

The Small Seapower State

A Perspective on Small Naval Power

Daniël Turk*

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Abstract

This article aims to offer an approach that evaluates the sea power of small states in a way that goes beyond the tendency to establish hierarchisations of naval power based on quantifiable military capabilities. Building on Jacob Borresen’s theory of the ‘coastal state’, in which not the navy as such but rather the unique characteristics of the coastal state as a (small) maritime nation served as its starting point, I will introduce the notion of the *small seapower state*. The Netherlands will be used as an example throughout the article to substantiate this. While the framework of the coastal state helps to gain a better understanding of small naval power, it does not include all the maritime nations we tend to classify as ‘small’. The small seapower state can serve as an alternative framework for the maritime nation whose link with the sea is not defined by the intrinsic value of its coastal waters, but rather because its role as a global maritime hub offers this type of state a larger role in global affairs than its own region affords. The return of peer competitors at sea will only reinforce the inherent differences between these types of maritime nations and should be reflected in the respective roles of their navies and future fleet compositions.

* D.P. (Daniël) Turk MA, MSc is a researcher at the Netherlands Defence Academy and pursues his PhD at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel on the role and characteristics of small naval powers.

Academic discourse on small naval power often lacks overarching narratives that go beyond numerical accounts of navies or measuring naval capability data. Holistic approaches that take into account the military aspects of a state's sea power as well as its wider maritime economy help to better understand the nature and character of small naval power. As the historically intricate link between seaborne commerce and the development of sea power may no longer be as straightforward as it used to be, it is nevertheless still there. This is not necessarily the case because of the maritime economy's wartime utility, but because of a strength in and of itself, as complementary to the naval capabilities a state can bring to bear.

A nation's relationship with the sea determines its navy's role and fleet composition. For the past thirty years, due to the absence of peer competitors at sea, the importance of determining this relationship and embedding it in a wider maritime narrative has receded into the background. The failure to embed such a narrative as part of a wider 'vision', or at least a discussion, about the sort of maritime nation a state is or perceives itself to be and, subsequently, to determine the sort of navy that best suits its interests, is part of an affliction that has taken hold of many Western states: 'seabindness'. Out of sight often means out of mind. With the (largely automated) infrastructure of many seaports having expanded away from their old city centres and the sea itself is associated by many with a holiday destination, it is not surprising that the 'seamindedness' of the peoples living in states that are existentially connected to the sea is waning. Even the watershed year of 2022, with images depicting the horrors of the kind of urban and trench warfare we thought we had left behind in the 20th century, it is easy to forget the maritime dimension of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Nonetheless, rising defence budgets across Europe, resulting from this 'wake-up call', are to impact the fleet composition of many European navies. Danger lurks that this sudden surge in defence budgets will result in hastily-made reactive decisions that alleviate (rightful) immediate concerns instead of addressing long-term

strategic challenges. In what is an ever continuous cycle of more expensive and often fewer ships, just replacing, hull for hull, the current fleet composition is a daunting task in itself. Pressure to acquire or upgrade existing assets leaves little leeway to reflect on what type of navy a maritime nation has and how it perceives itself and its role in the world.

Especially the smaller European maritime nations have little room for manoeuvre. 'Wars of choice' and the absence of existential threats to seaborne commerce or territorial waters have for a long time precluded discussions on possible trade-offs between constabulary versus warfighting capabilities or between 'expeditionary' versus retaining 'coastal' naval assets. In fact, contributing to maintaining the 'good order at sea', became the *raison d'être* for many smaller European navies. Otherwise they risked being seen as obsolete. Traditional coastal defence navies, like those of Denmark and Norway, (partially) transformed their fleet composition to enable participation in out-of-area maritime security operations. And those navies that already considered 'all the free world oceans' as their area of operations, like the Dutch navy, only became more expeditionary. The inherent distinctiveness between maritime nations lost its importance during this post-modern or 'post-Mahanian' phase in history. Irrespective of whether one's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was the size of Belgium's 3,447 square kilometres or the 2,385,178 square kilometres of Norway, the 'global' West had a stake in maintaining the good order at sea. It still does but the 2022 watershed again accentuated some fundamental differences. Metrics, such as geographic location, structure of the maritime economy, level of connectivity, and trade flows will reappear in the geopolitical foreground. Norway's gas production within its enormous EEZ became a European security concern, while the importance of the Dutch port of Rotterdam as a primary energy hub proved its consistently high ranking on many a connectivity index as the first port to welcome a tanker carrying LNG from as far as Australia to help alleviate Europe's energy crisis.

Yet the discourse mostly retains its narrow focus on the naval capabilities needed to participate in the ‘high-end’ maritime arena. As defence budgets were rapidly increased following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, old wish lists immediately resurfaced. One of the first decisions by the Dutch navy was to equip its frigates with Tomahawk cruise missiles – a plan shelved twenty years earlier in the midst of the ‘post-Mahanian’ era. Wanting the best hardware is only logical; however, it is beyond the scope of this article to take a normative stance therein. But rather, by building on the expanding body of literature written specifically from the perspective of small naval powers, this paper offers a framework that evaluates sea power in a way that goes beyond the tendency to establish hierarchisations of naval power based on quantifiable military capabilities; one that instead has at its core the small maritime nation’s relationship with the sea.

This framework, the *small seapower state*, is based on Andrew Lambert’s notion of the *seapower state*, which he understood as an ideal type of maritime nation that is culturally aware of the importance of acquiring strategic sea power and actively nurtures a seapower identity. Strategic sea power is still provided by the United States, but seapower identity ‘is shared among a group of second- and third-rank powers’.¹ These states ‘are disproportionately engaged with global trade, unusually dependent on imported resources, and culturally attuned to maritime activity’, yet unable to develop the naval capabilities of a ‘seapower great power’. Central to Lambert’s argument is that ‘sea power’ has come to be understood in strategic terms and less so as intended by the ancient Greeks when they considered a *thalassokratia* as a state dominated by the sea, not necessarily as one with a large navy.² This is the crux of this article. For it is exactly the preoccupation with the military aspects of naval power which, as we will come to see, has influenced the thinking on small navies.

