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Power and Profit at Sea in the Making of the International System

J.C. Sharman

Abstract:

The making of the international system from c.1500 reflected distinctively maritime dynamics, especially “gunboat diplomacy,” the use of naval force for commercial gain. Comparisons between civilizations and across time show first that gunboat diplomacy was peculiarly European, second that it evolved through successive stages. For the majority of the modern era, violence was central to the commercial strategies of European state, private, and hybrid actors alike in the wider world. In contrast, large and small non-Western polities almost never sought to advance mercantile aims through naval coercion. European exceptionalism reflected a structural trade deficit, regional systemic dynamics favoring armed trade, and mercantilist beliefs. Changes in international norms later restricted the practice of gunboat diplomacy to states, as private navies became illegitimate. More generally, a maritime perspective suggests the need for a reappraisal of fundamental conceptual divisions, shows how the capital- and technology-intensive nature of naval war allowed relatively small European powers to be global players, and explains how European expansion and the creation of the first global international system was built on dominance at sea centuries before Europeans’ general military superiority on land.

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From the late 1400s, European maritime military and commercial engagements with the rest of the world created the modern international system. Yet most theories of international politics have a firmly terrestrial orientation. They concentrate 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 centered on

naval coercion and power projection. The ends were primarily commercial: control of seaborne trade, expansion of market access, and, later, repayment of sovereign debts. Thus, the particularly European contribution to the making of the modern international system was organized maritime violence in pursuit of commercial ends, or what this article refers to as gunboat diplomacy.

The article explores the nature and significance of gunboat diplomacy for international politics, first through a comparison between civilizations, then by a comparison across time. Gunboat diplomacy was peculiar to Europeans, being largely alien to Asian politics. This European exceptionalism reflected a structural trade deficit with Asia, a particular European facility for naval violence developed in an anarchical regional system, and ideologies of mercantilism that conflated state power and commercial success. Gunboat diplomacy was practiced by a wide variety of European actors from the end of the fifteenth century to the close of the eighteenth century, but then was restricted to states in the nineteenth century, in line with changing norms concerning the state's legitimate monopoly over organized coercion. A proper appreciation of maritime dynamics changes scholars' understanding of the development of the international system. It shows how relatively small European actors attained outsized influence on the global stage, thanks to their facility in the particularly technology- and capital-intensive sphere of naval warfare and to relative indifference of Asian empires to maritime affairs. Relatedly, it accounts for how Europeans could establish the first truly global international system in a period when they were generally inferior to Asian great powers in military and economic terms. This maritime perspective thus explains how and why European expansion and the formation of the first truly global international system lagged general European dominance by almost 300 years.

Although central to the creation of the modern international system, gunboat diplomacy nevertheless blurs now conventional categories. Those using coercion were a mix of public, private, and hybrid actors seeking commercial goals, at a time when Europeans saw fighting as essential to and inseparable from trading. What are now taken-for-granted distinctions between 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 works have explained how the rise and fall of various norms over time have shaped means and ends in war.¹ Certain types of warfare have largely been consigned to the past, including wars aimed at amassing slaves, acquiring colonies, changing territorial boundaries, or amassing plunder.² Nonstate naval coercion for profit, once commonplace, became delegitimated and disappeared. After the decline of gunboat diplomacy its previously central role has now been almost forgotten. Currently, fighting and trading at sea are different things, and the separation according to which states do the former while companies do the latter, are relatively recent developments, and represent ideas that were completely alien for the majority of the modern era.

Contrary to “the stopping power of water,”³ the construction of the first global international system from the late 1400s suggests that the more appropriate metaphor is of the seas providing a “broad highway” for both trade and coercion between continents.⁴ More than this, for European powers, but not other civilizations, control and authority over the seas were goals in and of themselves.⁵ 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 multicivilizational international order.⁶ In the period from the late 1400s to the late 1700s, Europeans built the modern international system, even though they were often far inferior to non-Western great powers in terms of population, wealth, and military power. How was this possible? Europeans had both a technical capacity and a cultural inclination to control seas that Eastern empires lacked.

The importance of these dynamics notwithstanding, as Jan Glete argues, “Historical sociology has had considerable difficulties in understanding the maritime sphere and its role in European state formation.”⁷ International relations scholars seeking to explain the birth of the modern international system have likewise concentrated on war and trade on land.⁸ For those few historians and sociologists like Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein who have adopted a maritime approach, the role of war and coercion has remained very much secondary.⁹ The relatively small number of military historians who have devoted substantial attention to the study of war at sea have 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 monopolization of war at sea.¹⁰ Yet, as John Guilmartin notes, “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.”¹¹

Even the relatively scarce maritime treatments of the subject have tended to be disproportionately centered on Europe.¹² This focus has reflected the past tendency, now under challenge, to unreflectively generalize 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 as a whole.¹³ The atypical European orientation to combine commerce and war at sea contrasts with the assumption of homogeneous preferences and common strategies among units in the international system, that all international actors want more or less the same thing and go about getting it in similar ways. Furthermore, in contrast to the common exclusive focus on states, the relevant units within the international system are shown to be a diverse range of public, private, and hybrid actors.

This article further establishes and explains key variations in the use of international coercion across different historical epochs. Deep patterns in the conduct of international maritime violence have shifted in line with evolving understandings of legitimate actors and legitimate conduct in the international system.¹⁴ These changes are of fundamental importance, because as Martha Finnemore puts it: “Intervention policies lie at the boundary of peace and war in international politics. Regulating the use of force... defines the character of international society.”¹⁵

Evidence to support these claims is drawn from five centuries of encounters between civilizations. In looking at seaborne trade among indigenous actors in the Indian Ocean and East Asia, the first goal is to demonstrate that the European approach was indeed distinctive. 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 militarized control over trade routes, as Europeans. European exceptionalism here reflects trade imbalances between East and West, the formative effects of the self-help European trading environment, and mercantilist ideology.

