



A Man-of-War is the Best Ambassador

European Naval Deployments as Costly and Useful Diplomatic Signals

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By the slow-moving standards of international diplomacy, the relatively recent term “Indo-Pacific” has gone viral. Conceived as a hopeful expansion of Japanese strategic aims and adopted by the Trump Administration for its increasingly confrontational approach to China, multiple European states have now developed “Indo-Pacific” strategies. Even the slow, consensus-driven European Union managed to publish an Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021.¹ Perhaps inevitably given the size and diversity of the region, the scope of the strategy is vast. The tools, however, are few. In its “Highlights of proposed EU actions,” the strategy lists more outcomes — “standards and regulations,” “Green Alliances and Partnerships,” and “digital partnerships” — rather than actions, such as “support to healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness.” Strikingly, one specific action mentioned in the document is “enhanced naval deployments.”²

Not surprisingly, given that the term is a mashup of two of the world's great oceans, these strategies emphasize the maritime domain. “Ocean governance” is one of the seven “EU priority areas.” Besides a brief nod to cybersecurity, the EU's priority area of “Security and Defence” focuses entirely on the sea. The Netherlands' strategy states that “EU must also not be afraid of realpolitik,” but power politics across two oceans without naval capability resembles building bricks without straw. “Low-end” humanitarian missions, while admirable, is probably less cost-effective than most foreign aid, without providing much additional strategic gain. Even an EU contribution to a security mission ostensibly requiring navies and coast guards — stopping IUU fishing — ventures into the absurd given the region's 230 million square kilometers of ocean. Nor is there much likelihood of firing shots in anger. Even if willing, these fleets are unlikely to survive long given the anti-access/area denial weapons arrayed against them.³

European states appear willing to expend scarce resources on “presence” missions. In 2020, at the Shangri-La Conference, the Netherlands Minister of Defence committed to deploying a vessel to the Indo-Pacific every other year.⁴ This would represent committing a quarter of the Dutch Navy's frigate sailing time to such operations. The EU strategy calls for increased regional presence, but given the modest resources, every deployment must count.

This brief argues that even modest navies — almost uniquely among foreign policy tools — can effectively perform diplomacy when used thoughtfully and judiciously by civilian political leaders. The bulk of this brief explores how to analyse the diplomatic benefits of a naval vessel. The brief establishes two self-evident premises. First, diplomacy is the delivery of information to an international audience, but talk is cheap. Second, navies are decidedly not cheap. Together these premises suggest that naval diplomacy is a costly, and thus credible, means of delivering information.

The brief then discusses where to sink these costs. It points out that diplomacy is the province of civilian leadership; admirals cannot tell civilians how to use Europe's limited naval capital as a currency of international relations, but they can help civilians understand the exchange rate. It concludes by recommending that, as the world enters a more competitive, even mercantile era, Europe should focus its diplomacy via gunboats to deterring the potential for gunboat diplomacy.

1 EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs And Security Policy, *The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 October 2021, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf.

2 EU Strategy, 17.

3 Jeremy Stöhs. “Allied Navies in the 2020s: High-End Threats, Low-End Challenges and Promising Opportunities,” in *From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea: Allied Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century*, eds. Julian Pawlak and Johannes Peters (Kiel: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft MbH & Co, 2021), 273-294

4 Netherlands Ministry of Defence, “A look at the Defence News 13-19 June,” 22 June 2022, <https://english.defensie.nl/latest/news/2022/06/22/a-look-at-the-defence-news-13---19-june>.

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Squeezing Diplomatic Value from Europe's Navies

Naval battles are mercifully rare, but naval operations are frequent. While many peacetime operations seek to prepare for—and hopefully deter—war, a large portion of a navy's activities has little to do with warfighting. The lengthy and unprecedented 2021 deployment of the German frigate *Bayern* to the Indo-Pacific had few implications for the Deutsche Marine's combat prowess, but it certainly had political effects. Indeed, even when training for combat, where and how this takes place clearly serves other political purposes. The inaugural deployment of the Britain's *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier with a US Marine Corps aviation detachment on board—again to the Indo-Pacific—might plausibly be described as preparation for war.⁵ But this training could have been done much closer to home, thereby increasing training time and focusing on more regionally plausible combat operations for the United Kingdom.

Day-to-day fleet operations are often described as part of the navy's traditional mission of “presence,” but done correctly a presence mission can be “diplomacy.” Just as not all presence missions are diplomacy, not all diplomacy with gunboats is “gunboat diplomacy,” which has been the subject of some research and has earned a fair amount of deserved disrepute.⁶ While this may grow again in relevance to international politics again, and the United States has surely done its share of it both during and after the Cold War, the threat and even use of coercive naval violence is generally unavailable, or at least inconceivable, for most European countries.