If seapower states can only exist when they have the scale to achieve great power status and consciously create a seapower identity to help attain naval mastery, what then of contempo-

rary maritime states that share many of its characteristics? While they may not consciously create a seapower identity, or even failed to sustain existing maritime identities, the small seapower state is nonetheless ‘dominated by the sea’ – even though it might need reminding that it is. It lacks the scale to develop strategic sea power but that does not mean it cannot have agency. For possessing a large navy does not necessarily make a state a great naval power, much like having a small navy does not necessarily mean a state is a small maritime power.

Before turning to the concept of the small seapower state, I will first elaborate on how naval literature has skewed our understanding of what constitutes naval power and, secondly, what this tells us more specifically about small navies. I will then explain Jacob Borresen’s concept of the *coastal state* as a contrast to the notion of the small seapower state, which will subsequently be introduced as a framework that can help to think about small naval power in a wider perspective.

The Classification of Naval Power

The tendency to hierarchise or classify naval power is as old as history itself. In Herodotus’ descriptions of the naval battles at Lade or Salamis he goes to great lengths to explicitly mention the naval contributions down to the level of even the smallest Greek city-state. Irrespective of the accuracy of his *Histories*, what matters is that the ships listed are only the triremes, the purpose-built warships of classical antiquity, even though the pentekontor, as the general-purpose galley of the period, was still operated by many Greek poleis. Thucydides as well, when naming the very few members of the Delian League contributing ships to the Athe-

1 Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, continental empires and the conflict that made the modern world* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018) 7.

2 Lambert, *Seapower States*, 7.

nian-led alliance, only mentioned those providing triremes, thereby omitting the smaller League members still using these general-purpose galleys. In the ancient ‘indexes’ of naval power these vessels did not seem to matter. As the triremes evolved into ever more larger ship types, a ‘hierarchisation’ took shape resembling the rating system during the age of sail. In the third century BC warships were ‘classed’ according to the number of files of seated rowers.³ Thus the quadriremes were ‘fours’, the quinqueremes ‘fives’, etc. The largest of these ever used in battle were the deceres (‘tens’), but that did not stop the Antigonid ruler Demetrius Poliorcetes from having the Phoenicians build for him gigantic polyremes (up to ‘sixteens’). Ptolemy Philopator reportedly even had a ‘forty’ built, a vessel requiring 4,000 rowers. However, as Plutarch remarked, the beauty of Demetrius’ ships ‘did not mar their fighting qualities’, whilst Ptolemy’s behemoth, on the other hand, was meant only for ‘exhibition and not for use’.⁴

Basing one’s naval estimates on such force comparisons can thus be misleading and potentially dangerous. Many other variables of measuring power at sea are overlooked in such one-sided estimates. Nonetheless, even to this day any comparisons of fleet strength or force-effectiveness, as Edward Luttwak has noted, begins with the available capability data: ‘gross tonnage levels, the number of ships by classes, aggregate gun and missile power, and so

on’.⁵ Over time the character of such ‘capability data’ has changed markedly. We have moved on from the number of rowing files to codifying the amount of mounted guns in a rating system during the age of sail. And as the wooden hulls gave way to plated decks in the 19th century, tonnage and gun calibre became the metrics that determined fleet strength. Nowadays it is the amount of vertical launching system (VLS) cells or the sensor and command systems that tend to be the measurable metrics of naval power.

This inclination to hierarchise, then as now, is only natural. As is the use of such quantifiable ‘capability data’. There are, of course, more variables at play. But seamanship, maintenance standards or the use of weapons skills under stress are difficult to measure beforehand. Few outside observers would have thought that the Russian cruiser Moskva could be sunk by only two Ukrainian land-based anti-ship missiles. Furthermore, national characteristics of sea power invariably play a role in assessing each other’s naval strength. At the end of the 19th century, elder British statesmen who grew up in admiral Nelson’s wake of near absolute British naval dominance, saw no need to build capital ships in excess of numerical equality to the next two powers, for they still believed that ‘one Englishman was worth two or three foreigners’.⁶ As late as 1912, at the height of the Anglo-German naval arms race, Winston Churchill made the assumption that Germany possessing more dreadnoughts than Britain would not necessarily be a problem given the British preponderance in pre-dreadnought ships.⁷ Such uncorroborated considerations were nonetheless, as Luttwak wrote, ‘commonly the only variables that intrude upon the decisions that, in turn, determine the political effectiveness of naval forces’.⁸

Naval scholars often also understood naval power in similar fashion by providing ‘numerical accounts of sea power and measuring naval capabilities’.⁹ The strategic value of naval power is derived from the isolated study of ships, navies and their (perceived) capabilities. Literature is awash with examples of naval classifica-

3 Philip A. G. Sabin and Hans van Wees, *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman warfare*, Vol. I, Greece, the Hellenistic world and the rise of Rome (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) 357.

4 Plutarch and Bernadotte Perrin (English translation), *Plutarch’s Lives*, Vol. 9 (London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1920) Demetrius, 43.

5 Edward N. Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power* (Baltimore, London, John Hopkins University Press, 1974) 39.

6 Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power. A history of British naval policy in the pre-Dreadnought era, 1880-1905* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1940) 107.

7 Philip O’Brien, *British and American naval power: politics and policy, 1900-1936* (Westport, CT, Praeger, 1998) 81.

8 Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Sea Power*, 40.

