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Seapower theory and military history; a close but troublesome interrelationship

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INTRODUCTION

By careful collation of past events it becomes clear that certain lines of conduct tend normally to produce certain effects; that wars tends to take certain forms each with a marked idiosyncrasy; that these forms are normally related to the object of the war and to its value to one or both belligerents..¹

Sir Julian S Corbett, prominent naval historian and seapower theorist

Seapower theory is intended to explain the nature, character, characteristics, and conduct of war in the maritime domain. Theory about war and the maritime, and about naval warfare, certainly shares some basic traits with the physical sciences in the use of observation, description, measurement, and structured analysis supporting causal inferences or explanatory hypotheses. However, it also remains distinct from the physical sciences in significant ways, most notably in the absence of controlled, replicable experimentation as means of validating theory. For this and as warfare largely is a social activity, the conceptual foundations of the field reside more appropriately in the realm of the social sciences.² The nature of information, particularly pertaining to environments where data is dispersed, tacitly understood, or in forms resistant to detection, collection, and analysis, thus rendering it too subjective to be a basis for scientifically valid conclusions. War and warfare are nothing but such environments, i.e. complex human interaction where information always is fraught with uncertainty. Moreover, theory formation in such an environment is a function of information availability.³ Therefore, seapower theory cannot have the same precision or consistency in its generalisable claims as e.g. physics. Moreover, it is doubtful that any form of experiment short of actual war could be conducted to support, refute, or validate seapower theories due to war's inherent complexity. Furthermore, whilst unsuccessful experiments are simply a part of the process of scientific investigation in most sciences; unsuccessful military experiments, that is war, cause the downfall of regimes, nations, and world orders. Hence, although seapower theories may have an empirical basis, they are generally not tested, and their range of application are not known.⁴ Military theory is conse-

¹ Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: The Project Gutenberg eBook, 1911 (electronic reproduction 2005)), p. 9

² Paraphrasis of: Glenn Voelz, "Is Military Science Scientific?" *Joint Force Quarterly* : JFQ 75 4th Quarter (2014).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Paragraph is inspired by: Berndt Brehmer, "The research basis for teaching war studies - or for the officer profession," in *War Studies: Perspectives from the Baltic and Nordic War Colleges* ed. Tom Kristiansen and John Andreas Olsen (Oslo: Institutt for forsvarsstudier, 2007), p. 35., Jerker J Widén, *Theorist of maritime strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his contribution to military and naval thought*, Corbett centre for maritime policy studies, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2016), pp. 155-156., Robert P. Pellegrini, *The Links between Science, Philosophy, and Military Theory: Understanding the Past, Implications for the Future* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 1997), p. 43, and Henry E. Eccles, "Military theory and education; The need for and nature of," *Naval War College Review* 21, no. 6 (1969): p. 72.

quently not theory in the ordinary sense of empirically tested propositions.⁵ This represent a challenge that is subject to controversy and constitute a major, and persistent, theoretical discourse in seapower theory.⁶

In this paper I will investigate if there are other methods, i.e. in lieu of experimentation, that can lead to coherent and reliable seapower theory, whether universal or specific, normative, or explanatory. There are many research traditions in social sciences. Each tradition is a way to understand knowledge building and its validity, and each tradition comes with their respective ontologies, epistemology, and their corresponding methodological approaches, and they all have their strengths and weaknesses.⁷ Here, I will discuss the incontrovertible most used methodology in seapower theorisation; the use of history to develop and test seapower theory, and the resulting implications for those theories' explanatory and normative status.

DEFINING SEAPOWER THEORY

Seapower theory is a subset of military theory that is intended to explain the nature, character, and characteristics of war in and from the maritime domain.⁸ Thereto a substantial part of seapower theory deals with how navies can be instruments of and influences on foreign policy.⁹ Seapower theory fits well within the broad definition of military theory; i.e. a theory which is primarily concerned with the *nature* and *character* of war as well as the successful conduct of war.¹⁰ This is theory of war employing Clausewitz's ontological understanding of war; meaning that war is, and always has been, organised violence conducted for political ends.¹¹

⁵ Brehmer, "War Studies," 28, and 35-36.

