7 A New Environment for Navies?

Maritime strategy has never been determined in a vacuum but always in a real world of constantly changing conditions. The works of the great naval writers like Mahan and Corbett can be seen, in fact, as a record of the way in which maritime strategy has adapted to those changes. But the extent of environmental change occasionally seemed to require something more drastic than mere adaptation; it seemed to call for some concepts to be totally discarded and others brought in to replace them. In modern conditions, the wisdom of past masters of the naval art might therefore be misleading, irrelevant or even downright dangerous, at least as a guide to present and future policy. This view has never been more widely held than it is now. Primarily it is a reaction to changes seen over the past generation or so in the political, economic, legal and technological environment of maritime strategy. The next step, therefore, must be briefly to consider these changes.

(a) The political environment (by Peter Nailor)

It is not so very long ago that applied force – which in its naval guise has so often been called ‘gunboat diplomacy’ – was a major instrument of foreign policy. This salience did not so much reflect a world that was inherently violent, as an international system composed of a smaller number of states than we have now, controlling or dominating a much larger number of dependencies, and having a range of military power which for the most part was traditional in its forms and purposes. The alternative methods of passing information, making threats or demonstrations, or inviting negotiation were relatively few in number; communications were less sure, less quick and in their public mode reached a much smaller audience; political and economic interdependence was less well developed and less complex; international conferences and organisations were less commonplace, and intelligence networks less pervasive. Subversion was less extensive, sport was less important, ballet companies stayed at home and neither the Eurovision song contest nor Radio Cairo existed. By comparison with the range of direct and indirect methods of influencing allies, adversaries and other
states which exists today, the international vocabulary of action was relatively limited; and the need to use it was relatively restricted to the mere handful of states who were in effect the managers of the system. The use, or the threat of the use, of force was a practical and legitimate tool of statecraft in a world where no one state was so powerful that its pretensions were incontestable.

But now, with all the changes in method that exist, and all the alternatives to military force that can be deployed, it seems that the utility, as well as the salience of applied force may have declined. Some of the most important reasons for this arise within domestic environments. The execution of an active foreign policy intention is affected by the confidence (and popularity, in democratic states) with which the objective of the intention is laid out. And confidence in turn is affected by the nature of the activity. Thus, in postwar Britain, it was more difficult for governments to take forceful initiatives in the period when it was a major objective of policy to concentrate British attention upon the European area and to relinquish mainland bases East of Suez. It was a period in which British power was on the decline; and there was very little doubt about the difficulties that faced Britain in trying to continue to find the resources that would have been needed 'to send a gunboat'. In something of the same way, the post-Vietnam depression created, for a time, a similar disinclination on the part of the United States.

From some points of view, there was no logical reason why this should be so; foreign policy, like other state interests, is carried on at a number of levels, and particular interests may need to be supported even when the specific activity is not, in a general way, consonant with the drift of policy. But however carefully general principles may be articulated, the style of foreign policy is reactive; even the most powerful states cannot control the international environment and there is a general need to be able to respond to developments which may be unwelcome, and even unforeseen. What was more important however was the mood of the time: post-imperial nausea was debilitating and, for whatever reason, overseas adventuring was less popular. The costs had been counted, and found to be distasteful either because they were high, or because they were now rather more evident than before. This was particularly the case for the diplomacy of applied force, which attracted some criticism because, although its costs were fairly explicit, the benefits which accrued were indeterminate.

The fact of the matter was that a series of local bases in various parts of the world had provided an opportunity to engage in 'gunboat diplomacy', meeting a practical need for short response time, logistic support and so on, but which were difficult to attribute, in terms of cost. Naval forces were based on port X, not to be on call to deal with unforeseen emergencies, but because port X was (or had in the past