9 Kevin Blachford, ‘Ocean flows and chains: sea power and maritime empires within IR theory’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (9 November 2022).

tions. Their utility and relevance differ, but all attempt to create some sort of order to emphasize the differences between the world's naval forces.¹⁰ Making sense of the proliferation of navies as such is no unnecessary luxury. Bear in mind that in 1914, *Jane's Fighting Ships* listed only 39 navies, whereas today there are just over 160 states possessing a navy. Few are, however, instruments of true naval power. This is reflected in the many hierarchisations and typologies of the world's navies. These tend to have a narrow focus on the level of warfighting capabilities and a navy's reach, resulting in pyramidal frameworks with at the top only the very few true ocean-going navies.

Unsurprisingly, such studies have strong echoes of the American naval strategist Alfred Mahan. George Modelski and William Thompson calculated naval strength based on a capital ship count to test their long-cycle theory of hegemonic naval power.¹¹ Brian Crisher and Mark Souva created a dataset covering the period 1865-2011 to measure a state's naval power using the total tonnage of a country's primary warships – defined as platforms that can utilize ship-based weapons to destroy land, sea, or air targets outside of their own littoral waters.¹² But focusing on tonnage and assuming that there is a correlation between the size of a ship and its overall capabilities remains problematic. Keith Patton noted that in this day and age simply counting hulls or using tonnage as a metric tells us little about a fleet's combat power. During the dreadnought age powerful 12-inch naval guns hurling 850 pound shells required a platform the size of these enormous battleships. Nowadays, corvettes operated by small coastal navies have the potential to carry missiles that can be just as lethal as those aboard the largest surface ships. Patton uses the number of Battle Force Missiles (BFM) to measure fleet strength. The result is reminiscent of the rating system pioneered by the English in the 17th century: to classify ships based on the amount of their VLS cells. Those vessels with the capacity to carry over a 100 BFM, like the American Ticonderoga-class cruisers or the Chinese Type 055, would then be ranked as 'first rate' warships. 'Second-rate' warships are those carrying between

90-100 BFM and this continues all the way down to unrated ships with less than six BFM. Ship type becomes less relevant when using the number of BFM as a metric to measure fleet strength.¹³ For instance, in an effort to speedily ramp up its combat power, the Dutch navy announced in 2022 its intention to take into use four large, yet cheap (commercial) hulls that are stacked with BFM that can be launched from a nearby high-end frigate that serves as the 'mothership' to this flotilla of so-called TRIFIC ships.¹⁴ While TRIFIC theoretically contributes to missions, such as local air defence or anti-surface warfare, the focus on BFM as such only partially explains a navy's operational reach or its ability to conduct long-range power projection.

An alternative approach to classify navies is one that reflects the ability of a navy to project some form of naval power beyond its own territorial waters. Ken Booth used the term 'ocean-going navy' to distinguish it from a more coastal-oriented 'contiguous sea navy'. It is a distinction that reflects the difference in geographical reach, which, according to Booth, is in itself indicative of a navy's role and ambition.¹⁵ Michael Lindberg and Daniel Todd studied the influence of geography on naval force structures, identifying three primary types of navies: power projection navies, coastal (or territorial defence) navies, and constabulary

10 Michael Lindberg and Daniel Todd, *Brown-, Green-, and Blue-water fleets: the influence of geography on naval warfare, 1861 to the present* (Westport, CN, Praeger, 2002) 196.

11 George Modelski, *Seapower in global politics, 1494-1993*, ed. William R. Thompson (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).

12 Brian Benjamin Crisher and Mark Souva, 'Power at Sea: A Naval Power Dataset, 1865-2011', *International Interactions* 40 (2014) 608.

13 Keith Patton, 'Battle Force Missiles: the Measure of a Fleet', *CIMSEC*, 24 April, 2019.

14 TRIFIC stands for: The Rapidly Increased Firepower Capability. Jaime Karremann, 'Marine wil op korte termijn grote zwaarbewapende schepen met enkele bemanningsleden', *Marineschepen.nl*, 23 November, 2022. See: <https://marineschepen.nl/nieuws/TRIFIC-nieuw-plan-voor-zwaarbewapende-laag-bemande-schepen-231122.html>. In the meantime, TRIFIC has been renamed as MICAN.

15 Ken Booth, *Navies and foreign policy* (New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979) 120-21.

navies. Geography, or ‘operational environment’, is broken down into ‘blue water’ and ‘non-blue water’, with the latter subdivided in ‘green water’ and ‘brown water’ environments. It is, as they write, ‘the norm to associate power-projection navies with blue water, coastal navies with either green or brown water, and constabulary navies with green water’.¹⁶ There is thus a correlation between operational environment and naval force structure. Power-projection navies are usually well-fixed in the capital ship domain: aircraft carriers, destroyers, and frigates suited for high-intensity warfare. Whereas the force structure of coastal defence navies usually consists of corvettes and submarines with a limited operational reach, constabulary navies are mainly designed to operate in their own inland waterways.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, small navies are usually grouped in the latter two categories; equating small maritime nations with being weak and therefore conferring on them coastal defence or commerce raiding roles. The underlying assumption is that only large naval powers have maritime interests to protect that extend beyond their own territorial waters.

Clark Reynolds created a naval typology that reinforces such (simplistic) assumptions on the role and function of smaller naval forces. Reynolds identified three types of states that have used navies: First, the *maritime* nations in which navies are the principal strategic arm for their defence needs. Second, the *continental* powers that use their navy in a defensive role and in support of their armies. And third, the *small* powers, whose limited naval capabilities

can merely perform local services and are capable only of confronting similar sized states.¹⁸ But by considering small powers to be a homogenous group, he ignores smaller maritime states with (limited) global aspirations. Their navies may not do so strategically, like the great naval powers, but there are small powers with vital global maritime interests and capable, at least to a degree, of safeguarding them or contribute to their protection in a meaningful way. Instead, Reynolds considers protecting maritime commerce as one of the primary strategic applications of the naval power of the maritime nations, whereas the small powers can best resort to the traditional ‘strategies of the weak’ (i.e. commerce raiding). Thereby overlooking that small powers can also be maritime nations for which the protection of their maritime interests is equally important, if not existential. They do not possess as much naval ‘capability data’ as their larger counterparts, but the protection of their, in some cases, outsized maritime interests may still constitute the principal strategic function of their navies.

