

**Gunboat Diplomacy:
Power and Profit at Sea in the Making of the International System**

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Abstract:

The making of the international system from c.1500 reflected distinctively maritime dynamics, especially ‘gunboat diplomacy’, the ‘profit from power’ strategy of using naval force for commercial gain. Much more than in land warfare in Europe, war and trade at sea in the wider world were often inseparable, with violence being a central part of the commercial strategies of state, private and hybrid actors alike. Gunboat diplomacy was idiosyncratically European: large and small non-Western powers with equivalent technology almost never sought to advance mercantile aims through large-scale naval coercion, instead adopting a *laissez faire* separation of war and commerce. Changes in international norms first restricted the practice of gunboat diplomacy to states in the nineteenth century, and then led to its effective abolition in the twentieth century, as it became illegitimate to resolve trade and sovereign debt disputes through inter-state violence. Evidence is drawn from macro-historical comparisons of successive European-Asian encounters from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

From the late 1400s, the European military and commercial engagements with the rest of the world that first created the modern international system were essentially maritime in nature. Yet in crafting theories of international politics, social scientists have generally maintained a firmly terrestrial orientation in concentrating on armies, states and land, rather than navies, seaborne commerce, and the oceans. European maritime expansion had a distinctive character in both its means and ends. The means centred on exploiting a Western advantage in naval coercion and power projection. The ends were primarily commercial: control of seaborne trade, expanding market access, and later repayment of sovereign debts. Thus the uniquely European contribution to the making of the modern international system was organised maritime violence in pursuit of commercial ends, or what this paper refers to as gunboat diplomacy.

Although central to the creation of the modern international system, gunboat diplomacy nevertheless blurs taken-for-granted binaries of modernity: those using coercion were a mix of public, private and hybrid actors seeking mercantilist goals, at a time when fighting was essential to and inseparable from trading. Classically modernist separations of public and private, and commerce and warfare, occurred much later in the maritime sphere than on land. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that as a matter of norms, law and practice, states asserted a monopoly on the use of legitimate violence at sea. Even then, until the early twentieth century, the use of great power naval violence to resolve trade and sovereign debt disputes with peripheral powers was normatively and legally accepted, and practically commonplace.

Earlier constructivist works have explained how the rise and fall of various regulative

norms over time have shaped means and ends in war (e.g. Katzenstein 1996; Price 1999; Finnemore 2003; Tannenwald 2007; Carpenter 2011). Certain types of warfare have largely been consigned to the past, including wars aimed at conquering colonies, changing territorial boundaries, or plunder (Philpott 2001; Zacher 2001; Sandholtz 2008). The change represented by the decline of gunboat diplomacy is at least as important, however: if international maritime commerce and naval warfare can now be naturally thought of as separate, distinct activities, carried out by different kinds of institutions, this reflects the decline of gunboat diplomacy, its previously central role now almost forgotten. For the fact that fighting and trading at sea are now different things, and separation according to which states do the former while companies do the latter, are relatively recent developments, and represent ideas that were profoundly alien for the majority of the modern era.

Contrary the view of ‘the stopping power of water’ (Mearsheimer 2001), the construction of the first global international system from 1500 suggests that the more appropriate metaphor is of the seas providing a ‘broad highway’ for both trade and coercion (Rodger 2011: 121-122). More than this, for Europeans, but not other civilisations, control and authority over the seas were goals in and of themselves (Steinberg 2001; Benton 2009). The primarily maritime international relations that generated the first global international system had profound consequences. More than just a prelude to subsequent European domination and colonialism, the period before the nineteenth century saw the construction of maritime, networked European domains in an era that provides a unique example of a global multi-civilisational international order (Suzuki et al. 2014; Phillips and Sharman 2015). The consequences of maritime expansion for Europe itself were equally important:

European material culture and consumption patterns were enriched by many previously unknown products; science, technology and cartography made rapid

progress; the availability of new products and access to overseas markets caused domestic industries to restructure and completely changed some of Europe's most important trading networks; and the political and military capacities of some European states were hugely strengthened by the income generated by plunder and by the introduction of new high-yielding taxes on imported goods from outside Europe (Rommelse 2011: 139).

Some of the most important features of European sovereignty and international law were first developed to meet the novel demands of overseas empire-building, later to be imported back to Europe in a process of 'colonial reflection' (Branch 2012; see also Keene 2002; Benton 2009).

The fundamental difference between war on land and at sea is reflected in the wide range of actors engaged in naval coercion in the modern era, whether merchants, privateers, chartered trading companies, or mercantilist states. The use of violence for commercial ends was much more widespread and long-lasting than on land. While plunder was almost ubiquitous in European war, this was largely an incidental benefit for rulers, and a means of paying troops, rather than the primary motivation for conflict. For these reasons, 'Whereas the military revolution on land can usefully be addressed as a fundamentally military question... the course of the military revolution at sea is inseparable from changes in the economics of maritime commerce' (Guilmartin 2011: 129-130). Unlike on land, Europeans enjoyed a pronounced and consistent advantage over other civilisations in war on the high seas.

The importance of these dynamics notwithstanding, 'Historical sociology has had considerable difficulties in understanding the maritime sphere and its role in European state formation' (Glete 2000: 7). International Relations scholars seeking to explain the birth of the modern international system have likewise concentrated on war and trade on land (Tilly 1992;

Spruyt 1994; Ruggie 1998). For those few historians and sociologists like Braudel (1966) and Wallerstein (1980) who have adopted a maritime approach, the role of war and coercion has nevertheless remained very much secondary. The relatively small number of military historians who have devoted substantial attention to war at sea have often tended to see naval developments within templates developed to explain land warfare. In particular, they have argued that the early modern 'military revolution', the thesis that security competition drove the need for increasingly large and expensive armies that in turn required the development of the modern state, was paralleled by an equivalent process of the state monopolisation of war at sea (Parker 1988; Glete 2000). Even these relatively scarce treatments have tended to be disproportionately focused on Europe (Rommelse 2011: 118). This has reflected the past tendency, now under challenge, to unreflectively generalise from the singular experiences of the making of the European international system, to those of other regions, and to the making of the global international system (Hui 2005; Kang 2010; Johnston 2012; Phillips and Sharman 2015).