The next sections illustrate change across time. In the early modern, period gunboat

diplomacy was wielded by state and nonstate actors. In the nineteenth century, gunboat diplomacy was restricted to state actors. This restriction was in line with broader normative shifts to outlaw nonstate actors' use of organized violence. The actors employing gunboat diplomacy changed, but the basic commercial rationale did not. Gunboat diplomacy brings into question the fundamental dichotomies of war and trade, public and private, companies and states, high politics and low. How could European actors such as Portugal, the Netherlands, and England play such prominent roles in building the international system, despite being massively overshadowed by the power and wealth of Asian empires? European military dominance in Asia and Africa occurred 300 years after the beginning of European expansion. Europeans were able to build a maritime global order via gunboat diplomacy thanks to a narrow naval superiority, but even more so because of the indifference of Asian great powers, which did not regard the seas as worth fighting for.

The term “gunboat diplomacy” here is not synonymous with any and all uses of limited naval force.¹⁶ Exercises such as the deployment of two U.S. 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. Although there is no absolute dividing line, piracy is also different in usually being practiced by small groups on an opportunistic basis, rather than the formally constituted states and companies examined here.¹⁸ Finally, I do not argue that all European imperialism was driven by commercial concerns. Especially in the nineteenth century, security concerns connected with intra-European rivalries and prestige were primary motivations.

The Distinctiveness of Violence at Sea

For centuries, war at sea has differed from war on land: “Navies have always been far more complex and capital-intensive organizations 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.”¹⁹ For example, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, English forces allocated one cannon per 1,000 soldiers, but one cannon per 2.4 sailors.²⁰ Yet, this greater capital outlay and organizational complexity in deploying naval force did not give states any particular advantage over nonstate organizations. In contrast to the growing state monopolization of violence that occurred in the early modern

period in Europe c.1500-1750, organized violence at sea in the wider world was until the nineteenth century dominated by an unseemly combination of European private, public, and hybrid actors, united only in their application of violence for profit.²¹ The doctrine of mercantilism, the tendency to make sovereign claims on parts of the high seas, the widespread use of privateers, the power of hybrid chartered companies such as the English and Dutch East India Companies, and the later tendency to coerce delinquent sovereign debtors through the threat or use of limited state naval force, all attest to the fluidity that brings into question conventional dichotomies in international relations.

One of the most relevant thinkers in laying the analytical foundations of the idea of gunboat diplomacy is Frederic Lane. Lane begins with the idea that violence can be a service provided at greater or lesser cost to, for, and by European merchants, criminals, and rulers, malleable categories that blurred into each other. In contrast to war on land, for Lane there was no impetus for the state to win out over other actors in monopolizing violence at sea.²² Whereas violence on land is subject to economies of scale and tends to be a natural monopoly, neither of these tendencies holds for naval force.²³

For Lane, “protection costs” at sea refer to the whole gamut of responses to the threat of violence: arming ships and sailors, hiring mercenaries, making extortion payments, paying bribes, organizing convoys, establishing in-house armies or navies, or building or seizing trading outposts and ports.²⁴ In the millennium from 700 to 1700, protection costs were said to be the single most important factor determining the success or failure of European maritime trade. Violence, or protection from violence, crucially affected the cost of economic pursuits, but 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.”²⁵ Lane 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 such as war making and state making as organized crime, which also portrays rulers as “coercive self-seeking entrepreneurs”?²⁶ Charles Tilly notes that he takes central elements of his thesis directly from Lane.²⁷ Yet, there are also significant differences. Tilly emphasizes the (proto) state’s progressive monopolization of violence. As noted above, however, until into the nineteenth century, maritime international relations were defined by the diversity of violence-wielding

actors. Tilly sees rulers as pursuing 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.”²⁸ Although Tilly later speaks of capital-intensive oligarchic states such as Venice,²⁹ this isolated subtype 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. In contrast, the inclination to subordinate the pursuit of profits to that of power (and glory) in wars on land 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. If at home Europeans fought for glory, dynastic reasons, or as part of balancing strategies, in the wider world commercial motivations were primary.

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. As discussed below, Asian great powers were at least as capable of projecting power across the seas as Europeans until the nineteenth century. So too Arabs, Polynesians, Chinese, and others routinely traded across oceans for centuries before the European voyages of discovery. Yet only Europeans sought control over the high seas, key sea-lanes, and maritime trade as ends justifying the sustained use of organized violence by blue-water naval forces, whether public, private, or some combination of the two, capable of operating globally.

Maritime Asia

Given the long and dishonorable history of unfounded assertions about European exceptionalism, it is vital to substantiate the claim that gunboat diplomacy was distinctively European. Asians and Africans had been trading with each other across the Indian Ocean for centuries before Europeans arrived; there was certainly nothing distinctively European about intercontinental seaborne trade.³⁰ Militarily, 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 from 1405 to 1433, an order of magnitude larger than any European expedition for centuries

afterwards.³¹ The largest single Indian Ocean expedition of the sixteenth century was mounted by the Ottoman Empire to challenge the Portuguese in Gujarat in 1538.³² Further East, the Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s saw Japan move a force of 158,000 troops,³³ once again a greater number than any European power could send abroad until the nineteenth century. Thus, if Europeans were exceptional in their use naval power for commercial ends, this was not because they were the only actors capable of oceanic trade and war.