Small Navies: a Semantic Discord?

Based on the above it is tempting to conclude that small navies are all those that are not large. Eric Grove’s often used hierarchisation of naval power takes into account the world’s smaller navies (ranging from rank one: ‘major global force projection navies’, all the way down his ladder to rank nine: ‘token navies’), but he still retains the narrow political-naval focus which tells us little about their intended role and context nor is his threshold between what constitutes as a ‘small’ or ‘large’ navy exactly clear.¹⁹ In a 2014 revision of his ‘ranking’, Grove characterised the ranks four to eight as belonging to the small navy category, which includes the medium regional force projection navies, adjacent force projection navies, offshore territorial defence navies, inshore territorial defence navies, and constabulary navies.²⁰ If anything, such typologies only highlight that ‘there exists no single defined state of what a small navy is’, but rather that ‘there are varying degrees of smallness’.²¹

16 Lindberg and Todd, *Brown-, Green-, and Blue-water fleets*, 196.

17 Ibidem, 197.

18 Clark G. Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (New York, William Morrow & Co, 1974) 12-6.

19 Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power* (London, Routledge, 1990) 237.

20 Eric Grove, ‘The Ranking of Smaller Navies Revisited’, in *Small Navies: Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (London, New York, Routledge, 2014) 17-18.

21 Grove, ‘The Ranking of Smaller Navies Revisited’, 36-37.

Jeremy Stöhs underlined this in a 2021 study on Europe's ability to address the high-end challenge in the maritime domain. He categorized European naval forces as being 'large', 'medium-sized', 'small but high performing', and, lastly, as 'small and smallest navies'.²² Although Stöhs only uses this categorisation for the sake of analytical clarity, it does show the arbitrariness in trying to classify navies based on 'measurable' capability data. Based on its size (55,326 tons), the Danish navy, for instance, is about half the total displacement of the Dutch navy. But when using, for instance, Patton's metric to hierarchize according to the number of VLS cells, the Danish 240 cells exceed the Dutch 192 – and even the German number of 160 cells. Interestingly, a 2023 CSIS report on European navies branded the *Deutsche Marine* as 'world-class', whilst labelling the Danish and Dutch naval forces as 'robust'.²³

Basil Germond has convincingly deconstructed the hierarchisation of naval forces as an inherently subjective exercise whilst, nevertheless, also showing how the 'ranking' or 'othering' of naval forces have come to be seen as a generally accepted representation even within naval establishments.²⁴ It is a tendency summed up by Germond as follows:

- 1) Big navies are powerful whereas small navies are less powerful;
- 2) It is better to be powerful;
- 3) So, big navies are better than small navies.

What seemed to count in such a 'naval pecking order' is the position of each navy relative to others, 'rather than each navy's individual capacities judged against their state's needs and defence objectives'.²⁵ In some ways the 'small navy' discussion is a semantic discord, albeit one rooted in the premise that no navy likes to be labelled as small. The term 'small navy' has been unpopular amongst naval thinkers and the role of the smaller naval powers as well as their specific challenges and the context in which they operate is often overlooked. There is, as Ian Speller noted, an inclination to approach naval power from a perspective built upon an examination of the activities of larger navies, assuming that the resulting concepts and principles

apply in equal measure to the smaller ones.²⁶ The growing body of work on small navies notwithstanding, there is still no entirely satisfactory definition, other than perhaps Geoffrey Till's suggestion that a small navy is simply one with 'limited means and aspirations'.²⁷

Historically, however, labelling smaller navies as 'weak', 'second-rate' or 'inferior' helped to distinguish them from the 'strong' or 'large' navies. But 'second-rate' in which context? And 'inferior' compared with what? For instance, the 'strategy of the weak' par excellence, the French *Jeune École*, was based on the premise of France being the inferior naval power. But when the ideas for this strategy were first conceived in the 1860s, *la Marine* was only secondary to the Royal Navy – and even gained a brief edge over the British in the development of battleships with screw steam-engines.²⁸ The crushing Russian naval defeat at Tsushima (1905) made Russia, according to Arthur Marder, a 'third-class naval power'.²⁹ While the loss of fourteen battleships during the Russo-Japanese War would be a severe blow to any naval power, on the eve of the First World War the Russian navy nevertheless still possessed ten pre-dreadnought battleships and had seven dreadnoughts under construction – a force larger than most European maritime nations had at the time.

- 22 Jeremy Stöhs, *How High? The Future of European Naval Power and the High-End Challenge*, Centre for Military Studies (CMS) (2021), 25.
- 23 Mathieu Droin, Courtney Stiles Herdt, and Gabriella Bolstad, *Are European Navies Ready to Navigate an Ever More Contested Maritime Domain?*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (2023), 12-13.
- 24 Basil Germond, 'Small Navies in Perspective: Deconstructing the Hierarchy of Naval Forces', in *Small Navies. Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace*, ed. Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014) 33-4.
- 25 Basil Germond, 'Seapower and small navies: A post-modern outlook', in *Europe, small navies and maritime security. Balancing traditional roles and emergent threats in the 21st century*, ed. Robert C. McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) 27-28.
- 26 Ian Speller, 'Maritime Strategy and policy for smaller navies', *International Studies Association* (2012) 1.
- 27 Geoffrey Till, 'Can Small Navies Stay Afloat?', *Jane's Navy International*, no. 6 (2003).
- 28 C.I. Hamilton, *Anglo-Frenh Naval Rivalry, 1840-1870* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993) 82.
- 29 Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 441.

