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REVIEW

Seapower in the Post-Modern World

Basil Germond

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Basil Germond, co-director of the Security Research Institute at Lancaster University (United Kingdom), is currently one of the most influential voices on maritime power and naval issues. His latest work, *Seapower in the Post-Modern World*, is a true historiography of maritime power from antiquity to the present day, in which the author develops a careful framework for studying the concept, highlighting its importance in today's rapidly changing world. The title of the work, as the author explains in the opening pages, is a tribute to one of the books published just over a century ago by British Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond—one of the most famous disciples of the British historian and strategist par excellence, Julian Corbett—*Seapower in the Modern World* (1934).

The work is divided into seven chapters: A historiography of the concept of maritime power; Maritime power in international relations; Maritime power and post-modernity: A new framework for analysis; From pre-modern to modern maritime power; Solidarity-based and civil maritime power; and The future of maritime power (conclusions). Throughout these chapters, Germond provides a historical review of the existing literature on the subject, efficiently and entertainingly summarising the ideas of the great naval thinkers of the 20th century and identifying the different perspectives (history, culture, strategy, politics, economics) from which this topic has been approached.

The work is also being published at a time when much of the work that has been published in recent years has been limited either to maritime and naval history through biographies of illustrious figures and significant events, or to the exclusive field of maritime security (a field in which figures such as Professor Fernando Ibáñez stand out in our country), leaving aside other issues that shape maritime power as a whole. Germond's work incorporates aspects of all these disciplines to provide a clear and illustrative overview.

The first chapter is essentially a biography of the term 'sea power', originally popularised by the American Alfred T. Mahan in his works published from 1890 onwards. As Germond rightly points out, few works published since then have dared to give a precise definition of the term, which is often treated as a dogma that does not need to be defined. Thus, the different disciplines from which it has been studied and the main figures in the literature of this discipline are reviewed. It also addresses the difference between maritime power and naval power, the latter being the military component of the former, which encompasses many other aspects, and the need for maritime strategy as an instrument to transform maritime power into real influence.

A close example of the importance of clearly defining the differences between the two concepts can be found in the Spanish translations of some of the most representative works in maritime strategic studies. For example, Mahan's seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660-1783*, was translated and published in Spanish as *La Influencia del Poder Naval en la Historia*. This translation often misleads readers unfamiliar with the American author's work, which, far from limiting itself to treating maritime power as the basis of national power from a purely military perspective (naval power), placed special emphasis on the importance of the commercial and economic dimensions of states' maritime activity.

The second chapter focuses on the concept of power and the different perspectives that exist on this concept within international relations, clarifying the concept in relation to the central theme of the work and the field of study in which it is framed. Addressing the different schools of thought within international relations, Germond reviews each one's conception of maritime power and defines the three main axes of analysis that can be used to approach the historical study of maritime power and its influence in today's world: its elements, its articulation or enactment, and its results or objectives.

Based on these three axes or levels of analysis, the third chapter develops the analytical framework that is used throughout the remaining chapters to analyse in detail the main characteristics and particularities of each period. Germond thus defines a theoretical framework for the study of seapower as a historical phenomenon whose development and evolution consist of different stages or eras: pre-modernity, modernity, post-modernity and neo-modernity. This framework is based on a comprehensive conception of the concept of seapower that encompasses all its dimensions. Germond addresses each of these stages through the three axes mentioned above, in order to extract and present to the reader the characteristics of each of these phases or historical moments: the elements and forms of maritime power, the practical exercise of that power, and the ultimate causes or consequences it has for nations and international relations in general.

The fourth chapter focuses on the pre-modern era, covering a period during which entities such as Greece and Carthage dominated the waters of the Mediterranean and laid the foundations for what Alfred Mahan would later call the virtuous circle of maritime power, through which a nation decides to orient all aspects of its existence towards the sea, investing in maritime trade and from whose fruits the resources necessary to protect that trade and defend itself against external threats are born. Germond demonstrates, drawing on the work of historians such as Andrew Lambert (Lambert, 2028), that technological and material factors were what largely limited the expansion of maritime power during this period, rather than cultural and ideological factors.