What are the theoretical pay-offs of the new perspective proposed in this paper? The first is getting away from a parochial and unscientific Eurocentrism in our accounts of the genesis and evolution of the modern international system through an extended comparison of European and Asian actors and the relations between them. In addition, in contrast to the common exclusive focus on states, the relevant units within the international system are shown to be much more diverse. Contra the strong Weberian presumption that modernity was defined by the separation of public and private spheres, the means by which the modern international system were built depended on a fundamental denial of this dichotomy. The paper analyses the conduct of violence-based international commerce, the dominant mode of inter-regional exchange for the majority of the period since 1500. Europeans' proclivities for

gunboat diplomacy are singular, not shared by those Asian civilisations possessing broadly equivalent technology and material resources. This singularity contrasts with the assumption of homogenous preferences among units in the international system, that all international actors want more or less the same thing. Finally, the paper traces the influence of international norms change across time, initially with the normative prohibition on non-state naval force in the nineteenth century, and then delegitimation of gunboat diplomacy in pursuing commercial aims in the twentieth century. As Finnemore puts it: ‘Intervention policies lie at the boundary of peace and war in international politics. Regulating the use of force among states defines the character of international society’ (2003: vii). The rules and practices regarding what kind of force can be used for what ends provide a window on the constitution of international society, and changes in these rules and practices associated with gunboat diplomacy over the long term are indicative of broader changes in international society.

Evidence to support these claims is drawn from four centuries of overseas encounters and exchanges. It is comparative study examining the substantial and enduring differences between Europeans and Asians in their attitudes and practices relating to commerce and violence at sea. It is also a comparative study of international systems over time, showing how gunboat diplomacy went from being a commonplace, to then being restricted to states, and later still delegitimated altogether. The first empirical goal is thus to demonstrate that the Europeans were indeed distinctive by looking at seaborne trade among indigenous actors in the Indian Ocean and East Asia. For all their differences, none of the polities of the region saw maritime trade as a continuation of naval war by other means, and none sought militarised control over trade routes, or the kind of maritime protection rackets that Europeans later set up. Large and small Asian and African polities generally eschewed

blue-water navies, and tended to leave merchants to their own devices.

The next sections illustrate gunboat diplomacy in action with reference to the Portuguese and the Dutch East India Company, showing the common patterns that defined this strategy. The follow section considers the English East India Company, particularly in the First Opium War. In some sense a quintessential example of gunboat diplomacy, this also shows the beginning of state monopolisation of naval force. The last part of the paper examines the decline of gunboat diplomacy in two stages. In the later nineteenth century gunboat diplomacy became the exclusive preserve of states, even though this was often practised at the behest of private lenders in response to sovereign default. This outcome was in line with broader shifts to outlaw non-state violence. Finally, changing beliefs about the legitimate use of force made it increasingly inappropriate to solve trade and financial disputes by recourse to inter-state violence. In this sense, despite gunboat diplomacy being a cornerstone of international commerce for centuries, today it is almost unthinkable.

This paper concentrates on European expansion to the East rather than across the Atlantic, because it is possible to compare oceanic European trading concerns with Asian counterparts, something that is not possible in the Americas. However, it is important to note that many of the same fundamental patterns apply in the Western hemisphere: Europeans' over-riding mercantilist mentality, the symbiotic relationship between trade and warfare at sea, the merging of commercial and political-strategic goals, and the difficulty of separating 'public' actors specialising in the use of organised violence from 'private' actors concerned with the pursuit of profit. Not only were there chartered companies in the Atlantic also (the Dutch West India Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Russian America Company, etc.), but even those like the Spanish tended to delegate the process of exploration and conquest to autonomous warrior-entrepreneurs (Restall 2003; Sanchez 2016).

The term ‘gunboat diplomacy’ here is not synonymous with any and all uses of limited naval force (contra Mandel 1986; Cable 1994). Exercises like the deployment of two US aircraft carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait in 1996, or the deployment of marines to Lebanon in 1983, do not fit my definition, as these actions were motivated by national security rather than commercial concerns. Gunboat diplomacy is also different from ‘trade wars’ (Conybeare 1987), for example the successive tariffs and import restrictions imposed in the 1930s, where war is only a metaphor. Though there is no hard-and-fast dividing line, piracy is also different in usually being practised by small groups on an opportunistic basis, rather than the formally constituted states and companies examined here. Finally, I do not argue that all European imperialism was driven by commercial concerns; especially in the nineteenth century in such instances as the ‘Scramble for Africa’, security concerns connected with intra-European rivalries, and even so more prestige, were central motivations.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF VIOLENCE AT SEA

For centuries war at sea has been different from war on land in being a much more capital- and technology-intensive. For most of the modern period, warships have been the most complex and technologically advanced weapon-systems of their day. Spending on armies mainly meant spending on current consumption goods for soldiers, and relatively little on capital spending and high-technology; when it came to the naval budget, the reverse was true: ‘Navies have always been far more complex and capital-intensive organisations than armies. The industrial, technical and managerial resources required to build and operate warships vastly exceeded in kind and quality anything needed for an early modern army’ (Rodgers 2011: 123). For example, around 1700 English forces allocated one cannon per

1000 soldiers, but one cannon per 2.4 sailors (Chase 2003: 72).

Yet this greater capital-outlay and organisational complexity in deploying naval force did not give states any particular advantage over non-state organisations. In contrast to the growing realisation of the state monopoly of violence that occurred in the early modern period in Europe (and in China much earlier), war at sea has until the nineteenth century been dominated by an unseemly combination of European private, public and hybrid actors, united only in their application of violence for profit. The doctrine of mercantilism, the tendency to make sovereign claims on parts of the high seas, the power of hybrid chartered companies like the English and Dutch East India Companies, and the more recent tendency to coerce delinquent sovereign debtors through the threat or use of limited naval force, all attest to the fluidity that brings into question conventional dichotomies and conceptual separations.