Instead, as Glete writes, “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.”³⁴ 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, engaging in overseas colonization, or controlling maritime trade.³⁵

The Ottomans employed powerful war galleys in the Mediterranean.³⁶ As Wayne Lee notes, however, “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.”³⁷ 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.³⁸

The Mughal emperors, writes John Richards, “never considered or pursued expansion by sea. The culture of seafaring was completely foreign to the Mughal elite.”³⁹ They thought of the Portuguese and later other Europeans “as merely nomads...patrolling the seas.”⁴⁰ Pearson sees the Mughals as distant from merchants,⁴¹ while elsewhere the Mughals are described as “the classic example of a continental Asian empire with an aloof attitude towards maritime commerce.”⁴² Rulers in South Asia welcomed trade, but almost never actively promoted it.⁴³

Glete argues that China had the material wherewithal to establish colonies in Africa, Europe, and America, had they been so inclined.⁴⁴ The Ming emperor, however, 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.”⁴⁵ As Jeremy 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.”⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ Largely for these reasons, China had no real need for a blue-water navy.⁴⁸ Pirates were defeated by a combination of coastal defense, payoffs, and forced depopulation of the seaboard. Unlike its European counterparts, “the Chinese state almost never intervened in support of its maritime traders and emigrants.”⁴⁹ Speaking of Japan and East Asia more generally, Adam Clulow relates that “private groups of merchants had little standing across the region.”⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ There was something approaching a free market in Asian waters before the arrival of the mercantilist Europeans.⁵²

Treatments of the Europeans in comparative context confirm the sense that they adhered to a very different model of maritime affairs than the Asian and African models discussed above. 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.”⁵³ Tracy 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.”⁵⁴ Speaking of the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas dividing the world between Spain and Portugal, 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.”⁵⁵ Clulow once again supports this conclusion: “The overseas enterprises that began to push into Asian waters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were maritime organizations specifically geared toward seaborne warfare.”⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

A few Asian and African powers did mimic the European tendency to merge maritime trade and war.⁵⁸ The Barbary corsairs of North Africa combined their status as vassals of the Ottoman Empire with a thriving industry of privateering, raiding, and slaving.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ Finally, from the mid-1600s well into the nineteenth century, the Omanis practiced a highly successful form of militarized trade in the Western Indian Ocean.⁶¹ Yet, these examples are the exceptions and were often directly prompted by European models.⁶²

Thus, Europeans primarily won control of the Eastern seas by default; local great powers generally did not see the Indian and Pacific Oceans as worth fighting for. Yet, it would be wrong to deny Europeans' tactical advantages in naval warfare or to ignore the naval battles that they consistently won against Asian opponents.⁶³ These advantages boil down to three factors: (1) the use of superior cannons to sink enemy ships, (2) the sturdier build that made European ships more resistant to enemy fire, and (3) 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 could routinely defeat much larger Asian fleets in standing off and sinking enemy vessels by holing them at the waterline, while avoiding their opponents' attempts to close for boarding.⁶⁴ Asians had a long familiarity with gun-armed ships, in the Chinese case probably from sometime in the 1300s, but these guns were used as antipersonnel weapons.⁶⁵ Because European ships were built to withstand rougher North Atlantic conditions, they were rarely vulnerable to these smaller Asian guns.⁶⁶ Accentuating these two advantages, European vessels' superior rigging allowed them to engage and disengage at will through being able to sail closer to the wind.⁶⁷

Gunboat Diplomacy in the Early Modern Era, 1500-1800

As well as illustrating the specifics of gunboat diplomacy, the historical evidence on the Portuguese Estado da India and the Dutch East India Company presented below serves as a point of reference for both the intercivilizational and historical comparisons. First, in the use

of naval force to achieve commercial aims, the strategies of these actors represent a stark contrast with the non-Western polities surveyed above, thus backing the claim that gunboat diplomacy was distinctively European. Second, the fact that nonstate actors (chartered companies) were at least as important in gunboat diplomacy as states serves as a point of contrast with the later state monopolization of this practice in the nineteenth century. The prevalence of gunboat diplomacy as the defining feature of European-Asian international relations in the early modern era also underlines the significance of this practice for the formation of the modern international system.

THE PORTUGUESE 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 from East Africa, to the East and West coasts of India, to Southeast Asia, and 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.”⁶⁹ This realm came to be ruled from Goa by a viceroy appointed by the king and reporting to Lisbon. P.J. 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.”⁷⁰

The motives for this campaign of expansion were twofold. The first was a millennialist grand strategy of finding Christian allies in the East with whom to effect a giant pincer movement to jointly liberate the Holy Land.⁷¹ When these hopes were quickly dashed, a second rationale of profiting from the spice trade came to dominate. The benefits of this trade, which was tightly monopolized by the crown, were substantial: in 1518 the king obtained more revenue from spices than from the whole of metropolitan Portugal.⁷² The sprawling Portuguese domain in the East was premised on the king’s claim to authority over the whole Indian Ocean.⁷³ In a move that is highly revealing of the mentality of combining power and profit, in 1501 King Manuel declared himself “lord of conquest, navigation, and commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia, and Persia.”⁷⁴

Aside from attacking competitors in the spice trade, 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: “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 terms this was precisely a protection racket.”⁷⁵ 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 unfavorable 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 on the one hand, and the Portuguese aspiration to impose a state monopoly and administratively set prices backed by naval force on the other, is stark and striking.⁷⁶ The bellicose and maritime orientation of the Portuguese was repeatedly noted by contemporary Asian and African observers.⁷⁷ In Sri Lanka, the ruler decreed that “whilst the Christians would be Lords of the sea, he would be Lord of the land.”⁷⁸ Ultimately, by departing so far from market-clearing prices, the Portuguese may have later undermined their revenues through fostering corruption among their own officials and drawing in European competitors.