⁶ See for instance: Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), pp. 29-30., and Jan Tore Nilssen in: Harald Højback and Palle Ydstebø, eds., *Krigens vitenskap: en innføring i militærteori* (Oslo: Abstrakt forl., 2012), pp. 183-185.

⁷ Josep Gallifa, "Research traditions in social sciences and their methodological rationales," *Aloma* 36 (01/01 2018). and Stephen D. Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Kindle edition. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 20

⁸ Although not a point of departure for this paper, it can be argued that seapower theory only normally is a subset of military theory. This as, for countries that is entirely depended on the maritime, economically as well as military, it could very well be that seapower theory, or rather maritime strategy, determine their comprehension of military theory, i.e. that the use of sea power is not part of an overall military strategy – but does indeed determine that strategy (Tor Ivar Strømmen, "Bulwark and balancing act: the strategic role of the Royal Norwegian Navy," in *Europe, small navies and maritime security: balancing traditional roles and emergent threats in the 21st century*, ed. Robert McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).).

⁹ See for instance: Ken Booth, *Navies and foreign policy* (London: Routledge, 1977 (reprinted: 2014)). In pp. 15-25 Booth explains this elegantly through his seapower triangle.

¹⁰ Jerker Widén and Jan Ångström, *Contemporary Military Theory: The dynamics of war* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 7.

¹¹ Colin S. Gray, "The Changing Nature of Warfare?," *Naval War College Review* 49, no. 2 (1996): p. 8. A more detailed explanation of the ontology of war according to Clausewitz, is that it places fighting at its centre. Clausewitz claims that fighting is as definitive for war as mone-

The *nature* of war, according to Clausewitz, describes its unchanging essence, meaning those things that differentiate war (as a phenomenon) from other things. The *character* of war describes the changing way that war as a phenomenon manifests in the real world. As war is a political act that takes place in and among societies, its specific character will be shaped by those politics and those societies—by what Clausewitz called the “spirit of the age.” War’s conduct is undoubtedly influenced by technology, law, ethics, culture, methods of social, political, and military organisation, and other factors that change across time and place.¹² Military theory can therefore be described as a comprehensive analysis of all the aspects of warfare, its patterns and inner structures, and the mutual relationships of its various elements.

It also encapsulates political, economic, and social relationships within a society and among the societies that create a conflict and lead to a war. Finally, it includes the use of military force to prevent the outbreak of war and to control escalation after the opening of war.¹³

Military theories are both normative and explanatory. Military theory is multi-disciplinary in so far as one needs to understand the political, strategic, operational, and tactical processes in war, but the subject mainly deals with the military aspects of war – not everything that concerns war.¹⁴

Military history is a body of knowledge about the past that relates to armed forces. Warfare, the employment of organised violence, or the preparation to employ violence, lies at the heart of the discipline.¹⁵ Comparing that my definition of military theory above, one sees that military history and theories both concern themselves with the same topic. So, what does actually set them apart? Widén and Ångström explains this rather elegantly. They write that military theory, unlike history, deals with the general rather than the specific, the abstract rather than

tary exchange for economy. He explicitly defines war as fighting, a duel with violence as it means. War is an act of politics, where the dictation of the law by one side to the other gives rise to ‘a sort of reciprocal action’. War always consists of hostile bodies and each has the same object – to force the other to submit (Astrid H. M. Nordin and Dan Öberg, “Targeting the Ontology of War: From Clausewitz to Baudrillard,” Millennium 43, no. 2 (2014).) Some theorists challenge the continued relevance of Clausewitz’s ontology and his division into unchanging nature, and changing character of war, but is beyond the scope of this paper. See for instance: Jan Ångström and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds., Rethinking the Nature of War (London: Frank Cass, 2005). for a good introduction to this debate.

