

Review - Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century

Written by James Manicom

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JAMES MANICOM, OCT 12 2014

Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges

By Christian Le Mièrè

New York, Routledge, 2014

The 21st century will unequivocally be a maritime century. The overwhelming majority of global commerce travels by sea, most of the world's population lives within 200 miles of the coast, the world continues to rely on the sea as a source of protein, and the ocean ecosystem lies at the heart of global climate change. Even the Internet – purportedly the driver of future change – relies on cables that traverse the seabed. Consequently, states' ability to manage disputes at sea will define international politics in this century. Problematically, the conduct of states and their agents at sea is a poorly conceptualized area of study in the field of International Relations, despite its growing importance.

For this reason Christian Le Mièrè's volume should be welcomed. Located squarely within past writings on the use of seapower, such as Cable, Luttwak and Till, Le Mièrè brings conceptual rigour and historical depth to a concept that is part and parcel of the day to day functioning of global politics, but is poorly understood. Maritime diplomacy has a number of forebears including privateers, state intervention in whaling disputes, and the emergence of coast guard agencies. Indeed, in its modern incarnation, constabulary maritime forces have an important role to play in the conduct of maritime diplomacy.

Le Mièrè develops (pp. 12-13) a threefold typology of cooperative, persuasive and coercive maritime diplomacy that cover a host of extant maritime operations from confidence building measures to signalling to classically defined gunboat diplomacy. The book's central contribution is a useful five point framework (pp. 59-65) that can be used to compare maritime diplomacy operations across space and time. According to this framework, a given instance of maritime diplomacy is characterized by a mix of five characteristics that exist on a spectrum: the degree to which a given operation is kinetic or not; telegraphed or not; sustained or abbreviated; reactive or pre-emptive and symmetric or not. This framework is useful because it allows the analyst to strip away the flag of the vessels involved, as well as any underlying political dynamics, and assess a given incident on a set of falsifiable criteria.

Beyond the book's conceptual contribution, the book sets maritime diplomacy in a broad historical context. The book quite rightly focuses on the Asia-Pacific region via a case study – it is the world's most politicized maritime region – but is also full of useful instances of maritime diplomacy going back centuries involving not only traditional maritime powers like the U.S. and the U.K. but also less traditional bastions of maritime power like North Korea, Iran and Myanmar. A further insight for future development is Le Mièrè's observation that states are not the only agents of maritime diplomacy; non-state actors have engaged in the practice as well.

By way of critique, one observes that the book does not engage directly U.S. preferences on freedom of navigation. China has raised U.S. surveillance activities in its coastal waters to the same level of importance as U.S. weapon sales to Taiwan, yet this is an issue that the U.S. defends on the grounds of freedom of navigation. The latter is indirectly classified as low-end coercive maritime diplomacy (p. 25) and this is likely how these operations are perceived by most of the states they target including Canada, Japan and Indonesia. Although the book's impressive case study on maritime diplomacy in East Asia maps the Chinese response to the Impeccable incident in 2009, little space is given to America's perspective. Where do U.S. preferences about freedom of navigation, expressed in

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surveillance missions off China and in freedom of navigation operations worldwide, fit in the spectrum of maritime diplomacy? Are they always coercive? It seems that as they are a matter of principle they could be persuasive as well. This is an important question because the character of these operations and the politics that surround them are an enduring feature of the global maritime theatre. At a regional level they defend a U.S. national interest that seems to be in tension with the preferences of a number of its rivals including China and Iran as well as new partners like Vietnam and India.

This critique reflects a broader discomfort with the book's treatment of maritime legal issues. The discussion of the rationale for seeking 'defacto sovereignty' (pp. 40-41) over disputed areas risks perpetuating a dangerous misinterpretation of international law perpetuated by all Asian governments. No state can claim sovereignty over water through effective occupation; jurisdictional rights to water stem from state sovereignty over land and to a lesser extent islands and rocks. Constabulary forces, as the enforcers of jurisdictional claims, have a role to play in the perpetuation of a state's claim, but this is purely a political and economic consideration. It has no legal bearing on the source of the rights over water; sovereignty over the land.

Neither of these critiques detracts from the tremendous value that Le Mière's book adds at a critical juncture in the analysis of maritime issues in the Asia-Pacific. As claimant states to the region's numerous islands, rocks and atolls posture, protest and demonstrate their capability to enforce their claimed jurisdiction, analysts are witnessing a wide range of maritime behaviours almost universally labelled as 'assertive'. Le Mière's framework offers a way for analysts to assess the use of maritime diplomacy free of the increasingly politicized baggage that comes with the real time, if ill informed, analysis of the blogosphere. On p. 134 we learn, for instance, that PLAN deployments near James Shoal in the South China Sea in 2013 are best described as 'persuasive maritime diplomacy', a much more accurate label than the catch all category of 'assertive'. The book is thus useful for the growing number of scholars interested in the Asia-Pacific security, specifically maritime security, and should be required reading for the practitioners and journalists that seek to generate nuanced analysis of events as they unfold in this most maritime of centuries.

About the author:

James Manicom is a Research Fellow in the Global Security & Politics Program at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo, Canada. He is the author of *Bridging Troubled Waters: China, Japan and Maritime Order in the East China Sea* and has recently published in *Asia Policy*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *PacNet* and the *China Brief*.