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY 1602-1799

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. Initially the most powerful example was the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC). The chartered companies epitomize European hybrid actors designed for maritime profit through violence.⁷⁹ 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.”⁸⁰

The Dutch government gave the VOC a monopoly on trade with the East, and granted it the authority to engage in war and diplomacy, as well as a wide range of other governing, judicial, administrative, and even religious powers.⁸¹ 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.”⁸²

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.”⁸³ 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.”⁸⁴ The VOC can 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 practice 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 VOC as it was to its Portuguese predecessors and rivals. As Tracy claims, “In the Eastern seas, no European enterprise was more willing to resort to war to gain its objectives than the VOC.”⁸⁵ In the first half of the seventeenth century, the VOC not only succeeded in building a sprawling networked domain across the Indian Ocean,⁸⁶ but also eclipsed the Portuguese.⁸⁷

The VOC closely followed many aspects of the earlier Portuguese approach. It enforced a monopoly over key spices such as nutmeg, mace, and cinnamon. It used its control of the seas to turn the terms of trade sharply against the weaker polities of the region. The VOC instituted its own protection racket of safe passage passes for ships seeking to trade in the region.⁸⁸ 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 thoroughgoing, than that of the Portuguese.”⁸⁹ If there is one quotation 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 Honors should know by experience that trade in Asia must be driven and maintained under the protection and

favor of Your Honors' 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.”⁹⁰

The VOC inspired a host of European imitators that followed in its wake. 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: “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.”⁹¹

The Portuguese and the VOC in the East epitomize the features particular to European expansion via gunboat diplomacy. These include the strong, distinctively maritime emphasis capitalizing on the use of organized violence at sea. There is also the distinctive political-economic project of using naval force, rather than markets or contracts, to achieve commercial aims, and of seeking to enforce proprietorial and exclusive control over the seas.

What Explains European Exceptionalism?

Why were Europeans different from their Asian counterparts in employing gunboat diplomacy? The explanation has three interrelated economic, geopolitical, and ideational parts. First, because Western Europeans were isolated from coveted Eastern goods they had a greater incentive to engage in long-distance seaborne trade. Yet, after solving the problem of direct trading maritime access, Europeans found they had little to exchange with Asians that the latter wanted. In this context, one of the few competitive European “exports” turned out to be maritime violence. Second, Europe was especially violent, and so protection costs were the most important determinant of commercial survival and success. Europeans took this orientation from their home waters to the East. In contrast, hierarchy and hegemony in Asian regional systems provided merchants with a much more pacific trading environment. Third, mercantilism meant that both European rulers and merchants saw commercial and strategic priorities as complementary, and indeed inseparable. These doctrines were largely alien to Eastern rulers, who subscribed to a much more modern division between war as the concern of the state and trade as the pursuit of private merchants.

ECONOMIC ISOLATION AND THE TRADE IMBALANCE

In the medieval period, Europe was on the farthest periphery from the heartland of Eurasia.⁹² Though other civilizations engaged in long-distance trade, given their isolation, few felt the need as keenly as Western Europeans. This in part explains the drive to explore across the seas. The successful rounding of the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 1400s provided direct access to goods of the Indies for the first time, but left Europeans with a new problem: what to exchange for the cornucopia of goods on offer. Although at first the priority was spices, European traders were later faced with an almost insatiable demand at home for Indian textiles, Chinese silks, porcelains, and tea, among other commodities.⁹³ Asians, however, had little interest in European goods. The Chinese and Mughal Empires were largely self-sufficient, and they could trade with neighbors to obtain the relatively few goods they lacked.⁹⁴ The result was a persistent and (from the European point of view) worrying drain of specie to Asia, the only commodity Europeans had that Asian merchants wanted.

Europeans tried various commercial strategies to close the deficit, but ultimately came to rely on their main export to the East, maritime violence. One of their first strategies was to take part in intra-Asian trade to generate surpluses that could then be used to buy spices to be shipped back home. The Portuguese and later the Dutch and English East India Companies all employed this strategy.⁹⁵ The Europeans also sought to leverage their intercontinental reach. For the Spanish, this approach involved using American silver transported via the Philippines to directly pay for Asian goods.⁹⁶ The Russians exchanged furs from Siberia and Alaska.⁹⁷ Other Europeans sought to sell commodities produced with slave labor on their American plantations, especially tobacco.⁹⁸

Although these expedients ameliorated the problem, Europeans continued to struggle with a trade deficit well into the 1800s. And hence they came to rely on the gunboat diplomacy tactics surveyed in the previous section, from protection rackets to monopolies. They also directly exported the means of violence, selling weapons (especially cannons) and hiring themselves out as military specialists and mercenaries.⁹⁹ Furthermore, even the intra- and inter-regional trading solutions themselves relied heavily on violence. Lacking any substantial commercial advantage, wherever possible, Europeans sought to tilt the regional competition in their favor through the use of coercion. A Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes, “the [East India] companies could rarely compete with Asian traders in any market, save when they could use violence without fear of retaliation.”¹⁰⁰ Their interregional trading strategy

also relied on the use of force through enslaved African and American labor in mines and plantations, and through Atlantic monopolies maintained by the crown or armed chartered companies such as the Dutch West India Company and English Royal African Company.