It would be easy to attach too much value to a casual remark made by a distinguished naval historian like Marder. Even so, it is a line of thinking that has persisted all the way through the Cold War when to be small was considered an inferior state of being.³⁰ Reynolds' typology is exemplary for this period. Even in the then scarce academic publications dealing specifically with small navies, they were seen as 'configured to operate in basically defensive modes', because, as Joseph Morgan wrote towards the end of the Cold War, 'none can exert ocean-wide influence'.³¹ A few years later, Morgan still defined small navies as 'fleets that do not possess ships capable of force projection in the open seas'.³² His compatriot Charles Koburger shared the view that 'it is in the narrow seas that the small navies really come into their own'.³³

Where policy is concerned, the attitude of the Dutch after the loss of New Guinea in 1963 fits neatly in this paradigm. With the loss of this last vestige of Dutch 'empire', the navy stressed the importance of still including global deployments in its sailing schedules 'in order not to slip

unnoticed into a too narrow, local navy'.³⁴ While it initiated a fleet plan that resulted in the Royal Netherlands Navy even becoming for a brief moment one of the largest in the world (ranking fifth on the Crisher and Souva dataset), it was a naval policy that was to a certain extent detached from what NATO required from the Netherlands in terms of capabilities.³⁵ A Norwegian Fleet Plan, which was realized at about the same time, resulted, on the other hand, in a navy ideal to provide NATO's vulnerable Northern Flank with inshore coastal protection.³⁶ Denmark also fulfilled an important role within the alliance by guarding the straits between the North and Baltic Seas to prevent the Soviet Baltic Fleet from entering the Atlantic. Like Norway, the Danish navy developed a fleet of small and fast anti-shiping vessels consisting of torpedo boats, submarines, and minelayers that best utilized their unique strategic and geographical characteristics.³⁷ Ultimately, the Dutch naval establishment found new purpose in NATO after the loss of its 'empire', whilst also remaining committed to a doctrine of out-of-area reach backed up by a relatively large 'harmonious' fleet, which was, in part, the legacy of the Dutch self-perception as a historic maritime nation with global maritime interests.³⁸ Smaller naval powers are thus not necessarily 'weak', 'inferior' or 'second-rank' when its naval forces are attuned to the requirements of the type of maritime state they serve and the strategic environment in which they operate, irrespective of its fleet size, composition and 'capability data'.

The Coastal State

Finding a comprehensive definition of what constitutes a 'small navy' thus remains difficult. The question is whether it matters. For Till the conceptual differences between large and small navies are 'more a matter of degree than of kind'.³⁹ John Kearsley also believed that naval forces, large and small, seek to fulfil a wide range of missions. The difference being that small navies have different priorities than their larger counterparts. The former may prefer to operate closer to home or out-of-area as part of a coalition- but small navies will seek to substanti-

30 Robert C. McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller, 'Introduction. Europe, small navies and maritime security', in *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security. Balancing traditional roles and emergent threats in the 21st century*, ed. Robert C. McCabe, Deborah Sanders, and Ian Speller (London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) 4.

31 Joseph R Morgan, 'Small Navies', *Ocean Yearbook* 6 (1986) 388.

32 Joseph R Morgan, *Porpoises among the Whales: Small Navies in Asia and the Pacific*, East-West Center (1994) 3.

33 Charles W. Koburger, *Narrow Seas, Small Navies, and Fat Merchantmen. Naval Strategies for the 1990s* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1990) 58.

34 D.C.L. Schoonoord, *Pugno pro patria: de Koninklijke Marine tijdens de Koude Oorlog* (Franeker, Van Wijnen, 2012) 133.

35 Jan Willem Honig, *Defense policy in the North Atlantic Alliance: the case of the Netherlands* (Westport, CN, [etc.], Praeger, 1993) 202-3.

36 Rolf Tamnes, 'Major Coastal State - Small Naval Power: Norway's Cold War Policy and Strategy', in *Navies in Northern Waters, 1721-2000*, ed. Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen (London, Frank Cass, 2004) 235-36.

37 Timothy Choi, 'Danish naval evolution in the Arctic. Developments through the unipolar moment', in *Navies in multipolar worlds. From the Age of Sail to the Present*, ed. Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson (London, Routledge, 2021) 185.

38 Anselm J. van der Peet, *Out-of-Area. De Koninklijke Marine en multinationale vlootoperaties, 1945-2001* (Franeker, Uitgeverij Van Wijnen, 2016) 125-6.

39 Geoffrey Till, 'Preface', in *Navies in Northern Waters, 1721-2000*, ed. Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen (London, Frank Cass, 2004) vii-viii.

ate each mission in some way.⁴⁰ Prioritizing is not solely determined by the military means at one's disposal, but just as much by strategic circumstances and, put more broadly, the type of maritime nation a state is or perceives itself to be.

Writing at the end of the Cold War, James Cable remarked that 'few countries are sufficiently confident of the security of their own coasts or have enough important interests beyond their regional sea to afford the luxury of an ocean-going navy' which would provide European governments a larger role in global affairs than their own region affords.⁴¹ Nowadays, with the maritime centre of gravity shifting to the Indo-Pacific, the small seapower state, as I will argue, no longer considers such a force a luxury but perhaps rather a necessity. There is, however, a set of small maritime nations that prioritize their own region because their economic, political, and historic relationship with the sea is, to a larger degree, determined by their coastal waters. This is encapsulated in the theory of the coastal state by Jacob Borresen.

His 1994 article 'The Seapower of the Coastal State' provides one of the most interesting perspectives on small naval power. Borresen contests the until then prevalent notion that coastal states resort to limited force-projection navies and traditional 'strategies of the weak' solely because of limited means. Instead, complementary to Till's view that small navies 'can be governed by different ideas', Borresen states that the coastal state can either lack the ability or the *will* to maintain a 'blue water' navy. For the coastal state it can be a political choice to limit its naval capabilities to the waters that make up its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which, as for instance the case of Borresen's native Norway shows, can be quite large by itself as well as constituting a major source of its generated wealth. Coastal states do not compete with the global naval powers on the high seas, nor do they wish to do so.⁴² 'Coastal navies should not be modelled on the navies of the [global] naval powers', for, as Borresen writes, their sea power has a primarily defensive purpose. The navy of the coastal state is not

necessarily inferior to that of the naval powers that 'rule the high seas' but rather *different*.⁴³ The fundamental precept of Borresen's theory is that coastal states have access to and control over their own coastal waters. A state cannot be a coastal state if the integrity of its territorial waters depends on the goodwill of others.