When does a presence mission achieve diplomatic effects? Can navies have diplomatic effects without the threat of violence? How can we measure the costs and the return on that investment, and how can we measure the outcome? While unable to give perfect answers to these questions, this policy brief suggests ways to go beyond “tokenism” and “presence” by employing the simple political economic logic of opportunity costs to decide on where the scarce resource of the fleet can best operate to serve national interests.⁷

Navalists rightly highlight the large peacetime role that fleets play relative to both ground and air forces.⁸ Many of these same navalists bemoan governmental use of naval vessels to pursue presence missions with little regard to its impact on the fleet.⁹ Yet the latest US National Defense Strategy highlights the military's “campaigning” role: “the United States will operate forces, synchronize broader Department efforts and align Department activities with other instruments of national power, to undermine competitor coercion, complicate competitors' military preparations, and develop U.S. warfighting capabilities together with allies and partners.”¹⁰

The brief establishes two premises that I hope are self-evident, followed by a conclusion—the brief's main argument—emerging from them. First, diplomacy is the delivery of information to

5 A Dutch frigate also accompanied the battle group.

6 James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy 1919–1991*, 2nd ed. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1981). Oona Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

7 Will James, “Tailored, Tokenistic, or Too Much? Assessing the Royal Navy's Presence in the Indo-Pacific” (The Hague, Netherlands: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, March 2023).

8 Mallory Shelbourne, “Bill Defining Navy's Role Paves Way for Bigger Budgets, Says Author Rep. Gallagher,” *USNI News*. 6 December 2022. <https://news.usni.org/2022/12/06/bill-defining-navys-role-paves-way-for-bigger-budgets-says-author-rep-gallagher>. Kevin Rowlands, *Naval Diplomacy in 21st Century: A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order* (London: Routledge, 2019).

9 Robert O. Work, “A Slavish Devotion to Forward Presence Has Nearly Broken the U.S. Navy,” *Proceedings* 147, no. 12 (2021).

10 US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 2022*, 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

Just as not all presence missions are diplomacy, not all diplomacy with gunboats is “gunboat diplomacy”.

an international audience, but talk is cheap. Second, navies are decidedly not cheap. Given these premises, naval diplomacy is the delivery of costly information.

Diplomacy is the delivery of information, but talk is cheap

Diplomacy is an essential component of statecraft (the terms are often used synonymously), but is a surprisingly understudied topic relative to “harder” security issues.¹¹ Here I define it as attempts to advance national interests by the strategic provision of information to other international actors.

International politics can be constructively described as a series of bargains between self-interested actors hoping to improve their absolute and relative positions through agreements that produce a surplus of value. The importance of diplomacy between rivals appears self-evident, but even between allies, negotiations often have zero-sum aspects to them. Like any transaction, alliances may produce much value in security and other goods through gains from comparative advantage, but the distribution of this surplus is often the source of hard bargaining.

The problem with diplomacy is that incentives exist when bargaining to misrepresent private information—such as the amount of military capability or how much a state values a policy—in order to improve its bargaining power and thus the portion of the surplus it collects. To convey useful information to the other side, that is to prevent talk from being cheap, diplomacy works best when it entails a *costly signal*.

One simple means of costly signaling is to *sink costs*, taking actions that are costly *ex ante*.¹² Tying actions whose expense cannot be recovered to an ongoing bargain forces the other side to update its assessment of the value the signaling state places on the issue. Setting money on fire credibly tells the world how much you value something else.

Navies are not cheap

Building a fleet is a deeply domestic political act, even compared to ground and nuclear forces.¹³ Even if never used in war, the developing, building, and operation of a navy is one of the costliest activities in a government’s foreign policy. These costs have rapidly escalated over time, to the point that most middle powers have very few ships (and thus few days of sailing) available to them. This is especially the case for vessels that can be feasibly deployed at distance.

Building a fleet is a heavy lift in terms of domestic politics.¹⁴ When budgets decline, or a peace dividend is to be gained, cutting ship number is a quick way to reduce expenses quickly. Building it back up, however, is even more expensive.

11 For an important exception and a useful overview, see Marina E Henke, *Constructing Allied Cooperation: Diplomacy, Payments, and Power in Multilateral Military Coalitions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

12 The political scientist James Fearon famously laid out two means of costly signaling. Most of the attention has been spent on “typing hands,” which is surprisingly hard to do. Fearon citation. James D Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90. whether in the realm of grand strategy or crisis diplomacy. Leaders might either (a

13 Benjamin O. Fordham, “The Domestic Politics of World Power: Explaining Debates over the United States Battleship Fleet, 1890–91,” *International Organization* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 435–68.

14 Benjamin O. Fordham, “The Domestic Politics of World Power: Explaining Debates over the United States Battleship Fleet, 1890–91,” *International Organization* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 435–68.