¹² Christopher Mewett, “Understanding war’s enduring nature alongside its changing character,” *War on the Rocks* (January 21, 2014). See also sub-chapter *The use and abuse of history* below where the interaction between the nature and character of war is discussed in more detail.

¹³ Milan Vego, “On Military Theory,” *Joint Force Quarterly* : JFQ, no. 62 (2011): p. 60.

¹⁴ Widén and Ångström, *Contemporary Military Theory: The dynamics of war* p. 7.

¹⁵ Ian Speller, “The use and abuse of history by the military,” in *Building a better future* (Maynooth: Irish Defence Forces: MACE Publications, 2012), p. 2. Stephen Morillo, in his great introductory work to military history have a very similar definition (Stephen Morillo and Michael F. Pavkovic, *What is military history?*, 3rd ed., *What is history?*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), pp. 3-6.)

the tangible, and the timeless rather than the contextual.¹⁶ In military history, researchers tend to see their specific object of study as meaningful in and of itself, while, in military theory, they view the subject of research as a case of a large universe of comparable phenomena.¹⁷ This does not, however, mean that military historians never theorise or that military theorists never investigate the unique.¹⁸ The difference between their approaches has, however, consequences with regard to the extent that generalisations can be regarded as valid and relevant. The perspective that the object of a historical study is unique per se is, if we take it to its logical conclusion, is not compatible with generalising one's conclusions to other cases. By definition, military theory has, therefore, generalising aims, and it is something "more" than just a description of war and warfare.¹⁹ It often aims to be normative – or is at least viewed as such by many of its practitioners.

SEAPOWERTHEORY AS EXPLANATORY AND NORMATIVE THEORY

A normative theory evaluates and describes, or generalises, facts or causal relations. It states "good" ways of doing things, or the "right" way of thinking. It is essentially a guide, a prescription of norms and standards which its practitioners ought to follow. In seapower theory there is often a tension between explanatory statements about the causal relationships in maritime strategy (what is) and providing norms and guidelines for action (what ought to be). According to Widén, this tension is so profound that seapower theory in a historical sense has been dominated by normative rather than explanatory theory. Seapower theory more often than not promotes new doctrines in naval operations and does not constitute theory to grasp and comprehend maritime war and naval warfare as whole, nor to obtain thrust about the principles of maritime strategy.²⁰ Widén's statement is rather unforgiving, but carries much weight. The explanatory powers of a theory, and hence the enhanced understanding it provides, is key to a good theory of lasting importance. A theory formulated in or to a specific time, technology, or space, would almost by default constitute a theory that, if used under other conditions, would be questionable at best.²¹ Friedrich Hayek identified a similar phenomenon in his own field of economics, notably articulated during his 1974 Nobel Prize lecture, where he points out that circumstances defining outcomes in complex environments are rarely, if ever, fully accessible to the researcher, policymaker, or military planner, no matter how information is collected and acted upon.²² The crux of military theory

¹⁶ Widén and Ångström, *Contemporary Military Theory: The dynamics of war* p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Widén, *Theorist of maritime strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his contribution to military and naval thought*, pp. 155-156.

²¹ This paragraph is inspired by: *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

²² Paraphrasis of: Voelz, "Is Military Science Scientific?"

lies in the use of appropriate methods to achieve a satisfactory application of theory to each particular case.²³ That is in fact the domain of doctrine, i.e. applied use military theory in a specific context.²⁴ Hence, when theory becomes normative, it removes itself from theory and tend towards being a specific strategy or doctrine. Thereto, a normative theory is scientifically problematic since it is inherently based on *value judgements* that are difficult to disprove factually and rationally, or which is only relevant for its time and place.²⁵ For instance did Mahan make the conquest and retention of oversea markets dependent not so much upon economical ability as upon military force. A statement that could be seen as fairly accurate in the age of mercantilism, but not so anymore.²⁶