EUROPEAN ANARCHY AND ASIAN HIERARCHY

The second part of the explanation of European exceptionalism rests on differences in regional international systems. Although the trade deficit created a strong incentive to use violence, by itself this does not account for why Europeans were so adept at militarized trade right from the point they entered into regular contact with Asia. Drawing on David Kang's work, this part of the answer rests on the more pacific and hierarchical nature of Asian international systems relative to the more anarchical and violence-prone West.¹⁰¹ Those trading in European waters faced a profoundly insecure environment. N.A.M Rodger states: "The objective of the private shipowner was business, but few if any medieval shipowners could expect to make money without being willing to fight for it...Robbery under arms was a normal aspect of seaborne trade."¹⁰² Maritime trading republics such as Genoa and Venice were successful chiefly because of their ability to profitably combine war with trade.¹⁰³ When European traders later ventured to Africa and Asia, they bore the stamp of this systemic insecurity, which shaped their militarized institutions and strategies.¹⁰⁴

In contrast, as Kang suggests, the East Asian international system was relatively more hierarchical and peaceful than its European equivalent, especially when it came to the organization of long-distance trade.¹⁰⁵ Reasoning from earlier work by John King Fairbank on what has been termed by some a tribute system,¹⁰⁶ Kang argues that from 1368 to 1841 Chinese economic, military, and especially Confucian cultural hegemony created a system that peacefully managed both political and commercial relations with Korea, Vietnam, and (more sporadically) Japan.¹⁰⁷ As a result of this hierarchical system, Asian maritime traders had much less need to manage their own protection costs, and they did not face the same incentives to engage in gunboat diplomacy as their European counterparts. Some scholars have strongly challenged Kang's thesis as to whether this pacific tributary system of political and commercial relations really did rest on a shared Confucian worldview, as he maintains, or on material factors.¹⁰⁸ The debate is beyond the scope of this article, but the point remains that regardless of why maritime East Asia was relatively peaceful, the systemic context encouraged peaceful trade more than gunboat diplomacy.

No equivalent of a tributary system existed in South Asia. During the crucial period of European entry and expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the Mughal Empire exercised hegemony over the region.¹⁰⁹ This huge and vastly wealthy area encompassed between 100 and 150 million people, more than the combined total of all European great powers at the time.¹¹⁰ Although they were indifferent to the specifics of trade, Mughal rulers indirectly aided trade through monetizing the economy and providing a relatively higher degree of internal peace and order than in Europe at the time.¹¹¹ Systemic factors again explain why South Asian traders had less need of an in-house capacity for organized violence than their European equivalents.

MERCANTILIST IDEOLOGY

The third point relates to how the doctrine of mercantilism shaped the mind-set of European rulers, but was alien to their Asian counterparts. Although today it is a commonplace that national power and wealth are intimately related, this notion was foreign to premodern European rulers.¹¹² Before this point, if commercial affairs and wealth were seen to have any relevance at all for affairs of state, they were seen as dangerous, corrupting influences. Yet, with the rise of mercantilism, “the greatness and even the survival of states were now understood to be based on wealth. European states sought political self-preservation...in commercial power.”¹¹³ International trade was seen in zero-sum terms. Crucial to this doctrine was the reciprocal nature of wealth and power: “just as state power depended on the accumulation of wealth, so the accumulation of wealth depended on state power.”¹¹⁴ Importantly, mercantilism saw the economic underpinnings of military power in control of trade more than territory. Chartered companies such as the English and Dutch East India Companies were in many ways the perfect institutional representations of this new idea.¹¹⁵ In contrast, as the previous section established, Asian rulers adhered to an essential separation between state power and commercial concerns that was the antithesis of mercantilism.¹¹⁶

The shift away from mercantilism toward free trade from the end of the eighteenth century delegitimated monopolies and increasingly restricted the use of armed force to the state,¹¹⁷ but it did not signal the end of gunboat diplomacy. The new ideology was perfectly compatible with European states forcefully opening up foreign markets to free trade at the behest of private commercial interests, most obviously in the cases of China and Japan in the

mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, in the nineteenth century, the sanctity of contracts and property rights in the international system was seen to require gunboat diplomacy against delinquent states in the periphery.

The Historical Evolution of Gunboat Diplomacy

In the nineteenth century, the use of organized violence by nonstate actors became delegitimized. This injunction relied on a new distinction between the proper role of the state, being specialized in the use of large-scale violence, and the proper role of the corporation, devoted to commerce, a distinction that had been lacking in the early modern era. This separation restricted but did not end gunboat diplomacy, however, because in the nineteenth century, private interests in great powers could rely on their governments to use force against foreign parties abroad to secure private commercial aims. The remaining sections of the article explore this evolution with reference to the decline of the British East India Company in the face of the state monopolization of violence, the Opium Wars as epitomizing nineteenth century state gunboat diplomacy, and the naval enforcement of international debt repayment.

Theoretically, this argument builds on now fairly well established understandings of the role of norms in the international system, defined as standards of conduct for a given actor in a given situation, that can have both constitutive and regulative effects.¹¹⁸ Even those who are not committed constructivists now acknowledge that norms are an important driver of many fundamental historical shifts.¹¹⁹ For example, Douglass North ascribes the end of slavery to changing norms rendering the practice illegitimate.¹²⁰ A fellow Nobel economics laureate, Alvin Roth, describes the evolving regulative norms that underpin historical variations in “repugnant markets” as “every bit as real as the constraints imposed by technology or by the requirements of incentives and efficiency.”¹²¹

The interconnected norms relevant here have set out what actors should be, and what they should do (or not do), with the latter relating to both appropriate ends and appropriate means. There is now almost thirty years of international relations scholarship on how shared understandings of the appropriate institutional form for polities has helped produce an international system defined in terms of sovereign states cleaving to a common model of organization.¹²² Much of this work draws on “world society” work from sociology.¹²³

Sovereign states now make up the dominant form, largely independent of their functional performance. A defining feature of the modern sovereign state is its monopoly on the legitimate use of organized coercion. Just as international norms have come to prescribe some forms, they now proscribe others, such as chartered companies endowed with sovereign prerogatives such as the power to make war and peace.