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Naval diplomacy is the delivery of costly information

Because of this costliness, ironically one of the best ways to set money on fire is to try and make it float on water. Resolutions in the United Nations, even the Security Council, are fairly cheap talk. Economic sanctions might cost the sending state something but cause a great deal of harm to the sender, so serves more as weapon than signal. When it comes to the military instrument, the mobilization of ground forces is costly but threatening. Sending air force assets may be threatening but is not terribly costly.¹⁵

Naval vessels on the other hand are routinely underway, and so their movements do not necessarily signal a major change in military threat. No one thinks that Germany's *Bayern* was shifting the military balance of the Indo-Pacific by its deployment. Even US carriers cannot do that relative to China. Diplomatically, a ship provides the best of both worlds, signaling without threatening. How best to measure and assess these costs, thus leveraging them to advance a state's interests abroad?

First, considering the diplomatic goals of a deployment will increase the impact of simple naval presence. This need not, indeed should not, be limited to maritime issues. While naval deployments are often justified by the goal of "good order at sea," it is good order on land or at least among states that should be the focus of most diplomacy, and thus naval deployments.¹⁶ The sea can generally take care of itself, and when it cannot the naval requirements to address this are quite strenuous.

Second, much of a fleet's costly signal is performed before the commissioning pennant is broken. As Caverley and Dombrowski note, "The process of building a navy is slow, overdetermined, and hard to change," and therefore "a fleet design's influence lingers."¹⁷ Because of its long-term nature, unlike almost any other defence project, the design of the fleet is the physical manifestation of a country's grand strategy. Whatever is actually produced by the AUKUS deal, the most concrete outcome to date has been Australia spending over a half billion US dollars to signal its total reliance on the US for security and a belief that long-range power projection will be one of its principal means of defence for a generation or more.

Third, it is opportunity cost rather than the money spent on fuel, food, and personnel that makes up the majority of the costly signal of a naval deployment. A ship can be almost anywhere in the world but it cannot be everywhere. The Dutch frigate *Evertsen* might have been the least expensive ship to deploy with the *Queen Elizabeth* carrier group to the Indo-Pacific, but in terms of the portion of the Netherlands' defence effort, this was a powerful signal of shifting Dutch priorities.

Fourth, opportunity costs axiomatically do not come for free. Shifting resources to another region inevitably signals the previous region's diminished importance. Even simply reducing presence for financial reasons sends a costly negative signal with no recompensing positive one. The withdrawal of the ice patrol vessel HMS *Endurance* from its South Atlantic station was done for reasons of cost, but "may have served to cast doubt on British commitment to the Islands and their defence" of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) by the Argentinian junta.¹⁸

15 Abigail Post, "Flying to Fail: Costly Signals and Air Power in Crisis Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2019), pp. 869–895. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718777043>

16 Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).

17 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State; the Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1959). Risa Brooks, "Beyond Huntington: US Military Professionalism Today," *Parameters* 51, no. 1 (2021), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3036.

18 United Kingdom Committee of Privy Counsellors, "Falkland Islands Review," January 1983, <https://c59574e9047e61130f13-3f71d0fe2b653c4f00f32175760e96e7.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/E415E0802D-AA482297D889B9B43B70DE.pdf>

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Finally, the good news for navalists is that diplomatic usefulness is an excellent reason for maintaining a robust fleet operating at sea. The bad news is that diplomats, rather than military officers, should direct these missions. This may sound like heresy coming from a professor at the institutional home of Alfred Thayer Mahan. It is no secret that Mahan did not have much to say about naval diplomacy; the US preoccupation with warfighting has deep roots. But it also means that another cherished work in US professional military education, Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* must also be discounted.¹⁹ While Huntington championed "objective civilian control," with civilians leaving operations to the military professionals, modern naval officers must accept the reality that they are a tool of international politics, and thus their operation must be the tool of politicians. "The Sailor and the State" would be a quite different book.

Diplomacy with gunboats can deter gunboat diplomacy

This brief lays out a constructive way to consider the diplomatic use of naval operations in which ships are scarce and likelihood of resorting to violence is remote: diplomacy with gunboats without gunboat diplomacy. One of its major points is that naval diplomacy need not be limited to maritime issues. It concludes by arguing, perhaps ironically, that—whether in the Black Sea, the High North, or the Indo-Pacific—one important issue for which naval diplomacy is well-suited is the rejection and deterrence of gunboat diplomacy. Beyond maritime security, navies can help states communicate support for sovereignty and territorial integrity at a time where the world grows more competitive, more militarized, more mercantile. In such eras, small states suffer, which means the global system and economy, and thus Europe will suffer as well.

Political realists and liberals do not agree on much, but there is a consensus that if international law has accomplished one thing it is that it has made the invasion of sovereign states or even the use of force to collect debts from sovereign nations illegal and immoral. This is in the interest of the United States, Europe, and indeed China. We in the United States may accuse China of debt trap diplomacy, but China's painful history and its sensitivity to what it calls naval hegemonism gives me hope that it would support such a norm, at least for now. On the ground in Ukraine, US and European support makes clear that sovereignty is a vital national interest to these states. European navies should reinforce this norm, at the expense of many other missions, in a maritime region that is equally vital.

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State; the Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1959).

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