Borresen's theory showed a different path for smaller maritime nations to apply their sea power in a way in line with their political and strategic culture, their geography and geopolitical situation, as well as one that best serves their national security and economic interests.⁴⁴ His article was published, however, when the 'post-Mahanian' epoch, following the demise of the Soviet Union, was about to start. The essence of the coastal state navy, as one confined to local waters where it can exist as a credible coastal deterrent force, seemed to have lost its relevance. After all, to reverse Cable's remark: once you are sufficiently confident of the security of your own coast you can afford the luxury of an ocean-going navy. Or else risk becoming seen by politicians and taxpayers as a glorified (and expensive) coast guard. Borresen did not rule out the coastal state's participation in 'out-of-area' operations, but when its navy does, for instance to demonstrate the government's willingness to burden-sharing, it remains realistic about what its navy can and cannot do. It was not the projection of power that mattered, but the projection of stability. Such a form of projection beyond one's own coastal waters did not necessarily require 'queens' or 'bishops', but could also be performed by 'pawns'. Prioritizing the order of effect over the order of battle, the latter as the guiding principle in many a naval

40 Harold Kearsley, *Maritime Power and the Twenty First Century* (Dartmouth, Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1992) 108-9.

41 James Cable, *Navies in Violent Peace* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989) 104.

42 Jacob Borresen, 'The seapower of the coastal state', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 17 (1994) (1) 149-50.

43 Borresen, 'The seapower of the coastal state', 174.

44 Jacob Borresen, 'Coastal Power: The Sea Power of the Coastal State and the Management of Maritime Resources', in *Navies in Northern Waters, 1721-2000*, ed. Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen (London, Frank Cass, 2004) 249.

typology, at least allowed smaller navies – including those of the coastal state – to transcend the perception of ‘weakness’ or ‘inferiority’ as it has been shaped in decades of naval literature written from the perspective of large naval powers.

The Small Seapower State

Borresen’s theory of the coastal state offered a more holistic approach to naval power, something which, with the re-emergence of peer competitors at sea, might become relevant again. But while the notion of the coastal state applies to many small naval powers, not all will fit in this framework. If it was the only one that encapsulates small naval power, we would be back at Reynolds’ simplistic typology and overlook the fact that small naval powers can also be maritime nations with global maritime interests exceeding even those of the states we tend to denominate as large naval powers based on their military capabilities.

That is not to say that the maritime interests of the coastal state are confined only to its coastal waters. During the 20th century Norway ranked as an important shipping nation and Maersk-Möller, as one of the world’s largest shipping companies, still resides in Denmark. When global trade flows are disrupted, as happened during the Suez Canal obstruction in 2021, the coastal states are naturally also affected. But the first to feel the pain are global trade hubs like Rotterdam. While Oslo and Aarhus are gateways to their respective countries, Rotterdam, however, serves as a gateway to Europe and fulfils a pivotal role in the global economy. To the Netherlands this constitutes an enormous strategic asset. With container ships becoming ever bigger, the number of ports capable of handling them have become less. As a result,

seaborne trade flows are increasingly concentrated.⁴⁵ Rotterdam is one of the few European ports to have survived this ‘shakeout’ and thrived. The dredging of the ‘Tweede Maasvlakte’ and the expansion of the port further into the North Sea has highlighted as it were the discrepancy between Dutch maritime and naval power, since simultaneously, the number of (operational) naval vessels moored off the Dutch naval port of Den Helder has only decreased even further.

Going back to the original interpretation of a thalassokratia as a state dominated by the sea and not necessarily one with a large navy, then today’s small seapower state shares many of its characteristics. It may not deliberately cultivate a seapower identity which, as Lambert has argued, was a defining feature of the past great seapowers, but the small seapower state still collects and combines the trades of several areas at a single concentrated maritime hub, not through (military) control of the sea or by denying its enemies access to them, as hegemonic sea powers have done throughout history, but by utilizing the economic advantages of the sea. For Lambert it is fifth-century BC Athens as the example par excellence for subsequent seapower states – the Athens of Themistocles and Pericles, imperialistic and hegemonic – that serves as the archetypal seapower state. If so, then the small seapower state had its genesis in the Athens that emerged after its defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). Despite the loss of its trireme fleet in the climactic naval battle of the war, the city of Athens retained its wider maritime potential. There was still a commercial class, there were still naval architects, shipbuilders, sailors, rowers, and financiers to help foster a maritime revival during the following century. One not based on the trireme, but as a commercial thalassocracy.

Our interpretation of maritime potential today has, of course, changed markedly. But for centuries the logic was seen as a vicious circle, whereby maritime trade begets maritime resources, which in turn funds greater naval strength, leading to maritime supremacy, which then protects maritime trade.⁴⁶ While not the

45 Daniel Coulter, ‘Globalization of Maritime Commerce: The Rise of Hub Ports’, in *Globalization and Maritime Power*, ed. Sam J. Tangredi (Washington, NDU Press, 2002) 133.