One of the most relevant thinkers in laying the analytical foundations of the idea of gunboat diplomacy is Frederic C. Lane, who directly inspired Charles Tilly's later insights on war and state-building. Lane begins with the idea that violence can be a service provided at greater or lesser cost to, for and by merchants, criminals and rulers, maleable categories that blur into each other. Crucially, and in contrast to most social scientific theories of the rise of the state, Lane made no assumption as to which kind of actor could most effectively and profitably use violence at sea. In contrast to war on land, there was no impetus or trend for the state to win out over other actors in monopolising violence (see also Thomson 1994; Rommelse 2011; Stern 2011). For Lane, while violence on land is subject to economies of scale and tends to be a natural monopoly, neither of these tendencies holds at sea (1958: 404).

Violence, or protection from violence, crucially affected the cost of other economic pursuits, but also violence often comprised an economic pursuit or utility in itself. The profit margin between the price of violence and the cost of supplying it is described as 'tribute'.

‘Protection costs’ refer to the whole gamut of responses to the threat of violence, from arming ships and troops, hiring mercenaries, making extortion payments, paying bribes, organising convoys, even establishing an in-house army or navy, or building or seizing trading outposts and ports. In the millennium from 700 to 1700, protection costs were said to be the single most important factor determining the success or failure of maritime trade (1958: 410). Lane further held that Europeans’ main export to the East was offensive maritime violence, which lay at the heart of their overseas strategies in seeking to destroy competition and build protection rackets.

How does gunboat diplomacy compare with familiar ideas like war-making and state-making as organised crime, which also portrays rulers as ‘coercive self-seeking entrepreneurs’ (Tilly 1985: 169)? Tilly’s notes that central elements thesis are directly taken from Lane (p.175). Yet there are also significant differences. Tilly sees the main dynamic as the (proto) state’s progressive monopolisation of violence. As noted above, however, for the majority of the modern era, maritime international relations were defined by the diversity of violence-wielding actors; at sea, diversity has been the rule, homogeneity the exception. The state monopoly of organised violence was propelled by normative concerns, rather than those of functional efficacy. Since this time, however, the state’s monopoly on naval force has been more total than that on land. Tilly sees rulers as pursuing power in terms of control of territory and violence. Money was a means to these ends: ‘the people who controlled European states and states in the making warred in order to check or overcome their competitors and thus enjoy the benefits of power within a secure or expanding territory’ (1985: 172). Though Tilly later (1992) speaks of capital intensive oligarchic states like Venice, this sub-type does not fit with the consistent tendency of all kinds of European states, from Portugal and France to England and the Netherlands, to adopt similar profit through

power approaches at sea. The inclination to subordinate the pursuit of profits to that of power (and glory) is amply confirmed by the constant historical tendency of European monarchs to spend and borrow far more than they could afford on war, leading to repeated bankruptcies as a result (Parrott 2012). While at home Europeans may have fought for glory, dynastic reasons, or as part of balancing strategies, commercial motivations were primary in the wider world, both in their dealings with other Europeans, and the polities of other regions.

For all the undoubted importance of Lane's and Tilly's ideas, they came out of a scholarly context that lacked many comparative studies of other regions, and they carry with them a strong neo-classical economics flavour that tends to obscure the importance of normative context. As discussed below, Asian great powers showed greater technical ability to project power across the seas than anything equalled by Europeans until the late nineteenth century. So too Arabs, Polynesians, Chinese and others routinely traded across oceans for centuries before the European voyages of discovery (Bose 2009: 15-19). Yet only Europeans pursued control over the high seas, key sea-lanes and maritime trade as ends justifying the sustained use of organised violence by 'blue water' naval forces, whether public, private, or some combination of the two. To the extent that they 'failed' to separate rulers' military affairs in what is now taken as the public sphere, from the commercial concerns of profit, Europeans were much less modern than the Asian and African empires and polities they encountered from the late fifteenth century.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXT: MARITIME ASIA

Given the long and dishonourable history of unfounded claims about European exceptionalism, it is vital to substantiate the claim that gunboat diplomacy was distinctively

European. Recently, ‘Any time some one argues that Europe had an advantage in a given area—say property rights, or per capita income, or labour productivity, or cannon manufacture—along comes an Asian historian pointing out that that claim is false. The case for European exceptionalism has unravelled like a ball of string’ (Andrade 2011: 7). Yet like other historians of Asia, as well as historians of other regions outside the West, Andrade nevertheless agrees that the bellicose European orientation to maritime trade was singular (2006: 416-417).

Europeans did not enjoy any significant general military superiority on land over Asian or African opponents until the late 1700s (Mesoamerica was different, though even here disease greatly facilitated Spanish conquests). Claims about a ‘Western way of war’, founded on a supposedly unique capacity for both collective discipline and individual initiative (McNeill 1982; Hanson 1989; Keegan 1993), or a ‘military revolution’ (Roberts 1955; Parker 1988), have been disconfirmed by comparative studies showing similar developments around the same time or even before they occurred in Europe (Thompson 1999; Agoston 2005; Lorge 2008; MacDonald 2014; Roy and Lorge 2015; Andrade 2016). Nor did Europeans enjoy any significant general technological or economic advantage over the Asian great powers of the day until the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century (Pomeranz 2001; Subrahmanyam 2006; Rosenthal and Wong 2011; Buzan and Lawson 2015). On the contrary, for at least the first two centuries after the creation of the global international system, in terms of the aggregate determinants of material power like the size of military forces, population, and land area, European great powers were essentially puny when compared with the Ottoman, Mughal, Ming, and Qing Empires, some of which exceed the combined totals of all European great powers on these indices.

Narrowing the focus to the maritime realm, Asians and Africans had been trading with

each other across the Indian Ocean for centuries before Europeans arrived (Chaudhuri 1985; Bose 2009: 15-19). The rise of Islam had been especially important in promoting commercial and cultural exchange (Wills 1993). Furthermore, the greatest feats of maritime power projection before the 1800s were achieved by Asians, not Europeans. The Ming Chinese sent gun-armed expeditions of up to 26,000 soldiers and sailors as far afield as East Africa and Arabia 1405-1433, an order of magnitude larger than any European expedition for centuries afterwards (Andrade 2016: 121). The largest single Indian Ocean expedition of the sixteenth century was mounted by the Ottoman Empire to challenge the Portuguese in Gujarat in 1538 (Casale 2010: 59). Further East, the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s saw them move a force well in excess of 100,000 troops (Swope 2009), once again a greater number than any European power could send abroad until the nineteenth century. Thus the fact that Europeans made by far the most sustained use of naval power projection for most of the modern era cannot simply be explained by a claim that they were the only actors capable of doing so.