Norms also shape expectations of what actors should want, and appropriate means for achieving these preferences, including in the conduct of war. Norms of war apply to who should engage in war, how wars should be fought, and for which ends. In line with current norms of sovereignty, only states should have the right to engage in war, rather than private parties, as was historically the norm.¹²⁴ Various norms restrict the use of certain types of weapons,¹²⁵ while valorizing others.¹²⁶ In her landmark book on intervention, 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; over the sweep of history, however, these understandings change. State leaders come to redefine their interests and the best way to achieve them by the standards of the day.¹²⁷

The next section applies this theory to the historical evidence. It shows that the big historical changes whereby gunboat diplomacy became restricted to states are consistent with the norms-based explanation presented here, but also that this explanation is relatively more plausible than the leading alternative: that the rapid pace of change in naval technology priced nonstate actors out of this arena.

THE STATE MONOPOLIZATION OF VIOLENCE AND THE DECLINE OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

No institution better represents the decline of nonstate militaries than the English East India Company (EIC), the greatest of the chartered companies, and no episode more starkly illustrates the new style of commercially motivated but state-directed gunboat diplomacy than the Opium Wars. This section briefly tracks the decline of private violence through the changing fortunes of the EIC and establishes the proposition that, although the state became the exclusive wielder of violence, Westerners' extra-European use of naval coercion still

revolved around commercial goals.

The English East India Company was founded in 1600. For at least the first century and a half of its existence, the EIC shared the maritime and militarized character of the Portuguese, Dutch, and other Europeans in the East.¹²⁸ Ultimately, however, it built a corporate empire in South Asia. In particular, in the period 1757-64 the EIC won rulership of Bengal, at the time the richest area of South Asia, with a population far greater than Britain itself. The Company then expanded its domains still further through a series of wars against local rivals. Yet, in the late 1700s and into the early nineteenth century, a series of Parliamentary Acts saw the Company progressively subordinated to the British state. The 1773 Regulating Act established the general principle of British state sovereignty over the Company's Asian possessions, while subsequent legislation put the EIC under closer and closer government direction.¹²⁹

The Company lost its sovereign prerogatives because it was outcompeted by state rivals, but because of changing norms about what companies should be and do. In military terms, the Company went from strength to strength, besting not only South Asian powers, but also European state rivals in conquering what was at that point the single richest and most populous overseas empire.¹³⁰ Commercially, it had secured the fantastically lucrative monopoly on tea exports to Britain. The political establishment in Britain, however, increasingly took the view that there was an appropriate division of labor between states and companies, and that the use of organized violence was properly the sole province of the former.¹³¹ As such, the EIC's hybrid status came under attack inside and outside Parliament; for the first time, the Company's doings in Asia came under widespread popular and media scrutiny. Edmund Burke and Adam Smith were only two of the best known critics of the Company, assailing the combination of powers best kept separate.¹³² Thus Burke denounced "a state in disguise of a merchant, a great public office in the disguise of a counting house," decrying "that thing which was supposed by the Roman law so unsuitable – the same power was a trader, the same power was a lord."¹³³ Opponents saw the EIC as "dangerous precisely because it was old, a vestigial form of hybrid sovereignty that was quickly going the way of pirates, mercenaries, composite monarchies, and other alternatives to the nation-state."¹³⁴ For its part, the Company found it difficult to avoid further state control and defend its sovereign prerogatives at the same time as it was lobbying to enlist government military support and credit.¹³⁵

These attacks reflected more general trends, as the idea of the state's legitimate monopoly of the means of organized coercion gained ground, and hostility to deviations from this principle waxed accordingly. This idea secured final acceptance only in the mid-nineteenth century, much later than often appreciated.¹³⁶ Thus, the use of privateers declined sharply after the Napoleonic Wars, being outlawed in 1856.¹³⁷ Over the same period, there was a precipitous decline in the use of mercenaries.¹³⁸ Sarah Percy holds that mercenaries fell out of favor because self-enrichment was no longer an acceptable motivation for military service, while private military forces were seen as dangerous to the body politic in a way that state armies were not.¹³⁹ Although Avant includes an important role for domestic institutions, she too thinks that new Enlightenment ideas about popular sovereignty, the social contract, and the proper relationship between the state, citizens, and soldiers were also crucial in explaining the decline of mercenaries as an institution.¹⁴⁰

Leading military historians agree that the decline of private violence in the form of chartered companies, privateers, mercenaries, and military entrepreneurs reflected cultural shifts, rather than functional requirements. In his exhaustive study, *The Business of War*, David Parrott sees the year 1760 as the beginning of the definitive shift delegitimizing private military solutions,¹⁴¹ and enshrining the state's monopoly over the means and practice of warmaking. He holds that conceptions of status and appropriateness, rather than military necessity, drove the changes, arguing along the same lines as Percy that "when the role of private enterprise in warfare came under threat and finally disappeared in the late eighteenth century, it was for reasons that owed nothing to an assessment of its actual effectiveness."¹⁴² Instead, state armies became a "marker of sovereignty," a status symbol increasingly indispensable to the self-identity and external recognition of states.¹⁴³ John Lynn similarly emphasizes the primacy of norms, legitimacy, and even aesthetics in driving changes such as the phasing out of privately raised French regiments in the 1780s (before the revolution), and increasing state control of military resources, rather than any objective military necessity. He terms this phenomenon the "cultural regulation of war."¹⁴⁴ Other prominent military historians similarly emphasize the cultural drivers of the organization of military violence more generally.¹⁴⁵

New understandings of sovereignty mandated that the state exercise a monopoly over the conduct of war. The use of privateers and mercenaries declined as a result. So too in the second half of the eighteenth century the EIC dominated its European and Asian opponents,

yet nevertheless progressively lost its independence. Critics came to see it as illegitimate that a merchant company should exercise the powers of a state, especially those of waging war. Yet, this normative change was still perfectly compatible with the use of interstate violence for commercial ends, as the example of the Opium Wars demonstrates.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY: THE OPIUM WARS

Although merchants lost their in-house capacity for gunboat diplomacy, they remained wedded to a profit-from-power strategy, now employed exclusively by states on behalf of these private interests. Perhaps the primary examples of such in the nineteenth century were the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60).

