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The Relationship Between Defense Policy, Geopolitical Stability, and International Maritime Security

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Abstract

The oceans carry most of the world's trade, connect distant economies, and form the arena in which major powers compete and cooperate. This article examines the relationship among defence policy, geopolitical stability, and international maritime security. It argues that these three elements are mutually dependent. Defence policy shapes how states build and employ naval and maritime forces, geopolitical conditions determine whether those forces are used to compete or to cooperate, and the state of maritime security, in turn, influences the stability of the wider international system. Drawing on classical sea power theory, international relations scholarship, and contemporary maritime security studies, the analysis reviews theoretical perspectives, the formulation of maritime strategy, maritime flashpoints, the role of chokepoints and trade routes, alliances and naval diplomacy, legal and institutional frameworks, and non traditional threats. The study finds that stability is strengthened when defence policies are transparent, proportionate, and anchored in international law, and when states cooperate to protect shared sea lanes, but that mutual suspicion, security dilemmas, and unresolved disputes can turn maritime space into a source of tension. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at balancing deterrence with reassurance and at sustaining cooperative maritime governance.

Keywords: defence policy, geopolitical stability, maritime security, sea power, naval diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

History repeatedly shows that control of the sea shapes the fortunes of states. Empires have risen on the strength of their navies and commerce, and disputes over maritime access and resources have contributed to wars. In the contemporary era, the maritime domain remains central. Merchant ships carry the great majority of world trade by volume, undersea cables carry most international data, and offshore areas supply energy and food. Any disruption to the order at sea has consequences for the global economy and for the security of states far from the scene. Defence policy is the means by which governments decide what armed forces to maintain, what roles to assign them, and how to relate them to

diplomacy and economic policy. In maritime terms, it covers decisions on fleet size and composition, basing, alliances, and the balance between war fighting and constabulary functions. These decisions are not made in isolation. They respond to the strategic environment, including the intentions and capabilities of other states, and they also help to shape that environment by signalling resolve or provoking counter measures. Geopolitical stability refers to a condition in which major powers and regional actors expect existing arrangements to persist and manage their disputes without large scale violence. Stability is not the absence of competition but a situation in which competition is bounded by shared rules, mutual restraint, and credible deterrence. International maritime security, for its part, is the condition in which the seas can be used safely and lawfully by all, free from threats such as piracy, trafficking, coercion, and interstate conflict. This article explores how these three elements interact. It proceeds through nine thematic sections addressing conceptual linkages, theoretical perspectives, defence policy and maritime strategy, geopolitical flashpoints, chokepoints and trade, alliances and naval diplomacy, international law and institutions, non traditional threats, and policy implications. A summary and a list of references follow.

Conceptual Linkages Among Defence Policy, Stability, and Maritime Security:

The three concepts form a loop of mutual influence. Defence policy affects stability because the size, posture, and behaviour of a state's forces change the calculations of others. A navy that is seen as defensive and transparent can reassure neighbours, while one perceived as aggressive may trigger arms competition. Stability in turn affects defence policy, because states that feel secure can reduce spending or redirect forces toward cooperative tasks, while those that feel threatened tend to build capabilities and seek allies. Maritime security sits between the two. Bueger notes that the notion of maritime security links national security, marine safety, the blue economy, and resilience, which implies that it responds to both traditional state rivalry and non traditional threats (Bueger, 2015). A secure maritime environment supports trade and prosperity, which strengthen the foundations of stability. Conversely, a disrupted maritime environment, whether through piracy, blockade, or conflict, can undermine economies and heighten tension Booth's account of the roles of navies as military, diplomatic, and policing instruments provides a useful bridge among the concepts (Booth, 1977). Navies serve defence policy by deterring and fighting, serve diplomacy by showing presence and building relationships, and serve maritime security by maintaining order at sea. How a state balances these roles reveals its strategic priorities and affects how others interpret its intentions. Understanding these linkages helps avoid two errors. One is to treat maritime security as a purely technical matter of law enforcement, ignoring its political context. The other is to treat naval power purely as an instrument of competition, ignoring its contribution to the common good. Stable orders depend on recognising both dimensions.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sea Power and International Order:

Classical theorists placed sea power at the centre of national strength. Mahan argued that command of the sea, built on commerce, shipping, and bases, was decisive in the rise of great powers, and that a state's prosperity depended on its ability to protect maritime trade (Mahan, 1890). Corbett offered a complementary view, emphasising that the purpose of naval power is to secure the use of the sea for one's own communications and to deny it to the enemy, in support of wider national objectives rather than as an end in itself (Corbett, 1911). International relations theory provides further lenses. Realists such as Waltz argued that in an anarchic international system, states seek security and tend to balance against power, which can lead to cycles of competition (Waltz, 1979). Mearsheimer takes a more pessimistic view, contending that great powers seek to maximise their relative power and, where possible, regional hegemony, which implies persistent rivalry (Mearsheimer, 2001). On this reading, maritime competition is a natural consequence of the structure of the system. Jervis introduced the notion of the security dilemma, in which measures taken by one state to increase its own security reduce the security of others, who respond in kind, leaving all worse off. He argued that the severity of the dilemma depends on whether defensive and offensive postures can be distinguished and on whether defence has an advantage over offence (Jervis, 1978). Maritime forces are inherently ambiguous, since ships that can protect trade can also project power, which makes the security dilemma particularly acute at sea. Posen argued that the United States has enjoyed command of the commons, meaning dominance over sea, air, and space, which has underpinned its global military reach and the stability of the international system as it has operated (Posen, 2003). Others contend that this dominance is being eroded by the spread of advanced sensors and missiles, which makes access contested. Together, these perspectives show that maritime order depends on the distribution of power and on the way states interpret each other's behaviour.

Defence Policy Formulation and Maritime Strategy:

Defence policy is formulated through a process in which national interests are defined, threats are assessed, and resources are allocated. Maritime strategy translates this policy into a plan for the use of naval and other maritime forces. It addresses questions such as which sea areas matter most, what level of control is needed, which missions take priority, and how to cooperate with allies and civil agencies. Till emphasises that contemporary sea power serves multiple purposes, including good order at sea, the projection of power ashore, and the protection of the global system

of trade and communication (Till, 2018). A coherent maritime strategy must therefore integrate high end defence tasks with constabulary and diplomatic roles. States that focus only on war fighting may neglect the everyday tasks that sustain order, while those that focus only on policing may lack the capability to deter major threats. Strategy is also shaped by geography and economics. Island and archipelagic states depend on maritime links, while continental powers weigh investment in land forces against investment in navies. Shipbuilding capacity, technological base, and budget constraints influence the feasible options. Because naval platforms take years to build and last for decades, today's choices shape the strategic position of the next generation. Transparency and consistency of policy matter for stability. Published strategies, defence white papers, and regular dialogue allow others to understand intentions and reduce the risk of misperception. Conversely, ambiguity and abrupt shifts can create uncertainty. Kaplan's discussion of the Indian Ocean as an emerging centre of strategic competition illustrates how national maritime policies, such as the development of ports, naval bases, and fleets, are watched closely by neighbours and rivals, and how they can feed perceptions of encirclement or rivalry (Kaplan, 2010).

Geopolitical Competition and Maritime Flashpoints:

Maritime space contains several areas where competing claims and strategic rivalry generate tension. Disputes over islands, reefs, and exclusive economic zones are prominent, since sovereignty claims bring control over fisheries, hydrocarbons, and strategic position. Where several states claim overlapping areas, routine activities such as fishing, surveying, and patrolling can lead to confrontations. Yoshihara and Holmes examined the growth of Chinese maritime power and analysed how it interacts with United States maritime strategy, arguing that the development of capabilities to deny or complicate access in nearby seas raises the stakes of competition and affects the confidence of regional states (Yoshihara and Holmes, 2010). Whether one accepts their interpretation, their analysis shows how defence policies in one state shape the strategic planning of others and can feed a competitive dynamic. Flashpoints also arise from the interplay of military and civil actors. Coast guards, maritime militias, and fishing fleets can be used to assert claims below the threshold of armed conflict, a practice sometimes described as grey zone activity. Such methods allow states to press claims while avoiding open war, but they can also lead to accidents and escalation, especially where rules of engagement are unclear. Measures to manage these risks include communication channels between operational forces, agreed procedures for unplanned encounters, and diplomatic processes for resolving or shelving disputes. Jervis's analysis suggests that the ability to distinguish defensive from offensive postures, through transparency and restraint, can mitigate the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978). Stability in contested waters depends on such practical arrangements as much as on the balance of power.