Instead, 'In Asia the ruling elites were uninterested in maritime enterprise and warfare and left the ocean to foreign intruders without a determined fight for supremacy' (Glete 2000: 87). Europeans won control of the Eastern seas largely by default. The rulers of Asian great powers, even the archipelagic Japanese, took little or no interest in building blue-water navies, overseas colonisation, or seeking to control networks of maritime trade (Glete 2000: 77). Another historian concurs that 'the states of China and Japan were as strong as European states, both in terms of centralization and of course in size, but they were not interested in maritime expansion, which is why the European trading organisations, with state support, were able to achieve the success they did' (Andrade 2004: 443).

The Ottomans employed powerful galley forces for amphibious warfare in the Mediterranean (Guilmartin 1974; Murphey 1993, 1999). But 'Ottoman interests did not lie at

sea and their rulers were not interested in the sort of state-backed private enterprise voyages of discovery, conquest, and empire-building that the Portuguese and other European powers embarked on' (Lee 2015: 262). The Ottomans made only sporadic attempts to contest the Portuguese presence beyond the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and there was no effort to mimic the Europeans' mercantilist protection rackets. Instead, the Ottomans proposed a live-and-let-live system of trade in accord with the traditions of the region, but against those of European gunboat diplomacy (Casale 2010: 82).

As with most of their other Asian peers, the Mughal Empire enjoyed a structural trade surplus with the Europeans, and thought of the Portuguese and later other Europeans 'as merely nomads... patrolling the seas' (Gommans 2002: 164). The Mughal 'emperors never considered or pursued expansion by sea. The culture of seafaring was completely foreign to the Mughal elite' (Richards 1993: 283). Pearson sees the Mughals as distant from merchants (1990: 96, 112), while elsewhere the Mughals are described as 'the classic example of a continental Asian empire with an aloof attitude towards maritime commerce' (Wellen 2015: 443). For the Mughals, it was more cost effective to bribe Europeans rather than to build a navy to fight them (Chaudhuri 1985: 78). Speaking of South Asian more generally, Bose sees the comment of one Gujarati ruler as typical: 'Wars at sea are merchants' affairs and of no concern to the prestige of kings' (2009: 44-45). Rulers in this region welcomed trade, but almost never actively promoted it (Wills 1993: 91).

Glete argues that China had the material wherewithal to establish colonies in Africa, Europe, and America, had they been inclined (Glete 2000: 89). However, the Ming emperor reasoned that 'Overseas foreign countries... are separated from us by mountains and seas and far away in a corner. Their lands would not produce enough for us to maintain them; their people would not usefully serve us if incorporated' (Andrade 2004: 417). As Black puts it

‘The absence from the oceans appears a failure in Atlanticist terms, but these are scarcely appropriate as a means of judging societies that did not share these assumptions’ (Black 2004: 213; see also Casale 2010: 11). Chinese rulers saw maritime trade as ‘a necessary evil’, with the ocean being most useful as a barrier to keep barbarians at arm’s length (Andrade 2004: 420, 417). Largely for these reasons, China had no real need for a blue-water navy (Lorge 2008: 77). Pirates were defeated by a combination of coastal defence, pay-offs, and forced depopulation of the seaboard. Unlike its European counterparts, ‘The Chinese state almost never intervened in support of its maritime traders and emigrants’ (Wills 1993: 87). Speaking of Japan and East Asia more generally, Clulow relates that ‘private groups of merchants had little standing across the region’ (2014: 37). Even at home, ‘The “maritime China” of the coastal and overseas trade zones was quite marginal to the politics of the empire and sometimes organized in ways quite different from the land-centred bureaucratic system’ (Wills 1993: 101).

The smaller polities of the Indian Ocean, from the Swahili Coast of East Africa to the South Asian littoral to archipelagic Southeast Asia generally adopted a *laissez faire* attitude to trade, often enjoying substantial customs revenues as a result of their tolerance. Both empires and these smaller polities typically granted merchant communities considerable rights of self-government (Chaudhuri 1985; Subrahmanyam 1995; Pearson 1998; Hasan 2004). There was something approaching a free market in Asian waters before the arrival of the mercantilist Europeans (Pearson 1990: 70-73; Pearson 1998: 140).

Though the detailed evidence of European gunboat diplomacy is reserved for the following sections, other treatments of the Europeans in comparative context confirm the sense that they adhered to a very different model of maritime affairs than the rest of the world. The lead contribution to a two-volume piece on the subject observes:

The principal feature that differentiates European enterprises from indigenous trade networks in various parts of the globe... is the fact that they organized their major commercial ventures either as an extension of the state, like Portugal's *Estado da India*, or as autonomous trading companies like the English East India Company and the Dutch United East India Company..., which were endowed with many characteristics of the state, including the capacity to wage war in furtherance of their interests (Tracy 1990: 2).

He goes on to note 'the combination, characteristically if not uniquely European, of state power and trading interest, whether in the form of an arm of the state that conducts trade, or a trading company that behaves like a state' (Tracy 1990: 5). Speaking of the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, Casale observes 'The sweepingly global scope of this agreement, combined with the explicit connection it drew between state power and maritime commerce, established a prototype for a new kind of overseas empire that would redefine European political discourse for centuries to come' (2010: 5). Clulow once again supports this picture: 'The overseas enterprises that began to push into Asian waters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were maritime organisations specifically geared toward seaborne warfare' (2014: 135). It is important to note that the European 'profits through power' approach may actually have been less economically successful than the alternative policy of peaceful trade (Boxer 1965: 99; Tracy 1990: 19-20; Pearson 1998: 139, 141).