Conflict sprang from the long-standing problem discussed earlier in connection with European exceptionalism: the near-permanent trade surplus in favor of Asians caused a persistent drain of specie away from Europe and the Americas. A succession of Dutch, Russian, and British missions to plead the case for free trade in Beijing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were unsuccessful. The solution for the British was opium grown in India and traded to China, the only commodity that generated enough silver to rebalance the trade deficit.¹⁴⁶ Wary of both the economic and public health consequences, the Qing imperial government banned the importation of opium. Neither private British traders nor the government in London would accept this decision, especially after a huge quantity of traders' opium was seized and destroyed by Qing officials. By the 1830s, in keeping with the state's monopolization of sovereign powers, diplomatic relations with China had been taken from the East India Company and were exercised by the British government. The more general grievance was that Europeans chafed at their very limited commercial and diplomatic access to China, being largely restricted to Canton and Macao, and prevented from dealing with Chinese imperial officials directly.

The First Opium War showed some strong continuities but also important differences in the conduct of gunboat diplomacy. Gunboat diplomacy had changed from the era of mercantilism to that of free-trade imperialism.¹⁴⁷ Although some scholars have argued that the role of British traders has been exaggerated,¹⁴⁸ the consensus among historians is that the British government's main war aims were primarily commercial.¹⁴⁹ The Qing authorities were long uncertain as to whether they were engaged in a trade dispute or an actual war,¹⁵⁰ a direct result of the Westerners' fusion of warfare and commerce. Unlike in the halcyon days

of the chartered companies, however, the war was directed by the British government and waged by the Royal Navy and the regular British army, rather than private merchants or the EIC (though the latter contributed some units subordinated to state command). The war was predominantly maritime, with British forces blockading, bombarding, and seizing forts and settlements along the Pearl River Delta and up the coast. The knockout blow was delivered via the Yangtze River system. British gunboats intruded into the Grand Canal, blocking the payment of taxes and the distribution of grain throughout China. As well as imposing an indemnity to compensate the British merchants, and ceding Hong Kong to the British, the 1842 Treaty of Nanking that followed China's defeat opened up four additional ports to foreign trade. Once again, naval power was the route to commercial profit.

The Second Opium War saw the French join the British.¹⁵¹ The baseline commercial motivation for war stayed constant. The British and French (and subsequently other Western nations) were explicit in defining their aims in terms of further opening trade to foreigners, exempting them from internal duties, and legalizing opium. As with the previous conflict, Western trading interests were vocal in their demands for war.¹⁵² A central part of the treaties that ended the war concerned the forcible induction of the Chinese empires into Western diplomatic practice and conventions, but the commercial outcomes were just as important. Thus, in sharp contrast to contemporary norms, when it came to Western powers and China in the nineteenth century, the appropriate and efficient response to commercial problems was organized interstate violence.¹⁵³

It is important to briefly consider an alternative explanation of the decline of nonstate naval violence. The period that saw the abolition of privateering with the 1856 Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law, as well as the dissolution of the British East India Company in 1857, was also one of repeated revolutions in naval technology. Steam began to replace sail; rifled guns with explosive shells superseded smooth-bores firing solid shot; and iron displaced wood for ships' hulls.¹⁵⁴ Was the end of private naval violence the result of their failure to keep pace with rapid technological changes and the associated costs, with only states being able to pay the price?

Gunboat diplomacy was not a means to defeat state battle fleets, but a way to secure commercial advantage. It was premised on naval coercion directed at merchants to enforce protection rackets and monopolies. Similarly, across their entire history, the mission of privateers was capturing or destroying merchant vessels, not fighting warships.¹⁵⁵ Even when

such maritime violence was directed at governments, this was usually in the form of blockades, bombardments, riverine intrusions, and amphibious raids, not contests between rival armadas on the high seas. From the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries, the targets of gunboat diplomacy were almost never first-rank naval powers. Thus the fact that Western great powers were transforming their navies in the mid- to late-nineteenth century was largely irrelevant to private practitioners of gunboat diplomacy. Furthermore, contrary to the anachronistic view of the sudden obsolescence of the old forms, until 1880 there was a greater tonnage of wooden oceangoing ships than iron, and even many of the latter were sailing ships.¹⁵⁶ Merchants' shift to iron-hulled screw-propeller steamships later in the nineteenth century demonstrates that these new technologies were well within the means of private parties.

Finally, in some instances, nonstate actors were actually at the forefront of new naval technology. The epitome of Western technological superiority in the First Opium War was the steam paddler *Nemesis*, which wreaked havoc on Qing ships and forts and was equally important in towing British troop ships up-stream in rivers.¹⁵⁷ Yet, rather than being a Royal Navy ship, this was an East India Company vessel, paid for privately, and fighting legally as a privateer according to a letter of marque.¹⁵⁸ Thus, at this time, the British Empire's most advanced ship was also its last privateer.

TWENTIETH CENTURY GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY: ENFORCING SOVEREIGN DEBT REPAYMENT

This section examines a type of gunboat diplomacy that came to the fore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: great powers enforcing the repayment of debts incurred by peripheral governments to private creditors. Although gunboat diplomacy in connection with trade disputes had not disappeared, by the second half of the nineteenth century, there were very few markets left outside the West that had not already been forced open or taken under the formal control of the expanding European empires. As in the Opium Wars, and in keeping with the new norms, states used gunboat diplomacy on behalf of private commercial interests.

