

BOOK REVIEW

Geoffrey F. Gresh, 2020, *To Rule Eurasia's Waves. The New Great Power Competition at Sea*, Yale University Press, USA, 363 pages, ISBN: 9780300234848

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The role of the seas has historically been essential in the development of mankind, with the currents carrying people, trade, war, and ideas over vast distances. This was and remains a highly complex process, whereby a relatively small number of maritime polities contributed to the formation of proto-world systems and, in the end, to the rise of modernity and globalisation as we know it.

Beginning with a quote by Spykman – “*Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world*” – the book thus initiates its discussion on maritime power, competition, and commerce by looking at the importance of what it considers to be Eurasia’s main rivals, namely, China, Russia and India. It sees this rising competition as dominating and shaping the 21st century “as each power increases its geoeconomics, geopolitical, and naval embrace of maritime Eurasia from the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas to the Indian Ocean, Pacific Asia, and the Arctic.” (p.1). Significantly, Gresh sees one particular aspect which was not imagined by authors such as Mahan or Spykman – “the melting of the Arctic, the subsequent growing unification of maritime Eurasia’s disparate regions, and the emerging competition between Eurasia’s land powers at sea” (p.2).

Indeed, in a world where over 90% of the goods traverse the seas, the stability and security of these trade lanes will likely become ever more important. For Gresh, the key term here is competition, that is, a concept placed halfway between conflict and cooperation, a point where they may also coexist in tension with one another – after all, the history of Eurasia is dominated by competition and conflict. And if Gresh follows established specialist literature in arguing that economic prosperity, great power status, and maritime power are strongly interconnected, he narrows these down into maritime geoeconomics, the quest for great power status and navalism response, as well as the Eurasian sea lane security, all of which are tied to the changing politics and dynamics in the Eurasian space (pp.5-6). Thus, after briefly discussing the main maritime strategic schools of thought – notable especially in the analogy of the differing viewpoints of trade-oriented Corbett and status-quo challenger Tirpitz with the navalism involving the United States, Russia, India, and China (p.9) –, the book turns to discussing in more detail the aforementioned three main drivers of the increasing maritime competition in the Eurasian space.

One of the great changes over time in terms of maritime conflict was the importance of naval bases, which expanded along with European maritime dominance from the intensely competitive field of the Mediterranean to the oceans. The late medieval and early modern periods saw the Mediterranean powers struggle for bases culminating in the great battle of Lepanto – a pinnacle of the Mediterranean war system associated with galleys – heralding the rise of the Atlantic powers, the predominance of oceanic ships, global bases, and global maritime competition (pp.19-20). The continued importance of naval bases is only highlighted by the possibility of a new Eurasian maritime century, challenging the U.S. hegemony in this respect.

The second chapter deals with Russia and its dismantling of the regional status quo and a remaking of the world more to its advantage, and, significantly, the increasing geoeconomics presence of China in European maritime spaces, influenced by the ambitions of Xi Jinping and the quadrupling of maritime trade in the last four decades. While considering the traditional Russian goal of warm water ports, Gresh emphasizes the naval turn of the Soviet Union starting with the late 1930s and intensifying after the Second World War (p.26), including

Putin's attempts at restoring naval dynamism (p.31) and the geoeconomic and security importance of the Black Sea. The chapter also includes a brief look at Russian southern expansion, along with a simultaneous Chinese push west and north, the constriction of maritime space for NATO, the Baltic Sea, and overall Russian geoeconomics interests, as well as the added complexity of increased Chinese presence. The third chapter continues the discussion by returning to the always important Mediterranean theatre and the transformation of the post-Cold War dynamics due to Russian and Chinese actions. The chapter also considers pivotal maritime state of Greece, the Eastern Mediterranean – including a steadily stronger Chinese connection to Israel and its ports –, as well as the Southern and Western Mediterranean. Furthermore, Gresh points to the rising navalism and securitization in the region in the context of the – at least short-term – Russian-Chinese naval cooperation (p.84).

The fourth chapter deals with the nodal points found along the periphery of the Indian Ocean, and analyses the increasing importance of the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. It considers the great complexity of the Indian Ocean (pp.92-94), the present Chinese maritime advantages over India, and the centuries long geostrategic importance of maritime choking points such as the Strait of Hormuz. To this, the chapter adds a look at the desire for energy synergy in the region, as well the rising navalism in the Red Sea, with a long discussion on the potential of Djibouti and Chinese influence in the maritime city-state, somewhat mirrored by a look at the Chinese pursuit of the Gwadar port project in Pakistan. This makes a natural transition into the following chapter, focused this time on the Indian Ocean itself, India's ever greater geoeconomic reliance on the seas (p.132), its reaction to the Chinese maritime silk road (p. 136), and, importantly, Indian pursuit of great power status (p.140), which translates in a more assertive state embracing a new maritime strategy. This in turn leads to growing navalism in the Indian Ocean – supported by the fortification of Indian islands and competition with China over more maritime bases (p.155), from Sri Lanka to the Maldives and beyond.

Chapter six deals with the maritime silk road and the South China Sea, seen as essential steps in its future as a great power, as its expanding maritime economy will in turn contribute to its growing geostrategic reach and ability to break free

of any constraints which might be imposed on it from outside (p.174). It discusses the region in terms of historical importance, with Gresh also considering its strategic value (p.175) and the way in which the Chinese maritime economy has expanded as well as how its geoeconomic maritime investments are beginning to be clearer (p.202). The seventh chapter focuses on rising competition and the increasing navalism in East Asia, starting with 2014 and the increase in Indian assertiveness, which contributed to the more congested, securitized nature of the region, with states pursuing competing geoeconomics and geostrategic aims (p.207). The essential importance of the maritime city-state of Singapore is also discussed here, as India and China compete over it, with the latter being more entrenched for now. The Chinese competitive edge is seen as being maintained throughout the region, despite Indian gains, with Russian influence in the region likely to remain allied to China in the pursuit of the dismantling of the U.S. led postwar order.

Chapter eight then looks at the Arctic as a future frontier, underlining its economic and military importance. Marked by the relative absence of the United States, the Arctic is undergoing similar processes of congestion and securitization, primarily due to Russian geoeconomics interests (p.250), and strategic vision, but also due to China's increased focus northward (p.264). The final chapter points to a number of potential choices for the United States in addressing the coming Eurasian maritime challenge. These vary from driving a wedge between Russia and China to using a mix of transparency, economic development and support for historical and new allies, as well as acting on the increasing importance of the Arctic.

The work repeatedly shows the importance of Eurasia's narrow, strategic maritime choke points, and how this may increase the possibility of future conflicts in a globalised world. Thus, the major importance of the book is its focus on considering the Eurasian landmass as a whole and linking it to the maritime potential of various political actors in a vast and highly complicated region. With so much of the world's trade reliant on maritime routes – along with the multidimensional nature of seapower and its impact on international relations and politics – it is certainly an important research topic.