Although Europeans primarily won control of the seas by default, it would be wrong to deny their marked tactical advantage at sea, or to ignore the naval battles that they consistently won against Asian opponents. What were the specific features that gave Europeans a decisive naval superiority from 1500 onwards? These boil down to three factors: first, the use of superior cannons to sink enemy ships, second, the sturdier build that made

European ships more resistant to enemy fire, and third better rigging for a better ability to sail into the wind. Whether in the Western Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, or the South China Sea, Portuguese, Dutch, English and other European ships were consistently able to defeat much larger Asian fleets by standing off and sinking enemy ships by holing them at the water-line, while avoiding their opponents' attempts to close for boarding (Guilmartin 2011: 131-132). Asians had long familiarity with gun-armed ships, in the Chinese case probably from sometime in the 1300s, but these guns were used as anti-personnel weapons (Matthews 2015: 172; Andrade 2016: 60). Because European ships were built more sturdily to withstand rougher North Atlantic conditions, they were rarely vulnerable to these smaller Asian guns (Matthews 2015: 168, 177). Accentuating these two advantages, Europeans could often engage and disengage at will though being able to sail closer to the wind thanks to superior rigging (Andrade 2011: 14; Andrade 2016: 208). The Europeans lost much of their naval advantage close to shore and in rivers, and here they experienced fairly regular reverses at the hands of Asian and African opponents (Black 2004). The advent of steam-power in the mid-nineteenth century, however, extended European dominance into shallow coastal waters and rivers.

A few Asian and African powers did mimic the European tendency to merge maritime trade and war (Subrahmanyam 1995). The Barbary corsairs of North Africa combined their status as vassals of the Ottoman Empire with a thriving industry of privateering, raiding and slaving (Colas 2016). In response to the Portuguese challenge, the Sultans of Aceh built up their naval capacity in the second half of the sixteenth century to carve out and defend their share of the spice trade routed through the Maldives and thence to Ottoman ports in the Red Sea (Marshall 1980: 19). Finally, from the mid-1600s well into the nineteenth century, the Omanis practised a highly successful form of militarised trade in the Western Indian Ocean

(Pearson 1998; Tagliacozzo 2002). Yet it remains the case that these examples are very much the exceptions, and were often directly prompted by European models (Tagliacozzo 2002).

PORTUGAL AND THE *ESTADO DA INDIA*

The Portuguese were the first to practice the distinctively European model of gunboat diplomacy outside their home waters. They quickly accumulated a string of coastal outposts across the region, ranging from East Africa, to the East and West coasts of India, to Southeast Asia, and slightly later China and Japan. The resulting *Estado da India* 'did not designate a space that was geographically well defined but a complex of territories, establishments, goods, persons, and administrative interests in Asia and East Africa, generated by or subordinate to the Portuguese Crown, all of which were linked together as maritime network' (Subrahmanyam and Thomas 1990: 304). This edifice came to be ruled from Goa by a viceroy appointed by the king and reporting to Lisbon. In building this domain, the Portuguese were drawing on Venetian and Genoese models, as well as earlier Portuguese experiences in the Atlantic Islands, North Africa and Guinea (Chaudhuri 1985: 16; Subrahmanyam and Thomas 1990: 300). Marshall argues that 'There can be no doubt that the systematic use of force by the Portuguese on a continental scale for ostensibly commercial ends was entirely new to Asians' (1980: 17).

The motives for this campaign of expansion were two-fold. The first was a millennial grand strategic move to find Christian allies in the East with whom to effect a giant pincer movement to jointly liberate the Holy Land (Subrahmanyam and Thomas 1990: 300-302; Disney 2009: 43, 126). These hopes were quickly disappointed, and so the second rationale, the profits from controlling the spice trade, came to dominate. The benefits of this

trade, which was tightly monopolised by the crown, were substantial: in 1518 the king obtained more revenue from spices than from the whole of metropolitan Portugal (Pearson 1990: 77). The sprawling Portuguese domain in the East was premised on the king's claim to authority over the whole Indian Ocean (Disney 2009: 127, 138, 156). In a move that is highly revealing of the mentality of combining conquest and commerce, in 1501 King Manuel declared himself 'lord of conquest, navigation, and commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia and Persia' (Boxer 1965: 22).

Aside from attacking competitors in the spice trade, the practical upshot of this claim was that the Portuguese introduced a system of passes for safe passage. All ships in the Indian Ocean were required to buy these passes from the *Estado da India* in order to trade; those without were liable to be plundered, captured or sunk. This system closely matches Lane's ideas of protection rents and tribute: 'Basically a tribute was demanded from Asian trade; the Portuguese created *de novo* a threat of violence to Asian shipping, and then sold protection from this threat, as seen in the requirement to take passes and pay customs duties. No service was provided in return; in modern times this was precisely a protection racket' (Pearson 1990: 79). In addition, the Portuguese would bombard or blockade the smaller coastal polities of the region to induce them to pay tribute and to trade on highly unfavourable terms set by the *Estado da India*. The sheer size of the region and the scarcity of Portuguese ships and personnel meant that this protection racket was only ever partially effective. Nevertheless, the contrast between the prior local arrangements of economic competition between autonomous ports and merchants, and the Portuguese aspiration to impose a state monopoly and administratively-set prices backed by naval force, is stark and striking (Pearson 1998: 133). Ultimately, by departing so far from market-clearing prices, the Portuguese may have later actually undermined their own revenues through drawing in competitors and fostering

corruption among their own officials.

The bellicose and maritime orientation of the Portuguese was repeatedly noted by contemporary Asian and African observers (Subrahmanyam 2005). In Sri Lanka the ruler decreed ‘whilst the Christians would be Lords of the sea, he would be Lord of the land’ (Biedermann 2009: 276). Another sixteenth century South Asian commentator summed up the Portuguese thus: ‘They are very good at using firearms, and they are particularly brave on ships and in the water. But in contrast to this they are not so brave on land’ (Subrahmanyam 2005: 87). The same pattern held in Africa, where until the nineteenth century local rulers referred to themselves as ‘lords of the land’, but to the Portuguese and other Europeans as ‘masters of water’ (Vandervort 1998: 1).

