The Solidaristic Society of Maritime Nations

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Abstract

This article applies the concept of 'international society' (as proposed by the English School of International Relations) to assess the extent to which, and how, the current geopolitical upheavals will impact on the stability of the global maritime order. It claims that whereas all states share an interest in maintaining some degree of stability at sea, maritime nations, united by common objectives and values around freedom of navigation, maritime security, and marine environment protection, constitute a 'solidaristic society'. To fulfil common objectives and uphold shared values, which are currently being challenged, maritime nations rely on a 'collective seapower' strategy, whereby the burden and benefits of a free, secure, and resilient ocean are shared in a non-mutually exclusive way. Whereas the direct outcome is a strengthening of the solidaristic society of maritime nations, the question remains whether this will eventually contribute to the overall stability of the current maritime order and help preventing the rise of illiberalism at sea.

Introduction

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which constitutes a direct violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter,[1] has engendered a 'paradigm shift'[2] in terms of Western responses to Russia's aggression. This war is likely to have long-term effects on the global security architecture and on defence spending.[3]

For the discipline of international relations, the Ukraine war demands a critical reflection on the discipline and on the explanatory power of its various theories. Realism has emerged as the dominant theoretical framework that can explain power politics and the centrality of deterrence; moreover, long-forgotten predictions such as John Mearsheimer's 'we will soon miss the Cold War'[4] and Samuel Huntington's 'the West against the rest'[5] are suddenly

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[1] UN General Assembly, Resolution A/ES-11/L.1, 1 March 2022.

[2] UK Foreign Secretary's remarks at the Atlantic Council for the 2022 Christopher J. Makins Lecture, 10 March 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/uk-foreign-minister-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-is-a-paradigm-shift-on-the-scale-of-9-11/>.

[3] S Biscop, B Dessein & J Roctus, *Putin is creating the multipolar world he (thought he) wanted*, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations Policy Brief No. 156, March 2022, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2022/03/spb156-sven.pdf?type=pdf>; MC Fischer & P Walkenhorst, 'Germany's 180° turn on foreign and security policy in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine – European and transatlantic implications', *New Perspectives on Global & European Dynamics*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 11 March 2022, <https://globaleurope.eu/globalization/germanys-180-turn-on-foreign-and-security-policy-in-the-wake-of-russias-war-against-ukraine-european-and-transatlantic-implications/>.

[4] J Mearsheimer, 'Why we will soon miss the Cold War', *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1990, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/politics/foreign/mearsh.htm>.

[5] SP Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilization', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72(3), 1993, pp. 22–49.

brought back to the forefront of debates in international relations. Constructivist approaches, with their emphasis on identities and perceptions, help in understanding how the new Cold War narratives and practices are framed within binary identities, ideational factors, and 'banal geopolitics'.[6] For its part, the explanatory power of liberalism has been put in question in light of the invasion of Ukraine.[7] Indeed, the Ukraine war confirms that Francis Fukuyama's 'end of History'[8] is not for today and that the claim that economically interdependent states do not risk the stability of the global liberal order (as this would harm their own interest) has been proven to be, if not wrong, at least not an unbreakable 'law' of international relations. This has highlighted the main weakness of liberalism when it comes to predicting the occurrence of war: its over-optimism and belief in progress.[9]

That said, the unprecedented level of sanctions imposed on Russia and Russian assets, including businesses and individuals linked to the regime, demonstrates that whereas the 'triumph of the West, of the Western idea'[10] is not global, Western nations have nevertheless stepped up in solidarity to a degree hardly seen since World War II. In other words, 'NATO has never been more united than it is today'[11] and 'we see … a more unified West'.[12] This is demonstrated by the West's commitment to upholding core international law norms (such as *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*) and to defending shared values (such as human rights) even at a substantial economic cost and with the risk of escalation. This exemplifies the deep-rooted strength of liberal values in Western societies and political structures.

The English School of international relations, with its concept of 'international society', accounts for both power politics and cooperation, but the latter is explained outside the scope of liberalism. States cooperate within the international society not as a result of human 'progress' but out of their rational desire to maintain some degree of stability, civility and order while still competing for power.[13] However, the existence of the international society is never granted,[14] as Russia's disregard for *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* demonstrates. Consequently, like-minded liberal states, which share not only a common desire to maintain order but also common values and the sense of a common belonging (thus constituting a more

[6] F Ciută & I Klinke, 'Lost in conceptualization: reading the 'new Cold War' with critical geopolitics', *Political Geography*, vol. 29(6), 2010, pp. 323–332.