As military theories cannot be refined by continuous testing in a controlled environment, military theory ought to make general, rather than specific, predictions. Such general predictions are much harder to disprove and without continual testing, and hence the ability to prove a theory wrong, other more unscientific influences comes to bear on the relevance of military theory. Tradition, careerism, interservice rivalries, and domestic politics, thus could allow military theories to survive and be used long past the time when they have relevance.²⁷

Furthermore, a majority of the important Western military theorists are associated with the great powers of the world. Moreover, most of the empirical studies focus on cases where at least one side in the contest is a great power, especially so in the maritime domain. This begs the question to what extent there is a great power bias in the field that renders generalisations to smaller powers invalid? There are obviously research results and theoretical arguments, generated from studies of great powers that only partly can be transferred to other countries and areas.²⁸ An important example would be Mahan's renowned seapower theory. Mahan failed to make clear, or at least touched upon only by implication, the fact that all those advantages he promoted were the accompaniment not of Seapower as such, but of superior Seapower.²⁹

²³ Raoul Castex, *Strategic Theories* (edited and translated version of French originals from 1931-39), ed. Eugenia C. Kiesling (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), p. 17.

²⁴ Till, *Seapower*, p. 33. and James J. Tritton, *Naval Perspectives for Military Doctrine Development*, NDC (Norfolk, 1994)..

²⁵ This paragraph is inspired by: Widén, *Theorist of maritime strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his contribution to military and naval thought*, pp. 3-4.

²⁶ Herbert Rosinski, *The Development of Naval Thought: Essays by Herbert Rosinski*, ed. Benjamin Mitchell Simpson III (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1977), p. 28.

²⁷ Pellegrini, *The Links between Science, Philosophy, and Military Theory: Understanding the Past, Implications for the Future*, p. 43. See also: Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 1-4.

²⁸ Widén and Ångström, *Contemporary Military Theory: The dynamics of war* p. 3. See also: Milan Vego, *Maritime Strategy and Sea Denial: Theory and Practice* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), vii.

²⁹ Rosinski, *The Development of Naval Thought: Essays by Herbert Rosinski*, p. 22.

WHY THE CLOSE INTERRELATIONSHIP WITH HISTORY?

If we investigate the most renowned seapower theories, all of them utilises history as its empirical basis and are littered with historical examples.³⁰ Why is it so? Colin Gray offers a useful, but simplistic answer; History is important to seapower theory because, “historical experience is literally our sole source of evidence on strategic phenomena as the future has not yet happened.”³¹ Along the same lines, Milan Vego says that it is military and naval history that allows a theorist to select historical examples to either clarify or obtain evidence in support of a given statement or theoretical construct.³² That statement is important, as that would likewise mean that other historical examples could weaken or invalidate the very same theoretical constructs.

The interrelationship between history and seapower theories can be traced back to the latter half of the 19th century when Sir John Laughton developed ‘scientific’ naval history as a mean for the ‘higher education’ of naval officers in matters of strategy and tactics.³³ He claimed that the role of naval history was first and foremost as a vehicle for the development of naval doctrine.³⁴ He became hugely influential not only for his methodology, but more so because of his friends and extensive correspondence with the major names in his field – historians like Gardiner, as well as naval intellectuals like the Colomb brothers, Bridge, Mahan, Corbett, and Luce.³⁵ Seapower theories promulgated by this circle of theorists still incontestably constitute theoretical benchmarks in the field. They hold such

³⁰ For instance, Mahan's most influential work, *The Influence of Seapower upon history 1660-1783*, is nearly 80-90% historical analysis. The theoretical synthesis constitutes merely 10% of his work (Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (New York: Dover Publications, 1890 (reprint:1987))). Some other publications from leading theorists that exemplifies my statement: Julian S. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1911 (reprint: 2004)); Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett, *Seapower and Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989); Castex, *Strategic Theories* (edited and translated version of French originals from 1931-39); Booth, *Navies and foreign policy*; Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (translated and reprinted 1989) (Annapolis: Naval Inst Press, 1929); Sergei G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979); Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare at Sea: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Edward N. Luttwak, *The political uses of sea power* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Till, *Seapower*; Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power* (London: Routledge, 1990).