The Portuguese presence in the East is a clear demonstration of the features particular to European expansion via gunboat diplomacy. First, the strong, distinctively maritime emphasis capitalising on an advantage in the use of organised violence at sea. Right from when they first entered the region, the Portuguese enjoyed naval dominance over their Asian and African counterparts (though as noted often this was often by default), an edge that they exploited at every possible opportunity. Second is the distinctive political-economic project of using naval force, rather than markets or contracts, to achieve commercial aims, and in seeking to enforce proprietorial and exclusive authority over all the seas of the East. There is close fit with Lane’s ‘profits through power’ thesis and the centrality of tribute, whereby rather than the control of violence being a means to safeguard the main economic activity, violence *is* the main economic activity. Though there had been piracy in the Indian Ocean as long as there had been trade, the Portuguese strategic-commercial protection racket marked a definite departure from the customary *laissez faire* conduct of seaborne trade between local traders and polities in the region. Finally, though Portuguese and Asian merchants played key

roles in the *Estado da India*, there was nothing of the modern division separating public actors excising governing functions via a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, from private actors engaged in commerce.

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY

For the first century of its existence, the *Estado da India* pursued gunboat diplomacy unhindered by European competition. This changed at the beginning of the seventeenth century with the entry of a new type of hybrid private-public actor, the chartered company. The most dangerous example of this new type of institution was the Dutch United East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC). The chartered companies epitomise European hybrid actors designed for maritime profit through violence. The VOC ‘can best be described as a hybrid organization that successfully combined the attributes of both corporation and state’, in that it ‘was, from the beginning, as much a political and military creature as it was an economic one’ (Clulow 2014: 12 and 14; see also Adams 1996: 13).

The Dutch government gave the VOC a monopoly on trade with the East, and granted the authority to engage in war and diplomacy to safeguard its interests, as well as a wide range of other governing, judicial, administrative and even religious powers (Adams 1996, 2005). Thus the company’s 1602 founding charter read in part:

East of the Cape of Good Hope but also in and beyond the straits of Magellan, those of the aforementioned company shall be allowed to enter into agreements and contracts with princes and potentates in the name of the

States-General of the United Netherlands. They may also build fortresses and strongholds, appoint governors, armed forces, officers of justice and officers of other necessary services in order to preserve these places and maintain them in good order.

Yet the company was motivated by profit, and it pioneered some of the most important features of the modern corporation, including joint stock ownership, corporate personality, limited legal liability, and the separation of ownership from management. The verdict of recent historians is that ‘the VOC should therefore be considered a particular political institution in its own terms, one that challenged its critics to think about it as a body politic that was neither corporation nor empire, but rather a company-state’ (Weststeijn 2014: 15).

Both Dutch and foreign contemporaries endorsed this view of the VOC as an essentially hybrid institution. In the 1680s a Dutch politician proclaimed that the VOC was ‘not only a Company of commerce, but also a Company of State’ (Weststeijn 2014: 28). Surveying its holdings in the East, a seventeenth century English observer opined that the VOC had ‘raised a State in the Indies, governed indeed by the orders of the company, but otherwise appearing to those nations like a Sovereign State, making war and peace with their greatest Kings, and able to bring to sea forty or fifty men of war, and thirty thousand men at land, by the modestest [sic] computations’ (Clulow 2014: 14). The VOC could in no way be reduced to a mere appendage or instrument of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. The company often pursued its own political and commercial ends at the expense of Dutch foreign policy, a habit aided by the almost two-year communication lag between Europe and Batavia (Jakarta), the VOC’s Asian headquarters.

Maritime violence was at least as important to the Dutch company as to their Portuguese predecessors and rivals. Tracy claims that ‘In the Eastern seas, no European

enterprise was more willing to resort to war to gain its objectives than the VOC', and that as a result the traditional system of trade was 'smashed to pieces in the early seventeenth century by the Dutch' (1990: 2-3). In the first half of the seventeenth century the VOC not only succeeded in building a sprawling networked domain across the Indian Ocean (Ward 2008), but it also eclipsed the Portuguese, wresting away many of their key port-strongholds (Steenagaard 1973). The VOC closely followed many aspects of the earlier Portuguese approach. It successfully sought a monopoly over key spices like nutmeg, mace and cinnamon, using genocidal violence in the Banda Islands. It used its control of the seas to turn the terms of trade sharply against the weaker island and littoral polities of the region. The VOC instituted its own protection racket of safe passage passes for ships seeking to trade in the region (Chaudhuri 1985: 86-87). In general, 'Like the Portuguese, the Dutch were brigands as well as merchants, but the "organized violence" of the Dutch was more destructive, because more thorough-going, than that of the Portuguese' (Duncan 1975: 517; see also Adams 1996: 19). If there is one quote that sums up the Europeans' symbiotic approach to war and commerce at sea it might be that of VOC governor Jan Pieterszoon Coen explaining to the company board in 1614 that 'Your Honours should know by experience that trade in Asia must be driven and maintained under the protection and favour of Your Honours' own weapons, and that the weapons must be paid for by the profits from the trade; so that we cannot carry on trade without war nor war without trade' (Boxer 1965: 99).

The Dutch company inspired a host of European imitators that followed in its wake, not least the English East India Company (discussed below). These resembled each other, but, as established above, differed from almost all non-European merchant concerns in the central role of naval force. For example, speaking of the Danish East India Company, one scholar concludes that 'Revising a long-cherished view of violence for commercial gain as an

aberration in the otherwise businesslike conduct of the European chartered companies, recent scholarship has... highlighted the violent nature of early modern European enterprise to Asia' (Wellen 2015: 440).

THE ENGLISH EAST INDIA COMPANY AND THE OPIUM WAR

Initially overshadowed by the superior coercive strength of its Dutch peer, the English East India Company (EIC) was founded in 1600, but took several decades to secure the same joint stock character and sovereign prerogatives. Ultimately, however, it surpassed even the VOC in its military-commercial success. The EIC came to possess the same suite of sovereign prerogatives as other chartered companies, most notably the right to form armies and navies and wage war and conduct diplomacy, as well as administer territories, carry out judicial functions, and establish its own currency. Once again, however, it was owned by private shareholders, and run for profit by its board in London, struggle as they often did to impose their orders on company employees half a world away in the East.