[7] SM Walt, 'An international relations theory guide to the war in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/>.

[8] F Fukuyama, 'The end of history', *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18.

[9] M Mann, 'Have wars and violence declined?', *Theory and Society*, vol. 47(1), 2018, pp. 37–60.

[10] Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3.

[11] Joe Biden, Twitter post at 1:02 am on 25 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1507160840566460416>.

[12] 'Remarks by President Biden in State of the Union Address', *The White House* [website], 2 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/02/remarks-by-president-biden-in-state-of-the-union-address/>.

[13] H Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics*, Fourth edition, Red Globe Press, London, 2012 [1977], pp. 23–26.

[14] Ibid., p. 49.

limited but solidaristic society of states), shall enduringly uphold shared norms and work together to strengthen the international society.

This article applies the concept of international society to assess the extent to which, and how, the current geopolitical upheavals will impact on the stability of the global maritime order. It claims that despite divergences between states, there is a compromise around the need to maintain some degree of stability within the global maritime order that benefits everyone without costing too much to any state. However, it is possible that a member of this society deems it necessary (and rational) to violate existing rules to fulfil objectives in a self-interested way. For their part, maritime nations constitute a solidaristic society around liberal values and the centrality of freedom of navigation, including upholding existing rules at a cost. This translates into a collective seapower strategy whereby maritime nations attempt to stabilise the current maritime order and prevent the rise of illiberalism at sea in an era of global competition.

The International Society of States

The concept of an 'international society of states' (or just 'international society') originates in the ideas and writings of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull (fathers of what will come to be known as the English School of international relations), who, since the late 1950s, have rejected the 'either realist or liberalist' framing of international relations as a discipline.[15] While acknowledging the role played by both power politics and interdependence in explaining international politics, they rather emphasised the rationality of states as the main explanatory factor for the relative degree of stability that has characterised international relations in the postwar era.[16] In line with the Grotian tradition of 'rationalism', the English School rejects deterministic explanations: the international system is anarchical (since there is no supranational government) but sovereign states (which are equal in rights, not in power) constitute a 'society' of states, which explains why there is a good degree of order and little interstate violence despite the anarchical nature of the system. Violence may be endemic to the anarchical system (wars happen after all), but the rationality of actors limits the occurrence of violence to a large extent.

States have very different conceptions of 'justice' and competing foreign policy objectives, but being and thinking 'the same' is not a necessary condition for coexistence and for the international society to exist. Indeed, since states' interest is to maintain some degree of order and civility among themselves (and to bring stability to their relations), they share a common interest in restraining the use of force, in regulating international relations and in abiding (most of the time) by international law, so coexistence is made possible.

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[15] B Buzan, *From international to world society? English School theory and the social structure of globalisation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 6–7; see also H Bull, 'Martin Wight and the theory of international relations: the second Martin Wight Memorial Lecture', *British Journal of International Studies*, vol. 2(2), 1976, pp. 101–116.

[16] Bull, 2012, pp. 51–52.

Depending on the depth of the objectives and values shared, there is a spectrum from a pluralistic to a solidaristic international society.[17] A pluralistic society is the minimalist version described by Hedley Bull: members share the desire to maintain order among themselves but actively cultivate their differences; states have to agree over some basic common rules, institutional procedures, and behaviour (mainly non-aggression and diplomatic rules), and they have to abide by what has been agreed. Rules are thus respected like 'road rules', based on the principle of reciprocity: it does not cost much to respect them, but the collective gain is substantial.

A solidaristic society is the maximalist version; members share more objectives than simply the desire to maintain order and are ready to act upon (or enforce) the objectives they share. Members of a solidaristic society share values and identities (e.g. the Western conception of human rights). Their working together and sharing both objectives and values in turn means that members of a solidaristic international society have a bigger common interest in maintaining these mutually profitable arrangements and thus, since the existence of the international society shall never be taken as granted, it is rational for them to work towards maintaining, and even strengthening, the international society, even when upholding rules generates a cost.

At a *global* level, we have not yet reached the conditions for a solidaristic society to emerge. However, Barry Buzan claims that the concept of international society shall not only be applied globally (as was envisaged by Bull); it is also meaningful at other *sub-global* or regional levels.[18] This is where a limited version (in terms of membership or geographical scope) of a solidaristic international society can emerge. Solidarism can be more pronounced at the regional level due to the sharing of more objectives, values and institutions.[19] Indeed, whereas traditional English School scholars have almost exclusively focused on human rights as the pinnacle of solidaristic shared values, economic solidarism does explain the emergence of sub-regional solidaristic societies[20] (e.g. the EU); similarly, there are solidaristic security values, which are found at a sub-global level, and a version of collective security can be found in security communities like NATO.[21]

Western nations consciously share common interests and values beyond coexistence and have a feeling of a common belonging and of being bound by a common set of rules, which are reinforced by deep economic interdependence and shared institutional frameworks.[22]

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[17] Buzan, 2004, p. 49.