46 Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: a guide for the twenty-first century*, Second edition (London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009) 34.

first, Mahan is arguably the best-known author to explicate this historically intricate link between seaborne commerce and the development of sea power. Since then, however, the synergetic link has weakened and is today all but broken. Maritime potential no longer automatically translates into naval capabilities. The days when mid-19th century London could purchase naval primacy with an annual budget of some 4 million pounds(!) are gone.⁴⁷ Britain's financial and commercial strength compensated for its relative small population and geographic size. And the raw materials it lacked in times of war could be accumulated overseas under the protection of the Royal Navy. Mahan assumed these advantages conferred on sea powers to be unchanging, but failed to foresee the emergence of continent-sized, densely-populated superpowers with the industrial and technological wherewithal that could undermine the historic strategic leverage of sea powers. 'Britain could not again become mistress of the seas', since, as Halford Mackinder wrote, 'much depended on the maintenance of a lead won under earlier conditions'.⁴⁸ Lambert's assertion that it is the weakened link between the seapower states and the sea which has enabled continental powers to compete, does not alter the long-term geopolitical (maritime) advantages conferred on these continent-sized powers like the United States and China. Twenty-first century naval power rests on more than access to the proverbial naval stores of timber and hemp or the abundance of sailors to crew men-of-war. State-of-the-art warships are nowadays amongst the most complex weapon systems, the manufacturing of which depends on much more than just a shipbuilding industry. Economic sectors traditionally not regarded as part of a nation's maritime potential have become just as vital in developing naval power. Today, even the world's great powers find it difficult to completely rely on domestic suppliers. No amount of cultivated 'seapower identity' can overcome such deficiencies.

The problem is the tendency to view a state's maritime potential or maritime economy only through the lens of its military utility. Seen that way, there are indeed no longer any 'seapower great powers'. But in the age of geo-economics, a

state's maritime economy should be regarded as a source of strategic leverage in and of itself. Granted, the nature of maritime power has become very diffuse, perhaps best exemplified by the world's largest vessel in terms of total tonnage: the *Pioneering Spirit*. Designed in-house by the Dutch (but Swiss-based) offshore company Allseas, this gargantuan construction vessel capable of installing record-weight subsea pipelines was built almost entirely on the wharf of the South Korean company Daewoo. Once completed in 2015, the *Pioneering Spirit* was registered in Malta and assumed operations as an asset of an offshore company officially headquartered in land-locked Switzerland. Final assembly did take place in Rotterdam and, as one of the few ports able to accommodate a vessel this size, it still frequently docks at the Dutch port. But to whose 'maritime potential', if at all, does such a ship contribute? In the days of Mahan's writing, when shipping and shipyards were still in the minds of national policy-makers, the answer would have been much more straightforward. Shipping companies and trading firms were still port-bound and integral to a maritime city's identity. Today, Hapag-Lloyd in Hamburg is still one such exception, but like Maersk-Möller, these multinational companies earn their revenue servicing global trade hubs like Rotterdam, not necessarily their own domestic trade nodes. Shell may have moved its headquarters to London (and lost its predicate 'Royal Dutch' in the process), it is still one of the driving forces behind Rotterdam's hydrogen ambitions to help the port retain its position as one of the premier energy hubs. And while some of the world's largest commodity traders have a large physical presence in Rotterdam, they are a far cry from Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. Reports such as 'The Leading Maritime Cities of the World', highlight this diffuse character of

47 Bernard Brodie, *Sea power in the Machine Age* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1943) 119.

48 Halford Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas* (Oxford, 1925) 358.

maritime power.⁴⁹ For example, even though London's wharves now 'house costly apartments or indifferent restaurants', the City still ranks third, mainly because of its leading position in maritime finance and law.⁵⁰ And, notwithstanding the rhetoric of 'Global Britain', Britain has seen its share of global exports of goods dwindle to 2.3% of the world's total in 2021. Well below the 3.8% of the Netherlands and even less than Belgium's share of 2.4% – countries that can arguably make a more rightful claim as global maritime trading nations.⁵¹

When we translate the understanding of a commercial thalassocracy to what it means to be one in the 21st century, then such a state is still able to concentrate the produce and resources from wide geographic areas in a way that confers this global trade hub economic advantages disproportionate to its demographic and geographic size. The small seapower state, located near high-volume trade nodes, is well positioned to connect itself to new emerging markets and maritime networks. The coastal state does not remain unaffected by what happens outside its waters – hardly any country is entirely self-sufficient – but its role in global trade is not as pivotal as that of the small seapower state, whose hub function may be compared to that of a maritime 'chokepoint'. It will therefore also be disproportionately affected when seaborne commerce is disrupted. In the case of the 2021 obstruction of the Suez Canal, it was coincidentally a Dutch company, Boskalis, that helped free this crucial maritime highway. This too is maritime power.

It does not mean that the small seapower state can solely rely on the commercial aspects of its sea power. Militarily it is, however, much like the coastal state, limited in the naval means it can bring to bear. Like the coastal state, it is also aware of those limitations. They both do not

challenge the naval power(s) that rule(s) the sea. But whereas in the theory of the coastal state the naval presence is basically limited to that of the coastal waters because these are either large or contain resources vital to the state's wealth and security, the small seapower state, on the other hand, has a higher degree of (geopolitical) insularity and feels secure in its coastal waters. It therefore has the luxury to afford itself greater 'surplus' capacity for operations in out-of-area environments, including – and perhaps especially – in a 'Mahanian' security environment. Its insularity ensures that such deployments are not necessarily conditional on the security of its coastal waters. That does not mean those waters are risk-free but the small seapower state should, at least in theory, have an inverse prioritization compared to that of the coastal state and leave the monitoring of its coastal waters preferably to, for instance, its coast guard. Allowing itself greater 'surplus' capacity is a stance in line with the economic, political, cultural, and historic relationship the small seapower state has with the sea. While it cannot do so as a 'seapower great power', it does not mean it lacks agency or that its (global) deployments are inconsequential.

The symbolic discrepancy between the global trade hub Rotterdam and the limited naval capabilities moored off Den Helder is still large, but it is precisely because of the importance as well as vulnerability of the former that the small seapower state should think differently about the nature and role of its sea power.

Conclusion: the Small Seapower State as a Frontier State?