The major conceptual problem to understanding the EIC has been the presumption that an actor could not be a trading company and a sovereign entity at the same time (Stern 2009). Earlier studies tried to avoid this difficulty by suggesting that the EIC was at first a simple profit-seeking merchant company, until after conquering Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century it became a *de facto* arm of the British Empire (Stern 2011: vii). Very much in keeping with the treatment of the VOC above, the more recent consensus is that the EIC was in fact a private-public hybrid, a sovereign company (Erikson 2014; Erikson and Assenova 2015). Just as the Dutch company was no mere extension of the Netherlands government, so too the EIC cannot be regarded as an appendage of its home government: 'Political and

military goals were pursued for commercial reasons rather than for national ones' (Blusse and Gaastra 1981: 8).

For at least the first century and a half of its existence, the EIC shared the maritime and militarised character of the Portuguese, Dutch and other Europeans in the East. Evincing the now familiar European attitude, in the early 1600s the company's emissary to the Mughal court remarked that his interlocutors 'were best treated with the sword in one hand', while in 1718 the Bombay EIC governor reasoned 'if no naval force no trade, if no fear no friendship' (Watson 1980: 77 and 76). Even as early as the 1620s Company became a pivotal diplomatic actor in the region, allying with the Shah of Persia to drive the Portuguese from their base in Hormuz in the Gulf. In the late 1700s and into the nineteenth century, however, a series of Parliamentary Acts saw the company progressively subordinated to the British government. Yet the process by which company India became British India was by no means meant the end to the defining European practice of gunboat diplomacy, as the experience of the Opium War dramatically attests.

The conflict sprang from a long-standing problem faced by Western traders in Asia: there was a much greater demand for Asian goods in Europe than vice versa. The fact that Europeans had so little Asian customers wanted is one reason why European commerce in the East was so dependent on violence. The near-permanent trade surplus in favour of Asians caused a persistent drain of silver away from Europe and the Americas. First the Portuguese in the 1500s and then the VOC in the following century had sought to increase access to Chinese markets via their default strategies of gunboat diplomacy (Andrade 2004, 2016). Though they had the best of the naval encounters, European tactical victories were insufficient to force the Chinese imperial authorities to make significant trade concessions. A succession of British, Dutch and Russian missions to plead the case for free trade in Beijing

in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century came to nought. The solution was opium grown in India and traded by the EIC (despite being banned in both Britain and India), the only commodity that generated enough silver to re-balance the trade deficit with China. Wary of both the monetary and public health consequences, the Qing imperial government banned the supply of opium, a decision the British refused to accept.

The resulting Opium War (1839-1842) showed some strong continuities but also some important differences in the conduct of gunboat diplomacy (Bickers 2012; Lovell 2015; Mao 2016). Gunboat diplomacy changed, but did not disappear, in moving from the era of mercantilism to that of free-trade imperialism (Todd 2008). The superior fire-power and manoeuvrability of the British ships was again decisive, both against Chinese ships and their forts. Although the British government was concerned about its prestige, its main war aims were explicitly commercial in opening up the Chinese market to foreign trade. Once again, naval power was the route to profit, with the results formalised in the first of the ‘unequal treaties’ that opened the Chinese ‘century of humiliation’.

Unlike in the halcyon days of the chartered companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the war was run by the British government rather than the EIC (which had lost its trading monopoly), yet hybrid elements remained. The most famous and technologically advanced ship of the war was the steam-powered ironclad gunboat *Nemesis*. Rather than being a Royal Navy vessel, the *Nemesis* had been built as a private ship for the EIC, and then authorised as a privateer (with a letter of marque) during the war. In this sense, although authority over the legitimate use of force was shifting to the sovereign state, the hybrid character of the forces involved, part public and part private, remained. Even Victorian Britain, the exemplar of nineteenth century high modernity, still had major exceptions to the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of large-scale armed force. The baseline motivation for

war stayed constant: forcibly opening these China market to foreign trade in opium and other goods. In sharp contrast to today's norms, but entirely in accord centuries of gunboat diplomacy, the appropriate and efficient response to commercial problems was organised violence (Todd 2008).

THE DEATH OF GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

Gunboat diplomacy came to an end due to two normative trends. The first delegitimated the use of violence by non-state actors. This injunction relied on a prior ideational distinction between the state, specialised in the use of large-scale violence, and the corporation specialised in commerce. This was precisely the division that had been lacking in earlier times. By itself this separation restricted but did not end gunboat diplomacy, however. From the nineteenth century private interests in great powers could rely on their governments to use force against other government and non-government actors abroad to secure commercial aims. It was only with the second basic normative shift, the idea that trade and sovereign lending disputes should be solved peacefully, that gunboat diplomacy definitively became a thing of the past. This final section explores each development in turn.

The idea that the legitimate use of organised violence was the sole prerogative of the state secured general acceptance only in the mid-nineteenth century, much later than often appreciated (Owens 2015; Barkawi 2017). The most persuasive account of how and why previously commonplace practices of large-scale violence by private actors fell away is provided in Janice Thomson's *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns* (1994). She begins with same points made earlier: for most of the modern period, wars were just as likely to have been waged by non-state as state actors, and trading and fighting were largely inseparable in

maritime commerce (Thomson makes the chartered company sovereigns one of her main cases). However the period 1850-1870 saw the demise of the last great sovereign chartered companies, as the East India and Hudson's Bay Companies were stripped of their authority. At the same time and reflecting the same trend privateers were outlawed, and there was a precipitous decline in the use of mercenaries (see also Percy 2007).

Rather than any functional decline in the effectiveness of non-state violence, this shift is instead said to have reflected state leaders' increasing sense that non-state violence complicated their diplomacy, domestic control, and their efforts to unsanctioned private violence, like piracy. The consequences of this shift were most important for the use violence at sea, and for relations between great powers and peripheral states. Though this change narrowed the range of actors authorised to engage in gunboat diplomacy to states, these new laws and the underlying norms did not prohibit gunboat diplomacy per se, which remained a central element of the contemporary international political economy. The definitive passing of this practice required further normative change in the following century.