[18] Ibid., pp. 16–18, 47.

[19] Y Stivachtis, 'Interrogating regional international societies, questioning the global international society', *Global Discourse*, vol. 5(3), 2015, pp. 327–340.

[20] Buzan, 2004, p. 19.

[21] Ibid., p. 149.

[22] C Manning already recognised that there exists 'a kind of sub-civilisation, with a specific ethos', as for example NATO: see CAW Manning, *The nature of international society*, LSE, G Bells & Sons, London, 1962, p. 153. Although English School scholars interested in the sub-global level of analysis of the international society preferred to focus on regional societies (e.g. Europe) rather than trans-regional societies, the 'Western community serves as the most obvious candidate for a subglobal international society' (see YA Stivachtis, 'The

Additionally, the West champions the core rules of the international society in a proactive way (enforcement) in opposition to those who violate them, even at a cost (e.g. current sanctions against Russia). The West does not only form a self-contained solidaristic society of states; it proactively promotes its core norms within and beyond its polities. The extent to which this contributes to 'solidarising' the whole of the international society is open to debate.[23]

The concept of a solidaristic society is thus useful not only as an alternative characterisation of the West beyond its liberal nature but also as a tool to understand how the West operates in the current era of growing authoritarianism and challenges to core values of the international society. This concept is applied below to the analysis of the maritime order. At the global level, the pluralistic society at sea is at the minimalist end of the spectrum, with states sharing minimal, self-preserving objectives around freedom of navigation. However, at a sub-global level, there is a solidaristic society of maritime nations, which are bound by common maritime interests, values and cooperative mechanisms.

The Pluralistic Society and the Challenges to the Global Maritime Order

The principle of freedom of the sea (*mare liberum* as opposed to *mare clausum*) originates in Hugo Grotius's legal claim made in 1609 in a bid to secure the United Provinces of the Netherlands's interests in the Indian Ocean against challengers (notably Spain, Portugal and England).[24] Within the Westphalian system it was eventually agreed that it was in the best interest of all to adhere to the norm of freedom of the sea. Thus, the maritime domain was not to be divided into zones of exclusive sovereignty but was to remain a free space, a global lane of communication enabling the free flow of goods and capital.[25] This denotes a self-preserving, mutually beneficial arrangement for trade and power projection that has been the basis of the pluralistic society at sea, within which maritime and continental states alike share the common objective to maintain some degree of order at sea, and notably freedom of navigation as well as maritime safety and security. Coexistence at sea is self-centred in that members of the pluralistic society contribute to a stable maritime world order insofar as it does not contradict their national interest (Figure 1).

Within a pluralistic society, to facilitate relations in a mutually beneficial way, technical coexistence requires states to agree on a set of technical rules and institutions (e.g. Universal

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regional dimension of international society', in C Navari & D Green, *Guide to the English School in international studies*, John Wiley & Sons, London, 2014, p. 117.

[23] For a similar argument in relation to the EU and its solidarisation of international politics see B Ahrens & T Diez, 'Solidarisation and its limits: the EU and the transformation of international society', *Global Discourse*, vol. 5(3), 2015, pp. 341–355.

[24] M Brito Vieira, 'Mare liberum vs. mare clausum: Grotius, Freitas, and Selden's debate on dominion over the seas', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 64(3), 2003, pp. 361–377.

[25] CL Connery, 'Pacific rim discourse: the US global imaginary in the late Cold War years', in R Wilson & A Dirlik (eds), *Asia/Pacific as space of cultural production*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995, pp. 30–56;
PE Steinberg, 'The maritime mystique: sustainable development, capital mobility, and nostalgia in the world ocean', *Environment & Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 17(4), 1999, pp. 403–426.

