12 Soviet Maritime Power

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We, as a nation, have travelled through a period of misguided unconcern about maritime matters. I can only reflect that the populace of our country, which comparatively rarely these days travels by sea – except to cross the Channel or go silver-sea cruising – has largely forgotten about its dependence upon the oceans for our material needs and our standard of living. Indeed the immensity of the ocean, still infinitely impressive if you should happen to find yourself upon it, even in a large ship, together with the extraordinary power it can generate, and the opaqueness of its depths to systematic penetration by detection systems, is entirely lost on the air traveller. We Europeans seem to have been going through a period of ‘sea blindness’ – most inappropriately, for in East–West terms, Western Europe is, we should realise, a subcontinental island – but I really do believe that the scales are at length beginning to fall away.

I have alluded to the strategic importance of the ocean as a medium for the transport of goods and resources. It is as well to remind ourselves of its importance not just as a medium, but as a provider of goods and – increasingly important – raw materials as well as sources of energy. Thus it provides not only a means by which maritime power itself can be deployed, in a manner well understood for centuries by seafaring nations, but it is also increasingly a victim of resource competition – and indeed abuse. The relatively recent international appreciation of all this has found expression in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and I am indebted to Dr Ken Booth, Department of International Politics, University College of Wales, for questioning whether we yet appreciate fully the implications of the Law of the Sea. He points to the increasing territorialisation of the sea and the degree to which the 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone will gain status as a national asset: a possession to be exploited, guarded and controlled. He writes:

When warships carry out supportive tasks in waters of associates their presence will have been explicitly welcomed . . . equally . . .

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the impact of a coercive gesture will be enhanced in waters in which warships have definitely not been welcomed. But since coercive naval diplomacy is designed to send a disturbing message to the coastal state or its associates, the changed status of the water in which the ships are sailing will strengthen the signal which it is hoped to transmit . . . rather than marking the end of naval diplomacy, the territorialisation of the sea will open up a new era . . .

For, as we have known for generations, naval forces, in what I would describe as their ‘presence’ role, may advance, withdraw, concentrate or disperse without violating frontiers or abandoning ground.

Study of the Soviet Navy and the way in which it has developed during the remarkable tenure of Admiral Gorshkov, tells me that the Russians have sustained, true to their character, a far more logical appreciation of these developments, and what they portend, than have we – despite our maritime heritage and what remains of its material and human expression. In the United States Naval Institute Proceedings, Professor Norman Friedman has, with illuminating perception analysed the steady development of the Soviet Navy – a process not always as imaginative as we might expect against our Western model, but remorseless with deliberation and intent. In Proceedings, Professor Friedman has defined a clear future need for the Soviet Union to turn to the worldwide resources of the sea, certainly to satisfy its own requirements when the need should arise – as it will – and quite possibly with a view also to limiting Western access. Since the Soviet Union is markedly more self-sufficient than the West for many key raw materials, and indeed a current exporter of energy, this is a very nasty prospect. President Brezhnev once reputedly remarked to the President of Somalia that ‘Our aim is to gain control of the two great treasure houses on which the West depends – the energy treasure house of the Persian Gulf and the mineral treasure house of central and southern Africa’. This remains an important factor in Soviet policy-making. Surely, Russia’s unequalled maritime exploration effort can hardly indicate lack of interest in seabed treasure worldwide.

It may be argued that power politics is the key to future Soviet foreign policy. I would not wish to argue with that. But we do know that for whatever reason – paranoic fear, aggrandisement, sheer momentum, or all three – some 14 per cent of the Soviet GNP is devoted to arms. Moreover the profound caution of the Soviet leadership cannot be taken as any lack of determination to achieve