Maritime Chokepoints and Global Trade Stability:

A small number of narrow passages concentrate a large share of maritime traffic. Straits and canals connecting oceans and seas funnel energy shipments and containerised cargo through confined waters, where traffic is dense and navigation is constrained. Because alternatives are often long and costly, disruption at a chokepoint can ripple through energy markets, supply chains, and prices worldwide. Mahan recognised the strategic importance of positions that command routes of commerce, and his emphasis on bases and sea lines of communication remains relevant to modern chokepoints (Mahan, 1890). Kaplan's analysis of the Indian Ocean highlights how the arc of sea lanes from the Middle East to East Asia gives particular weight to the straits at either end, and how the interests of consumers, producers, and transit states converge there (Kaplan, 2010). States dependent on imported energy and exported goods have a strong interest in keeping these passages open, which provides a basis for cooperation as well as competition. The security of chokepoints depends on several factors. Coastal states bear responsibility for safety, navigation aids, and law enforcement within their waters, and user states often assist through capacity building and combined patrols. Naval presence deters interference and reassures commercial operators. Insurance markets also play a role, since perceived risk raises premiums and can deter shipping even in the absence of attack. Chokepoints can also be levers of coercion. A state able to threaten closure, whether through military means, mines, or the harassment of shipping, can exert pressure on others. This potential is one reason that defence policies of many states emphasise freedom of navigation and the ability to keep key passages open. The figure below presents an illustrative comparison of the relative strategic exposure of several well known maritime passages, expressed on a standardised index from zero to one hundred. The values are stylised to show relative magnitude and should not be read as measured data.

Alliances, Naval Diplomacy, and Confidence Building:

Alliances and partnerships multiply the effect of national maritime forces. They allow states to share the burden of patrolling, to pool intelligence, to coordinate logistics, and to present a united front in deterrence. Combined exercises build interoperability, and port access arrangements extend the reach of participating navies. For smaller states, association with larger partners can provide security that they could not generate alone. Naval diplomacy uses ships and maritime forces to pursue political objectives short of war. Booth distinguished the diplomatic role of navies, which includes showing the flag, building relationships, offering assistance, and signalling commitment, from their military

and policing roles (Booth, 1977). Port visits, disaster relief, goodwill exercises, and joint training are all instruments of this role. When employed with care, they strengthen trust and enlarge the circle of cooperating states. The same instruments can also signal resolve or coercion. A carrier deployment or a show of force near a disputed area conveys a message that may reassure allies but alarm rivals. Because maritime forces are mobile and visible, they are well suited to such signalling, yet ambiguity can lead to miscalculation. Posen's argument about the role of command of the commons in supporting alliance commitments illustrates how naval and air dominance can underpin credibility but can also be interpreted by others as a threat to their own freedom of action (Posen, 2003). Confidence building measures help to manage these risks. They include notification of major exercises, hotlines between military leaders, codes of conduct for unplanned encounters, and exchanges of personnel and information. Jervis argued that cooperation under the security dilemma is more likely when states can signal defensive intent and when the costs of misunderstanding are reduced (Jervis, 1978). Practical measures that make behaviour predictable are therefore a core element of maritime stability.

International Law and Institutions in Maritime Governance:

The legal order of the oceans provides the framework within which defence policy and maritime security operate. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea defines maritime zones and the rights and duties of coastal and flag states, guarantees freedom of navigation on the high seas and transit through international straits, and establishes procedures for settling disputes (United Nations, 1982). It is often described as a constitution for the oceans, and its broad acceptance gives states a shared reference point. Law contributes to stability by making behaviour predictable and by offering peaceful ways to resolve disagreements. Arbitration and adjudication allow disputes over boundaries and rights to be settled by neutral bodies, reducing the temptation to use force. Compliance, however, depends on political will, and states differ in their interpretations of certain provisions, such as the rights of foreign military activities in exclusive economic zones. Such differences can generate friction even among states that accept the convention. International and regional organisations add to the governance structure. The International Maritime Organization sets standards for safety, security, and environmental protection in shipping. Regional bodies facilitate dialogue on maritime issues, coordinate patrols, and develop codes of conduct. Specialised arrangements address piracy, fisheries, and pollution. Bueger observes that maritime security is a field in which many actors, including states, international organisations, and private industry, interact, so effective governance requires coordination among them (Bueger, 2015). The legitimacy of defence policy is strengthened when it is grounded in law. States that exercise rights consistently, accept constraints, and use legal channels to resolve disputes reinforce norms that benefit all users of the sea. Conversely, selective or opportunistic interpretation of the law can erode confidence and encourage others to follow suit, weakening the order on which stability depends.