Postal Union, International Civil Aviation Organization). Coexistence at sea has necessitated agreement on common standards concerning navigation, communication and safety, as well as on the relevant legal frameworks. Today, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is accepted as the 'constitutive instrument' that 'outlines the rights and obligations of States'.[26] When it comes to regulating international shipping, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) plays a leading role in developing international rules and accepted standards for maritime security, maritime safety and marine environment protection.
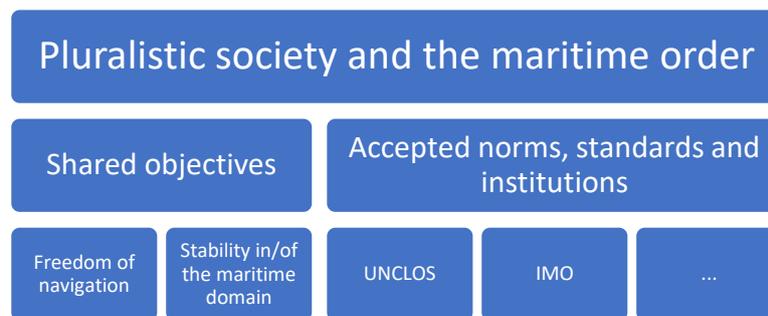

Figure 1: The pluralistic society and the maritime order

The all-encompassing pluralistic society comprises states as different as the US and the UK at one end of the spectrum and Russia at the other; they all benefit from freedom of navigation in their own way. Within a pluralistic society, it is in all members' interest to keep the established, mutually beneficial arrangements. However, norms and institutions tend to serve the interests of dominant actors within the international society. It can be argued that the organisation of the maritime order in general, and freedom of the sea in particular, has benefited sea powers (such as Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries and the US in the 20th century) more than land powers in facilitating empire building, global leadership and hegemony.[27] In turn, dominant sea powers have striven to shape the international (maritime) order in a way that would cement their dominance: 'the expanded notion of sea power as against purely naval power is dependent upon the regimes created by progressive maritime law'.[28] The contemporary, law-based international maritime order is a creation of the dominant sea powers that continues to work in the best interest of maritime nations, although it practically serves the interests of all, since economic prosperity in a globalised world order

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[26] R Beckman & Z Sun, 'The relationship between UNCLOS and IMO instruments', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Ocean Law and Policy*, vol. 2(2), 2017, p. 201.

[27] E Mancke, 'Early modern expansion and the politicization of oceanic space', *Geographical Review*, vol. 9(2), 1999, pp. 225–236; J Glete, *Warfare at sea, 1500–1650: maritime conflicts and the transformation of Europe*, Routledge, London, 2000; G Till, *Seapower: a guide for the 21st century*, Frank Cass, London, 2004, p. 16; RW Cox, 'The crisis of world order and the problem of international organization in the 1980s', *International Journal*, vol. 35(2), 1980, pp. 370–395; T Boswell & M Sweat, 'Hegemony, long waves, and major wars: a time series analysis of systemic dynamics, 1496–1967', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35(2), pp. 123–149, 1991; G Modelski & WR Thompson, *Leading sectors and world powers: the coevolution of global economics and politics*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1996; BR Posen, 'Command of the commons', *International Security*, vol. 28(1), 2003, pp. 5–53.

[28] J Kraska, 'Grasping "the influence of law on sea power"', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 62(3), 2009, p. 121.

depends on the degree to which the ocean can remain free and safe for trade, communication and (sustainable) exploitation of resources.

The core principles of the pluralistic society at sea (i.e. freedom of navigation and law of the sea) have recently been challenged by traditional land powers which contest the status quo (revisionism). The invasion of Ukraine highlights Russia's limited acceptance of the pluralist norms.[29] In particular, Russia posits that the non-intervention norm and the agreed rules of the pluralistic society do not apply to its neighbourhood,[30] which includes the Black Sea. States which violate core principles of the international society (e.g. *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*) put themselves outside the international society and consider themselves not to be bound by its norms. Reciprocally, members of the society are likely to consider that such states are excluded from the society;[31] this can result in communication breakdown or ending institutional cooperation. For example, in reaction to the invasion of Ukraine, the members of the Arctic Council decided to boycott talks with Russia, *de facto* putting the work of the council on hold. When a 'minor' actor remains outside the international society (e.g. North Korea), the implications for the society itself are limited; however, when a 'major' player like Russia *de facto* exits the society, the consequences can be substantial. For example, in the High North, the risk is that Russia might intensify its engagement with non-Western, non-Arctic states, such as China and India; the pausing of the Arctic Council might also jeopardise the safeguards against the Chinese fishing fleet endeavours in the region.[32]

In another example, to assert its claims over contested areas in the South China Sea, 'China takes international law seriously, but wishes to remake certain elements'; in particular, China puts forward the argument that:

> ... the extent of a state's maritime domain should principally be a question of sovereign decision informed by national economic and security needs, subject only to broad constraints of reasonableness and neighbourly accommodation.[33]

In practice, China has applied a 'grey zone' strategy in a bid to modify the status quo without crossing the threshold of wartime operations and risking escalation: claims over fisheries rights, citizen protection, the use of paramilitary, police and naval forces, and broader geopolitical claims are interlinked and coordinated, with one reinforcing the need and

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[29] It has been argued that Russia has never really been more than an 'entrant' into the society of states. See I Neumann, 'Entry into international society reconceptualised: the case of Russia', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 37(2), 2011, pp. 463–484.