³¹ Colin S. Gray, ed., *Strategy and History: Essays on theory and practice* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 5-6.

³² Vego, "On Military Theory," p. 66.

³³ Andrew Lambert, *The foundations of naval history: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the historical profession* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), as summed up on the back jacket of the book.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219. With regards to doctrine: Till, *Seapower*, p. 33. and Tritten, *Military Doctrine Development.*

³⁵ Lambert, *The foundations of naval history: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the historical profession*, as summed up on the back jacket of the book. The Colomb brothers, Bridge, Mahan and Luce are undoubtedly among the most important writers and theorists of sea-

a status that it has almost led to a paradigmatic interrelationship between naval history and seapower theory. An interrelationship that continues to dominate seapower discourse to this day, and which has caused numerous other naval intellectuals to adopt akin methodology to Mahan.³⁶ Similar theoretical developments also took place amongst, for instance, Swedish and French naval theorists, and almost independently from Anglo-Saxon thinking.³⁷ Hence, thinkers with very different outlooks came to use basically the same approach to develop their theories.

This almost paradigmatic interrelationship is not without rationale, it is actually fairly obvious. The study of military history offers the opportunity to learn from experience that is longer, wider and more varied than that of any individual.³⁸ Which is especially important for a profession that is, hopefully, never or very seldom used for its ultimate purpose. Or in Michael Howard's words "The military professional is almost unique in that he may only have to exercise his profession once in a lifetime, if indeed that often."³⁹ Ian Speller thus claims that an understanding of history is a necessary requirement for any theory of war that is based on more than unfounded speculation.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the mere occurrence of copious references to historical case studies does not tell us anything about the theory's factual qualities. In the better cases, history is used as evidence upon which theory is based, in other cases, history is nothing but cosmetics for a theory devised totally independent of serious historical research.⁴¹ Military theories

power in its formative phase in the late 19th century. The Colomb brothers in particular were seminal in the use of history to assist in the advancement of naval theory (Charles Oliviero, "The Complex Web of Western Military Theory (A New Model for the Investigation of Western Military Theory)" (PHD Royal Military College of Canada, 2006), p. 175.)

³⁶ Examples include, but is certainly not limited to: a Swedish work by Munthe and Unger in three volumes: Arnold Munthe, *Sjömaktens inflytande på Sveriges historia*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Stockholm: Marinlitteraturföreningens förlag, 1921); Arnold Munthe, *Sjömaktens inflytande på Sveriges historia*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Stockholm: Marinlitteraturföreningens förlag, 1922); Gunnar Unger, *Sjömaktens inflytande på Sveriges historia*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Stockholm: Marinlitteraturföreningens förlag, 1929). and the German Hermann Kirchhoff, *Seemacht in der Ostsee*, 2 vols. (Kiel: Corodes, 1908).

³⁷ In Sweden Julius Mankel used Swedish naval history to formulate strategic and tactical guidelines for Swedish naval forces already in 1855. (Julius Mankell, *Studier öfver svenska skärgårds-flottans historia, krigssätt och användande vid Sveriges försvar* (Stockholm: Hörbergsgka boktryckeriet, 1855).) Likewise, the French *Jeune Ecole* naval theories from the 1870's was partly based on France's long historical experience with *guerre de course*, i.e. commerce raiding. (Rolf Hobson, *Krig og strategisk tenkning i Europa 1500-1945: samfunnsendring, statssystem, militær teori* (Oslo: Cappelen akademisk forl., 2005), p. 250. and Arne Røksund, *The Jeune École: The Strategy of the Weak*, 1st ed., *History of Warfare Series volume 43*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 1-5.)