He then moves on to the modern era (commonly known as the Age of Exploration), studying the process of consolidation of nation states and the development of their maritime power during a period in which the geographical horizons of the known world expanded and what we now call globalisation began to take shape. Germond points out the link between nation states, the construction of empires and the expansion of maritime power, noting that the most immutable and enduring characteristics of maritime power had developed in the pre-modern era rather than the modern era.

He continues his analysis in chapter five by addressing the debate surrounding the characteristics of a post-modern era, considering the extent to which we can recognise that we are currently living in such a period. Here, new characteristics of maritime power emerge, including the compression of time and space, the emphasis on new technologies, the emergence of non-state actors, and the growing influence

of supranational institutions such as the EU and ASEAN in the development and exercise of maritime power. This period also highlights the confrontation between two opposing trends: the growing territorialisation of maritime spaces (represented by aspects such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—UNCLOS) versus the deterritorialisation of threats to international security (terrorism being the most notable example of this phenomenon).

The sixth chapter introduces two new concepts developed by the author: collective maritime power and civil maritime power. The first responds to the trend that emerged with the end of the Cold War and the inclination of states with aligned maritime interests to collaborate in order to address the most relevant threats. Germond describes it as a ‘solidarity-based society of maritime nations’¹. The second has to do with the increasing use of maritime spaces for economic purposes through entities such as the merchant navy, large shipping companies, fishing fleets and marine scientific research. The author concludes that the dominance of the Western bloc of nations as an alliance of maritime nations is largely based on this civil-economic vision to exert a dominant influence on the global order, but is increasingly threatened by the emergence of visions from Southeast Asia (primarily China) that challenge this status.

Germond concludes his work with chapter seven and his conclusions, reviewing the general ideas presented throughout the preceding chapters and emphasising the importance of approaching the study of maritime power as a phenomenon that has evolved over the centuries. He argues that continuity rather than change has characterised maritime power as a concept and practice, displaying characteristics that make it universal and not necessarily exclusive to Western nations. He also points to the need to study this phenomenon in greater depth in order to understand more clearly and thoroughly the differences between Western and non-Western nations at a cultural and ideological level.

Broadly speaking, *Seapower in the Post-Modern World* is one of the most comprehensive and succinct works produced to date. As the author points out from the outset, the literature on maritime issues is abundant both in terms of authors and the disciplines from which it is approached. Germond’s work therefore succeeds admirably in summarising and organising a significant part of the literature, and in going further thanks to its theoretical framework of analysis. While many other works focus on specific historical periods (as demonstrated, for example, by the literature on Spanish maritime and naval power), Germond provides a linear vision and a clear map for understanding the evolution of the concept as one of the most ancient human experiences.

In this sense, it is a valuable addition to the aforementioned field of study. At the same time, however, the fluidity of the narrative and the author’s ability to express

¹ This is a highly relevant issue, on which Germond and other authors have occasionally emphasised the importance of a robust commitment to protecting stability and freedom of navigation, fundamental pillars on which globalisation has been based to this day.

the most complex aspects in a simple way make it equally accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with the discipline. Ultimately, it can be conceived as an abridged history of the relationship between human beings and the sea, but also as a guide to understanding the role played by states and non-state entities in the current international order; a role that is set to grow in importance in the coming years and to which special attention should therefore be paid (as China has demonstrated with its ambitious commercial expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative).

Compared to other relevant works in the field, Germond's book is a more than adequate introduction for those new to the field of maritime strategic studies. Today, the global reference work is *Seapower: A Guide for the 21st Century* by British historian and naval expert Geoffrey Till, one of the most illustrious names in this field of study, with whom the author has had the opportunity to share seminars (Till, 2018). His work, the fifth edition of which will be published shortly, is much denser and more overwhelming in content and depth of analysis, resembling more of a manual. In contrast, Germond's work constitutes a first approach to the discipline, providing a remarkably solid knowledge base.

In short, Germond's work is indispensable for academics and professionals in the maritime field, allowing them to reflect on the significance of maritime power for our society, the different ways in which it has been used over the centuries, and, above all, the challenges ahead in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Bibliografía

Lambert, A. (2018). *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Shaped the Modern World*. Yale University Press.

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