[30] K Kaczmarska, 'Russia's droit de regard: pluralist norms and the sphere of influence', *Global Discourse*, vol. 5(3), 2015, pp. 434–448.

[31] B Buzan, 'From international system to international society: structural realism and regime theory meet the English school', *International Organization*, vol. 47(3), 1993, p. 349.

[32] E Buchanan, 'The Ukraine war and the future of the Arctic', *RUSI Commentary*, 18 March 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-war-and-future-arctic>.

[33] D Guilfoyle, 'The rule of law and maritime security: understanding lawfare in the South China Sea', *International Affairs*, vol. 95(5), 2019, p. 1017.

justification for the other.[34] These examples highlight the fragility (or, in Bull's words, the thinness) of the pluralistic society at sea.

The Solidaristic Society of Maritime Nations and Collective Sea Power

At a sub-global level, a group of like-minded states, conscious of their similarities and common interests, constitute a solidaristic society of maritime nations, within which the depth of the objectives they share is greater. Members, whose security and prosperity strongly depend on the sea, uphold freedom of navigation, contribute to maritime security and ocean governance, and work towards a 'resilient ocean'.[35] They are also united by their sharing core maritime traditions and values (c.f. below). And they are ready to proactively defend them to address challenges to the stability of the global maritime order, which indeed serves their (maritime) interest first, but more generally is understood as benefiting everyone in that it promotes free trade, economic growth, employment, and cultural exchanges (Figure 2).
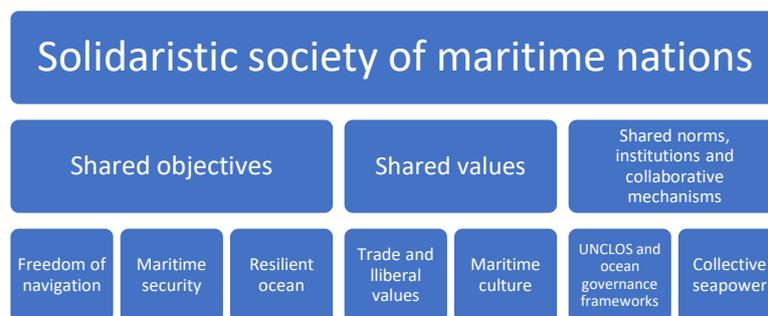
Figure 2: The solidaristic society of maritime nations

Today's members of the solidaristic society of maritime nations (on a spectrum from core maritime states such as the UK, Denmark or Singapore to the US, Canada or Australia) share a century-long history of cooperative behaviour without major ideological or geopolitical insurmountable divergencies (neither on land nor at sea), except in the case of Imperial Japan in the first half of the 20th century. Like-minded maritime nations share similar defence, security, foreign policy and economic objectives. They share a common desire to uphold freedom of navigation but also a feeling of a common belonging to a society of nations that share values such as freedom, free trade, human rights, and political accountability. Today, this roughly equates with the West, although seapower identity 'has become a collective

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[34] A Patalano, 'When strategy is "hybrid" and not "grey": reviewing Chinese military and constabulary coercion at sea', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 31(6), 2018, pp. 811–839, 813–14, 831.

[35] For an application of the concept of resilient ocean, see HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, CP 403, p. 92, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf>.

Western possession rather than the sole preserve of individual states'.[36] The connection between Western and maritime identity explains as follows:

The flourishing of a maritime and seafaring culture has been associated with trade values.[37] Although it can be found outside Western societies, maritime culture embodies the 'free spirit of humanity',[38] since it requires a degree of openness and freedom that is less frequently encountered in authoritarian contexts. But more than trade values, seapower is intrinsically linked to liberal values. Possessing substantial naval power and depending on maritime trade for one's economic prosperity does not equal to being a maritime nation. Andrew Lambert established that "seapower" is more than strategic *naval* power; it requires a 'conscious choice' to develop a seapower *culture*. '[S]eapower great powers', he claims, have flourished as a consequence of their relative weakness compared to land powers, for they had to use their comparative advantage in maritime trade. Such an agenda has better been served by progressive, inclusive political systems, as demonstrated in, among others, Athens, Venice and England; this explains the strong interlinkage between trade, seapower, liberalism and democracy, which is still core to contemporary Western identity.[39] Maritime values have traditionally been linked to the interests and attributes of the dominant sea powers (as opposed to the more authoritarian and mercantilist land powers), which have proactively nourished their maritime identity. For example, since the Elizabethan era, the sea and what it brings to England's power has constantly been romanticised and glorified in arts and discourses.[40] In turn, the maritime culture or outlook that is part of the necessary conditions for seapower to flourish has facilitated progressist political systems (albeit not in a way that has prevented colonisation and its wrongdoings). This explains why the sea and seafaring values have historically been represented more negatively by authoritarian rulers (e.g. China's Qing Dynasty, 1644 to 1912), who have been suspicious of maritime stakeholders and the values they vehiculate.[41]

As discussed above, the current norms and institutions of the global maritime order tend to serve the interests of maritime nations, but the rise of illiberalism and revisionism at sea (e.g. Russia breaking the rules in Ukraine and the Black Sea, in particular disrupting/preventing the

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[36] A Lambert, *Seapower states*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2018, p. 328; see also pp. 7, 323, 325.

[37] Till, 2004, p. 22.

[38] L Dehio, *The precarious balance: four centuries of European power struggle*, Vintage, New York, 1962, p. 272.

[39] Lambert, 2018.

[40] S Baker, *Written on the water: British romanticism and the maritime empire of culture*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London, 2010. This narrative is also being deconstructed in the context of decolonial studies that warn of imperial nostalgia or amnesia. See for example R Saunders, 'Myths from a small island: the dangers of a buccaneering view of British history', *The New Statesman*, 9 October 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2019/10/myths-from-a-small-island-the-dangers-of-a-buccaneering-view-of-british-history>; O Turner, 'Global Britain and the Narrative of Empire', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 90(4), 2019, pp. 727–734.

[41] G Quilley, 'Sailors on horseback: the representation of seamen and social space in eighteen-century British visual culture', in T Cusack (ed), *Framing the ocean, 1700 to the present*, Ashgate, London, 2014, pp. 85–100; Lambert, 2018, pp. 8, 324.

free flow of goods to and from Ukraine's ports, and China challenging the rules in the South China Sea) has led members of the solidaristic society of maritime nations to proactively uphold current norms and to assure the perennity of the global maritime order. Within a solidaristic society, members are ready to work together to develop common strategies to address issues within the international society. For maritime nations, one of these mechanisms of solidarity is a collective seapower strategy.

The concept of seapower is associated with the writings of US Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan,[42] who popularised the idea that, by combining a flourishing maritime commerce with a powerful navy to protect it, sea powers have an intrinsic advantage over land powers. In peace as in war, seapower is a 'great enabler'.[43] Seapower encompasses military (naval), economic (trade) and ideational (maritime values) components.[44] However, because of the narrow emphasis traditionally put on the balance of *naval* power, seapower has usually been considered in *relative* terms 'since some countries have more than others'.[45] This vision fits with a modern Mahanian understanding of seapower within a zero-sum international system.

However, within a solidaristic society of maritime nations, seapower shall be understood in an *absolute* way, with members sharing (in a non-mutually exclusive way) the objectives, means and benefits of the joint enactment of seapower[46] when it comes to upholding freedom of navigation, maritime security (securing the maritime domain) and governing the oceans and its resources (i.e. 'ordering ocean space'[47]). This corresponds to a post-Mahanian, post-modern form of seapower,[48] which has two main characteristics:

First, it is less state-centric, less naval and more civilian: from international shipping companies to fishing communities, private/civilian stakeholders from various sectors (security, economy, NGOs) and with various levels of power have a role to play in stabilising the maritime order and upholding its norms. For example, in reaction to the invasion of Ukraine, J Overton argues that the old concept of a '1000-ship Navy'[49] has been put in practice not as:

> … a collection of primarily nation-state naval capabilities used against non-state actors and natural disasters [but] but a collection of mostly interagency, non-naval, and

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[42] AT Mahan, *The influence of sea power upon history, 1660–1783*, Cosimo Classics, New York, 1890.

[43] CS Gray, *The Navy in the post-Cold War world: the uses and value of strategic sea power*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1994, p. 13.

[44] B Germond, *The maritime dimension of European security*, Palgrave, London, 2015.

[45] Till, 2004, p. 4.