³⁸ Basil Henry Liddel Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (Philadelphia: Lulu Press, 1971 (as reprinted in 2015)), Part 1.

³⁹ Michael Howard, "The use and abuse of military history," *Royal United Services Institution. Journal* 107, no. 625 (1962): p. 6.

⁴⁰ Speller, "The use and abuse of history by the military," pp. 9-10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

removed from thorough historical analysis and understanding is thus often, to quote Colin Gray, “repackaging the obvious in ways that mislead the credulous.”⁴² Such theories, according to Speller, does not add much intellectual value as they are often nothing but pure speculation and can accordingly often be badly flawed.⁴³

THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

Although historical analysis as shown constitutes a major component in developing and formulating military theory, the way it is used varies widely. Its use is not one but numerous related approaches that could be classified along the lines of for instance event-centred empirical analysis and comparative historical analysis. Regardless of definitions, pitfalls, and incomplete data, the use of history by sea-power theorists irrespectively aims at making generalisations and identify causal relationships on basis of historical analysis. But could we use historic analysis for such a purpose?

With historical example as its laboratory, military theory relies on ex post facto analysis of what are essentially natural experiments. This entails several limitations. As a mode of analysis, historical narrative is fundamentally linear and deterministic by nature. Its aim is to find causality, thereby minimising the role of chance. It veils complexity and shies from ambiguity. Its vernaculars tend toward the anecdotal, interpersonal, and spectacular. History does not always know what it does not know. Ultimately, what it provides is reasoning by induction—drawing general rules from specific examples. It is non-empirical in that it relies on uncontrolled data. Perhaps most importantly, as a basis for applied theory, it lacks mechanisms of validation through experimental replication—the essence of scientific methodology.⁴⁴

However, if we on the other hand look at how Sir Michael Howard approach this issue, a more constructive and positive view emerge. Howard once wrote that “even after all allowances have been made for contextual differences throughout history, wars have elements that resemble each other more than they resemble other human activities. Wars are nothing but men trying to impose their will on one another by violence.”⁴⁵ All wars, according to such a view, thus consist of features that are unchangeable or constant regardless of the era in which they are fought and those that are transitory or specific to a certain era. This is arguably one of the most important aspects of Clausewitz’s concept of war, an aspect in which a phenomenon, war, is considered to have both objective and subjective natures.⁴⁶ The objective *nature of war* includes those elements – such as violence, friction,

⁴² Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005), p. 143.

⁴³ Speller, “The use and abuse of history by the military,” pp. 9-10.

⁴⁴ Voelz, “Is Military Science Scientific?”

⁴⁵ Howard, “The use and abuse of military history,” p. 7.

⁴⁶ Sir Michael Howard was an ardent student of Clausewitz, see: Beatrice Heuser, “Captain Professor Sir: Some Lessons from Michael Howard,” *War on the Rocks* (February 27, 2020 2020).

chance, and uncertainty – that all wars have in common. By contrast, the subjective nature of war (*the character of war*) encompasses those elements – such as military forces, their doctrines, weapons, as well as environments (land, sea, air, and danger) in which they fight – that make each war unique. According to Clausewitz's concept, the objective and subjective natures of war interact continuously. Thus, the nature of war cannot be separated from the means and the actors involved in its conduct.⁴⁷ Generalisations on basis of the nature of war will therefore have a degree of universal applicability and does consequently delineate changes in the character of war. This even as, also according to the Prussian, war's nature does not change—only its *character*.⁴⁸

Military historians since Thucydides have extended their gifts into the present. Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Delbrück, Fuller, Liddel Hart, Mahan, Corbett, the Colomb brothers, Till, Howard – and the list goes on, were not imprisoned by their discipline. They readily engaged in great questions of their time – and indeed this was what led to them developing military and naval theory. Among military theorists, Clausewitz, and Delbrück in particular, were careful to draw a distinction between the attainment of knowledge and the use of it, between military history and what they call military criticism. They held that while history and criticism served different ends, scholars could serve both without violating their professional oaths. Indeed, they felt it essential that they do so. What they had in mind was not the application of military history so much as the application of the military historian. Military criticism was a means to advance an understanding of war.⁴⁹

