea. However, it is also an illustration of the constraints of traditional Mahanian ideas and naval necessities based on national and alliance competition. The author, for example, provides an interesting analysis of the growing cooperative tension between the United States and China in this region. In many ways it is a tension between the modern and post-modern naval paradigms.

The look towards the future in the last chapter touches on a number of interesting challenges in the maritime domain in general and for navies in particular.

These include a rise in the relative importance of the sea and seapower, a change of attitudes towards the sea, a continued focus on the littoral, a likely increase in the range and diversity of naval tasks, and the implication of these factors on how navies should develop and behave in the twenty-first century. The author specifically points out that navies have hard choices to make in their relationship with new technologies and in the trade-off between modern and post-modern missions.

In the end, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* is without doubt the best single publication on power in the maritime domain and naval strategy in general. It will remain a standard text book for those teaching naval strategy for many years to come. The book is a must read for scholars, military professionals and everybody interested in all things maritime.

*Dr Abel Esterhuise, Military Strategy Department, Faculty of Military Sciences, Stellenbosch University*