In 2021, the Dutch frigate Zr.Mr. Evertsen was part of a British-led Carrier Strike Group that deployed in the Indo-Pacific, intended, amongst other things, to stress the importance of freedom of navigation in the waters that are the hotbed of renewed navalism. A year later, the Dutch Minister of Defence indicated her intention for a Dutch naval deployment to the Indo-Pacific once every two years to communicate the Dutch intent to contribute in safeguard-

49 *The Leading Maritime Cities of the World 2022*, Menon Economics (2023).

50 Rose George, *Ninety Percent of Everything* (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2013) 5.

51 'Evolution of the world's 25 top trading nations', UNCTAD. See: <https://unctad.org/topic/trade-analysis/chart-10-may-2021>.

ing free shipping.⁵² The frigate Zr.Mr. Tromp is to be sent to the Indo-Pacific in 2024. In an indirect way this is the ‘flag’ following the state’s overseas economic interests. When investment values in a region increase and trade volumes become greater, it is logical that such a region is accorded a higher foreign policy priority. Trade is the barometer of a state’s strategic interests, perhaps especially so in the case of the small seapower state.⁵³ And it is the small seapower state’s navy that is, albeit in a modest capacity, an instrument of such policy. The fact that it was a Dutch frigate and not a Norwegian or Danish vessel accompanying the Carrier Strike Group, is indicative for how the Netherlands still perceives itself and its wider role in the world. The thinking, as expressed in the 1960s, to avoid slipping ‘unnoticed into a too narrow, local navy’, is still predominant. Perhaps not as outspoken, but there is still the belief that this provides the Netherlands a larger role in global affairs than its own region affords. The Dutch pivotal hub function in global trade also justifies this role much more than during the years following the loss of its ‘empire’.

This intent to deploy on a regular basis to the Indo-Pacific will nevertheless require the utmost of Dutch naval ‘surplus’ capacity. As Dutch means may not match the stated aspirations, especially so now that we have moved on from the ‘post-Mahanian’ era including (hybrid) threats to the small seapower state’s own coastal waters. This is not new, but unlike during the Cold War period the sea has become more than merely a ‘highway’. The industrialization of coastal waters has given territorial seas an intrinsic value unthinkable in the days of Mahan. The development of offshore windfarms, extensive pipeline networks, and seabed telecommunication cables converging on the Dutch coast have made the protection of the North Sea a critical national interest in itself. Whilst these developments reinforce the hub function of the Netherlands as a small seapower state and, moreover, made the economic processes at sea even more vital to its economy, it has also given the Netherlands some characteristics similar to that of the coastal state. This was reinforced when, a little over a year after the stated inten-

tion to regularly deploy naval assets to the Indo-Pacific, the Dutch Minister of Defence announced that the Dutch navy was to gain a permanent task in securing the Dutch part of the North Sea.⁵⁴ Russian ‘incursions’ questioned relying solely on the Coast Guard. A report of the Dutch think tank HCSS on the high value of the North Sea aptly described the Netherlands as a ‘front-line state’.⁵⁵

This leaves the Netherlands, as a small seapower state, somewhat in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, its geopolitical insularity has improved substantially. As late as 1989 the possible frontline was on the north German plains; today it has shifted to the Baltic states and, as of 2023, to the Russo-Finnish border. Yet simultaneously, the intrinsic value of its small but economically critical EEZ – almost as an extension of the land – has made the Netherlands a maritime frontier (coastal) state which could in the future hamper Dutch naval ‘surplus’ capacity to act as a small seapower state. Especially when we consider that only a handful of Russian oceanographic ‘spy’ ships in the North Sea can theoretically absorb the Dutch ‘surplus’ naval means. One of the precepts of Borresen’s theory of the coastal state is that you cannot be one when the integrity of your territorial waters depends on the goodwill of others. Without diminishing the importance of safeguarding the coastal waters, it is the question whether these Russian ‘incursions’ constitute enough of a ‘breach’ of integrity to merit a trade-off in capabilities best suited for the role and maritime interests of the small

52 ‘Mogelijk vaker marineschip naar Indo-Pacific’, *Defensie.nl*, 13 June 2022. See: <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/06/13/mogelijk-vaker-marineschip-naar-indo-pacific>.

53 Michael P. Gerace, ‘State Interests, Military Power and International Commerce: Some Cross-national Evidence’, *Geopolitics* 5 (2000) (1) 111.

54 ‘Defensie krijgt grotere rol bij bescherming infrastructuur Noordzee’, *Rijksoverheid.nl*, 7 July 2023. See: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/07/07/defensie-krijgt-grotere-rol-bij-bescherming-infrastructuur-noordzee>.

55 Frank Bekkers (et al.), *The High Value of the North Sea*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (The Hague, 2021) 8.

seapower state in exchange for gaining the naval characteristics associated with that of the coastal state.

'Seablindness' has become quite a buzzword, and I for one am also guilty of including it in this article. The fact that threats to the maritime 'frontier' or a state's overseas maritime interests are not as tangible as the amassment of armies along the Ukrainian border in the weeks preceding the Russian invasion, makes it more difficult finding a 'cure' for this 'infliction'. Cato once showed a Tunisian fig in the Roman Senate to underline that the (unsubstantiated) Carthaginian maritime threat was only a few days sailing away. Often mentioned today is the

need for narratives to reinforce this lost link between the state and the sea. This is true, but such a narrative should take into account the inherent differences between the types of maritime states. For while small navies share many similar challenges, capacity-driven accounts of sea power do fail, however, in explaining the state's relationship with the sea and how this determines its navy's role and (future) fleet composition. The notion of the small seapower state offers one such narrative. This is important because, as one Dutch historian once warned, the navy could in the future resemble 'greenhouse plants': politically vulnerable because it is no longer rooted in a deep layer of 'maritime humus'.⁵⁶ ■

56 G. Teitler, 'Maritieme Strategie', in *Militaire Strategie*, ed. G. Teitler (Amsterdam, Mets & Schilt, 2002) 109.