The godfather of seapower theories, Mahan, suggests an outline for analysing and understanding wars as they have occurred in history. This outline is an indispensable aid in keeping clearly in view the essential points around which further analysis can be made. He said that regardless of whether a belligerent is in a strategically offensive or defensive position, he must establish a hierarchy of objectives. This hierarchy should include immediate, middle-range and long-range objectives;

⁴⁷ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Globalization and the Nature of War*, Army War College: Strategic studies institute (2003), pp. v-vi.

⁴⁸ Mewett, "Understanding war's enduring nature alongside its changing character."

⁴⁹ Roger Spiller, "Military History and Its Fictions," *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 4 (2006): p. 1093. See also: Peter Paret, "Hans Delbrück on Military Critics and Military Historians," *Military Affairs* 30, no. 3 (1966). To further detail this statement with regards to Clausewitz: Clausewitz formulated a body of significant considerations and dynamics for which no hard evidence could exist, and insisted that these factors had to be imagined and related to known historical facts in order to comprehend the moral aspect of supreme command. In other words, a critical component of the larger theoretical edifice presented in *On War* defined the terms of synthesis of that for which there was no record, and thus neither summarised nor distilled history, but complemented it. (Sumida, "The relationship of history and theory in *On War*: the Clausewitzian ideal and its implications," *The Journal of Military History* 65, no. 2 (2001). See also: Pellegrini, *The Links between Science, Philosophy, and Military Theory: Understanding the Past, Implications for the Future*, p. 45. and Azar Gat, *A history of military thought: from the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 182, 193-194, and 254-255.)

the geographical areas for the main effort; and the geographical areas for the secondary effort, where defence can be distracted, and strength dissipated in favour of the primary areas.⁵⁰ When analysing naval warfare, present or historically, through such a lens, Mahan drifts towards being a military critic rather than a military historian – which indeed could be said to be what differentiates a seapower theorist from a naval historian.

Whenever discussing applied use of history, it is wise to consider whether the course of history can be regarded as a laboratory for testing hypotheses at all. In his monumental, *A Study of War*, Quincy Wright suggested that generalisations are possible if one can identify the right perspective.⁵¹ Gaddis on the other hand, claims that whenever we set out to explain a phenomena, such as a historical phenomenon, we cannot replicate; everyone in some way or another relies upon acts of imagination.⁵² However, military theory is not about predicting the future but preparing for it. Therefore, by using history to develop and test theory, even if the historical empirical data is inaccurate, it still expands the ranges of experience, both directly and vicariously, and hence renders military theory using history as its laboratory more scientific. At the very least, it helps identifying the questions that ought to be asked and the issues that need to be thought through.⁵³ And even as history does not provide prescriptions, it is still an aid to prediction for the simple reason that what happens tomorrow is not independent of what happened today or yesterday. ‘The future has no place to come from but the past,’ wrote Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, so the study of the latter inevitably sheds some light on what to expect in the former.⁵⁴

Another important question is to determine what kind of historical analysis one could use and how it should be employed. History is always an interpretation made by a historian. Moreover, history is usually written with hindsight, and events are often analysed out of context. Such combinations can easily lead to conclusions and generalisations entirely unfounded in what actually took place, and more so if used for preconceived ends or to underline a particular line of thought.⁵⁵ Having this in mind whilst reading, for instance, Mahan provides some disturbing insight. Mahan wrote didactic history, it really makes little difference which of his books on the influence of seapower one reads: The lessons will be the same.⁵⁶ He wrote history that patterns the past after the present, in which what might be learned from the

⁵⁰ Rosinski, *The Development of Naval Thought: Essays by Herbert Rosinski*, p. xiii.

⁵¹ Widén and Ångström, *Contemporary Military Theory: The dynamics of war* p. 174.