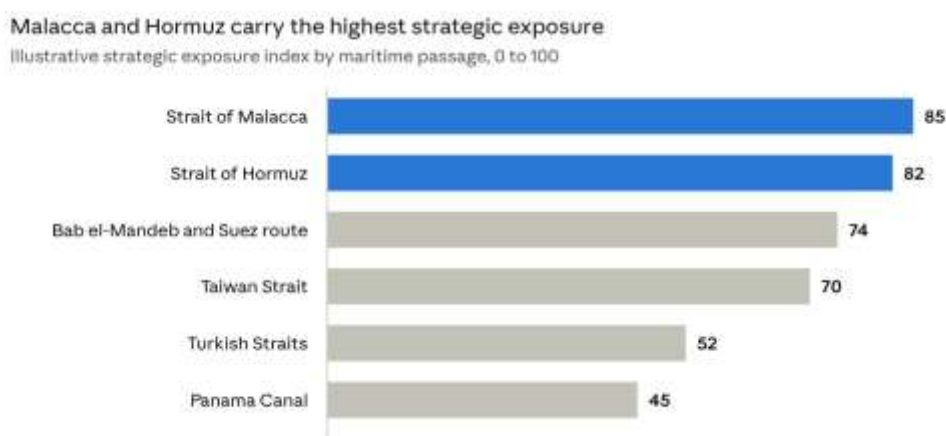
Non-Traditional Threats and Cooperative Security:

Beyond state rivalry, maritime security is challenged by threats that do not fit the pattern of interstate competition. Piracy and armed robbery, trafficking in drugs, arms, and persons, illegal fishing, terrorism, environmental disasters, and the effects of climate change all affect the safe use of the sea. These threats are transnational and often arise from weak governance, poverty, and conflict ashore, which means that naval force alone cannot resolve them. They nevertheless have strategic significance. Disruption of shipping raises costs for trade, illicit flows finance armed groups, and illegal fishing undermines food security and fuels grievances. When states fail to address such problems collectively, instability can spread across regions. Conversely, cooperation against shared threats can build habits of collaboration that spill over into other areas. Till notes that the modern use of sea power includes the maintenance of good order at sea, which entails cooperative action against common challenges (Till, 2018). Multinational operations against piracy, joint patrols against trafficking, and shared surveillance networks illustrate how navies of states with differing interests can work together. Such cooperation is easier when threats are clearly shared and when mechanisms for coordination exist. Cooperative security has limits. States may hesitate to share information that reveals capabilities, may disagree about jurisdiction, and may differ in their priorities. Mearsheimer's pessimism about cooperation among great powers suggests that collaboration is most likely where interests align and where it does not threaten relative position (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nonetheless, cooperation on non traditional threats offers a pathway for building trust even among rivals, provided it is framed around mutual benefit.

Policy Implications and Future Directions:

Several policy implications follow from the analysis. First, defence policy should balance deterrence with reassurance. Maintaining credible capabilities is necessary, but transparency about intentions, proportionality in force posture, and engagement with neighbours help to avoid unnecessary escalation. Corbett's view that naval power serves wider national objectives rather than being an end in itself supports policies that integrate military, diplomatic, and economic instruments (Corbett, 1911). Second, states should anchor their maritime conduct in international law, using established legal mechanisms to settle disputes and applying rules consistently. Third, they should invest in cooperative

frameworks, including information sharing, combined exercises, and communication channels, which reduce the risk of misunderstanding. Fourth, they should protect chokepoints and sea lanes through partnerships among coastal and user states, combining capacity building with presence and diplomacy. Fifth, defence planners should recognise the interconnection between traditional and non traditional threats and develop integrated approaches that involve navies, coast guards, civil agencies, and international partners. Sixth, they should prepare for emerging challenges, including the militarisation of new technologies, the security of undersea infrastructure, and the effects of climate change on coastlines, resources, and migration. Future research should examine how shifts in the distribution of power affect maritime order, how grey zone tactics can be deterred without escalation, and how cooperative arrangements can be sustained when relations between major powers deteriorate. Comparative study of regional experiences would help identify practices that reduce tension and strengthen resilience. The central lesson is that defence policy, geopolitical stability, and maritime security are interdependent, and that wise policy treats them as parts of one system.



Summary:

This article has examined the relationship among defence policy, geopolitical stability, and international maritime security. It has argued that these elements form a loop of mutual influence in which the design and behaviour of maritime forces shape the expectations of other states, the strategic environment shapes defence choices, and the condition of the seas affects the stability of the wider system. Classical and contemporary theory highlight both the competitive logic of sea power and the possibility of cooperation under conditions of transparency and shared interest. Flashpoints, chokepoints, and grey zone activity illustrate where tension arises, while alliances, naval diplomacy, confidence building, international law, and cooperation against non traditional threats offer ways to manage it. Policies that balance deterrence with reassurance, uphold legal norms, and sustain cooperative governance are most likely to preserve stability and keep the oceans open for all.

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