[46] B Germond, 'Seapower and small navies: a collective and post-modern outlook', in I Speller, D Sanders & R McCabe (eds), *Europe, small navies and maritime security*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2019, pp. 26–35.

[47] B Germond, 'Representation: seapower and the political construction of the ocean', in K Peters, J Anderson, A Davies & P Steinberg (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space*, Routledge, London, 2022, p. 54.

[48] M Pugh, 'Is Mahan still alive? State naval power in the international system', *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, vol. 16(2), 1996, pp. 109–123; G Till, 'Maritime strategy in a globalizing world', *Orbis*, vol. 51(4), 2007, pp. 569–575.

[49] M Mullen, 'What I believe: eight tenets that guide my vision for the 21st century Navy', *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 132(1), 2006, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2006/january/what-i-believe-eight-tenets-guide-my-vision-21st-century-navy>.

sometimes non-state capabilities, using diplomatic and economic power, and even guerrilla tactics, against a nation state's (Russia's) elements of maritime and national power.[50]

There is a substantial civilian dimension to collective seapower. The role of the private sector in contributing to securing the objectives of the solidaristic society of maritime nations fits with Buzan's argument that transnational, cosmopolitan forces are instrumental in cementing a solidaristic society.[51]

Second, it is more collective: within the solidaristic society of maritime nations, the burden and the benefits of collective seapower are shared among members (and private stakeholders when relevant), but not all will benefit and contribute equally. Eventually what matters is that they all benefit in their own way from the overall stability of the maritime order:

> … structures, policies and objectives are collective; expected gains/benefits are absolute, shared between actors and not relative. [As such] collective seapower fits with the description of the sea as a non-zero-sum space.[52]

Collective seapower is not just a post-Cold War phenomenon. For example, ideas akin to it were suggested – albeit mainly as a way to secure Britain's interests via naval cooperation in light of the growing threat posed by continental powers – at the turn of the 20th century, such as Sir Julian Corbett's 'collective security system of independent states linked by the sea and their sea power in a network of strategic alignments'[53] and Sir Halford Mackinder's suggestion that 'the British Navy shall have expanded into the Navy of the Britains'[54] and that cooperation between 'insular' nations was critical to a peaceful world order.

Collective seapower materialises at six levels:

1) At the ideational level, there is not only an acceptance of but a strong belief in the principle of the 'free sea' and a common desire to uphold relevant norms, which derives from strategic considerations but also from what Lambert calls the 'soul of seapower' – that is, maritime values linked to progressive forms of political organisations.[55] The collective dimension of this endeavour is also endorsed.

2) At the narrative level, maritime values and related norms (including the free sea) are promoted; the importance of the sea for security and prosperity is emphasised and put in relation to the need to stabilise the maritime order and uphold relevant norms. The narrative promotes collaborative processes to achieve maritime objectives. A prime example is the

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[50] J Overton, 'For Ukraine, the 1,000-ship navy finally sets sail', Center for International Maritime Security, 13 April 2022, <https://cimsec.org/for-ukraine-the-1000-ship-navy-finally-sets-sail/>.

[51] Buzan, 2004, pp. 197–198.

[52] Germond, 2022, p. 54.

[53] L Halewood, '"Peace throughout the oceans and seas of the world": British maritime strategic thought and world order, 1892–1919', Historical Research, vol. 94(265), 2021, p. 572.

[54] Ibid., p. 565, citing Halford Mackinder (1902).

[55] Lambert, 2018, p. 2.

vision exposed in the UK Government's 2021 Integrated Review and its accompanying Command paper.[56]

3) At the political level, budgetary decisions are made and necessary actions are taken to play one's part in the defence of the society of maritime nations, in line with (1) and (2).

4) At the strategic level, members of the solidaristic society of maritime nations oppose, in a coordinated way, those which do not share these values and which undermine the principles of the free sea. They are ready to antagonise those opposing such principles.

5) At the operational level, this translates into confidence-building measures with allies and partners, joint exercises, and operations. In the current context, the deployment of naval assets in defence of freedom of the sea is of paramount importance. As demonstrated by the maiden voyage of Carrier Strike Group 21, led by HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the symbolic and operational value of this deployment rests on the number of visits and joint exercises/operations with partners and allies as diverse as Ukraine, Oman, India, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. Exercising seapower is not limited to naval operations though. It is about using the leverage of one's maritime dominance to achieve one's goals. An example is the US, the UK, European countries and others banning Russian ships (flagged/owned/operated) from their ports.