How did gunboat diplomacy die in the twentieth century? It was primarily a matter of changing norms of appropriateness. The idea that governments, corporations, or some public-private-partnership combination of the two, would use large-scale naval force with the open and explicit aim of increasing the profits of commercial enterprises is now almost unthinkable. This normative prohibition on gunboat diplomacy is the product of deeper, underlying, inter-linked changes that have delegitimised practices of imperialism and colonialism, and placed new limits on the use of military force in the international arena (Jackson 1993; Philpott 2001; Zacher 2001; Crawford 2002; Reus-Smit 2013). Two treatments of the subject working from opposed starting points tend to come to this same conclusion.

James Cable's *Gunboat Diplomacy* ([1971] 1994) talks rather wistfully of the decline of naval coercion wielded by what he terms the 'dashing young naval officers' of 'the civilised powers' (1994: 143). Cable ascribes this decline to 'a considerable shift in attitudes towards outside intervention. The hierarchy of nations and the privileged position of great powers are less easily conceded... The idea of an international order, a common concern for the rights of property... now seem less important than the prerogatives of national sovereignty' (1994: 84). In her book *The Purposes of Intervention*, Martha Finnemore analyses the decline of gunboat diplomacy from quite a different perspective, but ultimately arrives at a very similar conclusion. Both authors note that changes in military technology do not explain the decline in gunboat diplomacy. Even though fleets became more vulnerable to new inventions like mines and torpedos through the second half of the nineteenth century, gunboat diplomacy remained common (Cable 1994: 3; Finnemore 2003: 18). There were no high-profile defeats that suggested the obsolescence of gunboat diplomacy in narrowly military terms.

Finnemore begins with the thesis that actors' calculations about the utility of force reflect in large part their appreciation of the conditions under which the use of force is considered legitimate. At any given time, what counts as an appropriate or inappropriate justification for the use of force may be taken for granted, but over the sweep of history these understandings change. State leaders come to re-define their interests and the best way to achieve them by the standards of the day (Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999; Crawford 2002; Sandholtz 2008). Finnemore focuses on a type of gunboat diplomacy that came to the fore in the nineteenth century: enforcing the re-payment of debts incurred by sovereign governments to private creditors. Though gunboat diplomacy in connection with trade disputes had not disappeared, by the second half of the nineteenth century there were

very few markets left that had not already been forced open, or taken under the formal control of the expanding European empires.

Tomz (2007) and many others have argued that the fundamental challenge for private lenders extending credit to sovereign borrowers is that the former cannot coerce the latter to stick to the terms of the agreement, thanks to the anarchical nature of the international system. But characterising the situation in this way is to universalise the normative presumptions of the twenty-first century: gunboat diplomacy as a solution or deterrent to default is normatively off the table and unthinkable, even though the logic of international anarchy would suggest that all options are open. In the nineteenth century especially, the solution to problems of sovereign default was for bankers in the great powers to call in the assistance of their governments in coercing the debtor governments to re-pay what was owed. If a naval demonstration did not suffice to bring the borrower into line, the great power's navy could capture customs houses, thereby diverting tax revenues directly towards debt repayments. As part of the explosion of sovereign lending to peripheral countries, from China, to Latin America and the Caribbean, to the Balkans and the Ottoman empire, gunboat diplomacy was one of a number of sovereignty-limiting arrangements designed to ensure that bankers got their money back (Krasner 1999; Lake 2009).

Governments from creditor countries viewed gunboat diplomacy not as it is viewed today, an 'outrage against sovereignty and a threat to peace' (Cable 1994: 3), but quite the contrary: a means by which to uphold international law and order relating to the sanctity of property and contracts (Finnemore 2003: 28). The international courts of the day actually favoured creditors whose governments used force over those who relied on peaceful means of dispute settlement (Mitchener and Weidenmier 2005: 662). Not surprisingly, creditors were strongly in favour of such interventions, and the bond markets of the day saw the ultimate

sanction of gunboats as highly credible, given that in the period from 1870 until the outbreak of World War I about 40 per cent of defaulters were subject to gunboat diplomacy (Mitchener and Weidenmaier 2010: 20). Some have even argued that by strengthening the credibility of their claims to repay, gunboat diplomacy was actually in the economic self-interest of victim states, who could raise more money under easier terms than they could have without the threat of third-party enforcement via naval intervention (Mitchener and Weidenmaier 2005, 2010); the historical record does not suggest that borrower governments saw the practice in such a positive light.

Given its continuing military and economic efficiency, Finnemore explains the end of gunboat diplomacy for sovereign debt enforcement by waxing norms of sovereign equality, but also in terms of the more proximate development of the rise of the international legal profession. By the early twentieth century, the diplomatic corps of the great powers, particularly that of the United States, were increasingly staffed by those with professional training in international law. At the Hague conference in 1907 which established the crucial principle that disputes over sovereign debt defaults be settled by international arbitration, rather than force, international lawyers played a particularly prominent role. In accord with broader writings on the effects of professionalisation (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), these lawyers considered that legal proceedings were both the most legitimate and efficient means to settle debt disputes. Ending gunboat diplomacy in this way was far from a costless or an empty gesture. Powerful states faced important new restrictions in coercing weak ones. Private lenders tended to suffer severe write-downs on their capital in arbitration decisions (Finnemore 2003: 44).

CONCLUSIONS, AND WHAT'S LEFT OF GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY?

Despite recent talk of the return of pirates, mercenaries and private military companies on land and at sea, there is nothing like the widespread and large-scale use of naval violence by non-state actors that was commonplace for 400 years, from the dawn of Western expansion until the early twentieth century. There are no companies with navies. Just as important, states no longer attack other states to improve market access or ensure debt repayment. It marks a sharp break with the single most important driving force behind the construction of the modern international system. The end of gunboat diplomacy is an important but previously neglected example of how changes in regulative norms have transformed the use of force in international society. The very absence of such a historically common phenomenon is remarkable, if seldom noticed, in part because of the terrestrial conceptual bias in observing the largely maritime process of European expansion.

If there is perhaps one element of continuity with these earlier times, it is the continued Western preference for high-technology, capital-intensive interventions in the periphery. As discussed above, this is not because only Westerners have had the requisite technology. Whereas once it was galleons and carracks bearing bronze cannon, now naval power projection is accomplished with aircraft carriers, submarines and cruise missile-armed ships. Although no longer deployed for profit, the importance of Western naval power looks likely to endure well into the twenty-first century.

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