⁵² John Lewis Gaddis, "History, Theory, and Common Ground," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): p. 78.

⁵³ *Inspired by Michael Howard, The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 11., and Till, *Seapower*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in time: the uses of history for decision-makers* (Free Press, 1986), p. 251.

⁵⁵ John E Jessup Jr. and Robert W. Coakley, *A guide to the study and use of military history* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1979), p. 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

event or pattern rather than the historicity of the event itself was important. Mahan thus represents a line of theorists on war who used history for preconceived ends.⁵⁷ Mahan's methodology must therefore be questioned, but his findings ought not to be discarded. His counsel is of abiding value maybe not so much for the answers, but because they help to identify the questions that need asking.⁵⁸

To conclude I turn to John Lynn who writes that: military history can be used to recognise trends and provide advice. Moreover, while events do not repeat themselves, patterns in war can usefully be discerned. For example, on the conventional battlefield, there are only so many operational gambits available to the commander. Options such as penetration of the enemy's centre or left or right turning movements were available to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.⁵⁹ Likewise, the strategic options that command of the seas offered Rome during the Second Punic war are very similar to what seapower offered the British during the 18th century, and even translate directly to contemporary options and challenges experienced by states that must account for the maritime in their strategic decision-making.

CONCLUSIONS

*But it must never be forgotten that the true use of history is not to make men clever for next time; it is to make them wise forever.*⁶⁰

Sir Michael Howard

Throughout this text I have questioned whether seapower theories holds explanatory value or even normative status with regards to maritime strategy and naval warfighting. The short answer is – yes, they do, but probably only if they are understood or placed in context. Their applicability beyond their time, technology and space is undetermined and will likely remain so. Naval warfare is scarce, far between, and a complex social activity, hence, experimentation analogous to hard sciences is unattainable. Instead of experimentation, seapower theory rests firmly on generalisations drawn from historic analyses. However, such applied use of history is not without pitfalls and scientific challenges. One cannot simply learn from history as history does not teach lessons.⁶¹ However, all future events always come from no other place than the past. The past hence inevitably sheds light on

⁵⁷ Amos Perlmutter and John Gooch, *Strategy and the social sciences : issues in defence policy* (London ;Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1981), p. 32

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Till, ed., *Maritime strategy and the nuclear age 2. ed.* (London: MacMillan, 1984), p. 258.

⁵⁹ Gary Sheffield, "Military past, military present, military future: The usefulness of military history," *The RUSI Journal* 153, no. 3 (2008): p. 104.

⁶⁰ An abbreviated quote from the closing paragraph of: Howard, "The use and abuse of military history."

⁶¹ This line is borrowed from Michael Howards famous statement "History does not teach lessons. Historians may claim to teach lessons, and often they may do so wisely, but 'history' does not." See Howard, *The Lessons of History*, p. 11.

what to expect in the future. History is our only empirical source to how seapower works, and such insight ought primarily not to be used to describe or predict the future, but to criticise and to guide our understanding. Such generalisations can be derived from history – if history is studied as Sir Michael Howard concluded in his 1961 seminal essay; in width, only by seeing what does change can one deduce what does not; in depth, one must get behind the order subsequently imposed by the historian and recreate the omnipresence of chaos and criticise; and lastly in context, as wars are conflicts of societies.⁶²

But most importantly, using history alone is not the perfect methodology to develop and evaluate seapower theory regardless of method, sources or how one conjunct knowledge. History is certainly important, even vital, especially as a vast, but opaque, source of empirical data. Still history is always influenced by hindsight, imagination, and interpretations, and depict a context long gone. Hence, use of military and naval history ought to be combined with other methods when theorising seapower. Taken together, a combination of contrasting approaches offers an opportunity to cover the weaknesses of each with the strengths of others. However, what those methods are, or could be, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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⁶² Michael Howard, "The use and abuse of Military history (reprint of 1961 original)," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981).

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