6) At the institutional level, maritime nations work to cement global institutional mechanisms (e.g. the UNCLOS regime) that are pillars of the global maritime order. They also need to develop sub-global mechanisms that enable more solidarism. Whereas NATO is an enduring example of a solidaristic, mainly Western, regional institution, the recent AUKUS partnership between Australia, the UK and the US demonstrates the importance of developing a complex grid of institutional mechanisms that bring together like-minded maritime nations, strengthen commonalities, and offer economies of scale. Collaborative processes do not need to be state-centric, and institutional cooperation can be loose, with actors of civilian seapower contributing to the common effort (e.g. major shipping companies such as MSC, Maersk and ONE suspending their operations to and from Russia[57]).

Conclusion and the Way Forward

This article has applied the English School's concept of international society to the maritime order, whose stability rests on two pillars: a pluralistic one and a solidaristic one. At the *global level*, members of the pluralistic society are loosely united by the need to maintain some degree of stability and freedom within the maritime domain, which has been, so far, in the interest of even states situated at the thinner pluralistic end of the society (such as Russia).

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[56] HM Government, 2021; Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a competitive age*, March 2021, CP 411, para 7.20, p. 48, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-Defence_Command_Plan.pdf>.

[57] O Gill & L Ashworth, 'Maersk joins global shipping boycott cutting off Russia', *The Telegraph*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2022/03/01/container-lines-move-halt-sailings-russia/>.

Whereas this has been instrumental in explaining the enduring stability of the maritime order, and in particular freedom of navigation, the pluralistic international society at sea is being challenged by the growth of revisionist and illiberal practices. At the *sub-global* level, and in response to the above, the solidaristic society of maritime nations is becoming more united in defence of a system that benefits their interests. This is translating into a collective seapower strategy, 'whereby like-minded maritime nations share the burden and benefits of a stable but free maritime order'.[58]

In this context, the extent to which the maritime order will remain stable and favourable to maritime values and interests will depend on the successes and failures of future actions and decisions by states at both ends of the pluralist–solidarist spectrum:

- Will maritime nations succeed in 'solidarising' the pluralist international society at sea without pushing those at the thinner end of the spectrum towards revisionism?
- Will maritime nations succeed in convincing the less revisionist members of the pluralistic society that it is no time to be complacent about those which disregard basic norms but time to play a proactive role in strengthening the core shared principles?
- Some members of the solidaristic society of maritime nations (such as the US, France or even Australia) are less maritime and more continental than others (such as the UK or Singapore). So, to what extent can the solidaristic society broaden its universality without diluting its core identity by including other non-Western nations such as India or South Africa, whose interests are very much dependent on the stability of the current maritime order?
- What role will China play? On the one hand it has contributed to the rise of revisionism at sea and defends positions akin to *mare clausum* over maritime areas of strategic importance, but on the other hand it is a traditional land power trying to master some form of strategic maritime power (as demonstrated by its growing naval power projection capabilities, its network of bases and its geopolitical ambitions, as well as its civilian seapower strategy with the Belt and Road Initiative). Thus, along with its adoption of a more (albeit limited) maritime outlook, China might increasingly rely on (and thus defend) a stronger pluralistic society at sea.
- Will Russia remain an outcast, beyond even the thinner end of the pluralistic society, or will it, at least in regard to the sea, be bound by basic norms of freedom of navigation and respect for UNCLOS? At the time of writing, Russia's blockade of Ukraine that is responsible for food shortages in the Global South demonstrates its unwillingness to abide by even the most basic rules of the

[58] Written evidence submitted by Dr Germond to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons (UK Parliament) inquiry Implementing the Integrated Review: Tilt to the Indo-Pacific, TIP0012, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/40238/pdf/>.

international society. What will need to happen in Russia for it to regain some degree of respect necessary for cooperation with members of the solidaristic society of maritime nations?

The concept of international society helps us understand that the source of the stability of the maritime order is to be found in states' willingness to maintain this stability, which is based on rational interests around the benefits they all get from a free and secure maritime domain. It also highlights the fact that differences do not pose a problem within the pluralistic society as long as nobody decides to break the rules to such an extent that the maritime order is put at risk. Whereas at one end of the spectrum we have recently seen an increase in revisionist practices at sea, it is also important to stress that, at the other end, the solidaristic society of maritime nations is stronger and as proactive as ever in defence of the agreed norms. In this configuration, seapower has to be understood as a collective endeavour; it is a tool jointly deployed by maritime nations and their partners (alongside civilian stakeholders) in a bid to both defend their interests and strengthen the international society at sea.