Odette Lienau, Michael Tomz, and 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.¹⁵⁹ But characterizing the situation in this way

is to universalize the normative presumptions of the twenty-first century: gunboat diplomacy as a solution or deterrent to default is normatively proscribed. In the nineteenth century, especially, the response to problems of sovereign default was for bankers in the great powers to request the assistance of their governments in coercing the debtor governments to repay what was owed. If a naval demonstration did not suffice, the great power's navy could capture customs houses, thereby diverting tax revenues directly toward debt repayments. With the explosion of sovereign lending to peripheral countries, gunboat diplomacy was one of a number of sovereignty-limiting arrangements designed to ensure that bankers got their money back.¹⁶⁰

Governments from creditor countries viewed gunboat diplomacy not as it is viewed today, an “outrage against sovereignty and a threat to peace,”¹⁶¹ but as a means by which to uphold international law and order relating to the sanctity of property and contracts.¹⁶² The international courts at the time actually favored creditors whose governments used force over those who relied on peaceful means of dispute settlement.¹⁶³ Not surprisingly, creditors strongly favored such interventions. The bond markets of the day saw the ultimate sanction of gunboats as highly credible: in the period from 1870 until the outbreak of World War I, about 40 percent of defaulters were subject to gunboat diplomacy.¹⁶⁴ Some scholars have even argued that by strengthening the credibility of their commitments, gunboat diplomacy was in the economic self-interest of borrower states, which could raise more money under easier terms than they could have without the credible threat of enforcement via naval intervention.¹⁶⁵

A pivotal example of gunboat diplomacy in response to debt default is the Venezuela Crisis of 1902-03.¹⁶⁶ In October 1899 during a civil war, the Venezuelan President José Cipriano Castro Ruiz stopped payment of debts owed to German and British banks, companies, and bondholders, and refused offers to negotiate in the newly created Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. In response, Germany and Britain, later aided by Italy, implemented a blockade, seizing the Venezuelan navy and exchanging fire with shore batteries. Evincing the attitudes of the day, President Theodore Roosevelt noted that “if any South American country misbehaves toward a European country, let the European country spank it.”¹⁶⁷ A compromise agreement brokered by the U.S. government saw Venezuela agree to repay a discounted sum, pledging 30 percent of the customs revenues of its two largest ports as a surety.¹⁶⁸

In response, the United States and another nine creditor nations went to The Hague to contest the preferential treatment given to those creditors behind the gunboat diplomacy. The Tribunal found, however, that the creditors taking military action were indeed entitled to preferential treatment.¹⁶⁹ That decision, and the design of the blockade to strictly accord with the international law of the day, reinforces the point that, although gunboat diplomacy is now seen as the violent abrogation of law, as recently as the early twentieth century it was seen as upholding the rule of law.¹⁷⁰ This instance is a typical example of the use of gunboat diplomacy regarding sovereign debt, being described as “standard operating procedure, classic gunboat diplomacy,”¹⁷¹ and “a then-familiar situation.”¹⁷²

Conclusion

This article has argued that for most of the five centuries that a global international system has existed, relations between civilizations have been predominantly maritime, as Europeans have fought and traded from the seas. Scholars’ theories have neglected gunboat diplomacy, however, as well as the more general significance of maritime international relations in the development of international society. Rather than separate activities, seaborne fighting and trading have been essentially intertwined. Using naval power for profit was common to a range of European state and nonstate actors, but alien to other civilizations. In the modern period and on a global scale, what has been taken to be the rule, i.e., divisions between war and trade, the separation of high politics and low, and the primacy of land, armies, and conquest, is in fact the exception. In contrast, what has been taken to be the exception, i.e., the use of war for commercial ends, and the primacy of naval violence and maritime control in global international relations, is in fact the rule.

The second major implication relates to the differentiation of actors’ capabilities and motives. The capital- and technology-intensive nature of naval power allowed small European states to exercise an outsized influence on the global stage. In the mid-seventeenth century, Portugal and the Netherlands each had populations of about 1.5 million and England 5 million, compared with 120 million for Mughal India and 150 million for China.¹⁷³ These European nations enjoyed no great per capita economic advantage over the empires of the South and East Asia until the end of the eighteenth century, three centuries after the beginning of European expansion.¹⁷⁴ Nor did Europeans enjoy any decisive military-technological

advantage outside the maritime sphere until this same time or even later.¹⁷⁵ Yet, despite their essentially trivial populations, economies, and armies, the nature of naval warfare meant that Europeans were able to substitute capital and technology to build formidable forces across the oceans dedicated to the pursuit of profit.

European actors, state and nonstate, were able to coercively build the first global international system thanks to their niche advantage in naval warfare, but perhaps even more importantly because of the general indifference of Asian great powers to maritime affairs. This advantage was sufficient to allow Europeans to dominate the merchants and minor island and littoral polities of the East in setting up their protection rackets and monopolies. The general disinclination of major Asian powers to compete for control of the oceans meant that Europeans in many ways won their expansive maritime domains by default at a time when they had little desire and even less ability to accrue territorial empires in the East. As such, the conventional terrestrial perspective in international relations, conceiving the seas as only a barrier or obstacle to projecting power, misses the crucial formative dynamics of the modern international system.

The final implication relates to problems in conventional presumptions concerning the timing and drivers of the construction of the international system. There is often an implicit or explicit argument that explains the initial creation of the global international system as a result of Western conquests and imperialism.¹⁷⁶ In the Americas, there is some truth to this, although disease was at least as important as military superiority *per se*.¹⁷⁷ But the simultaneous process of European expansion to the East, and the encounters with far more powerful Asian empires, possessed of broadly equivalent military technology, cannot be accommodated within the same frame.¹⁷⁸ As one historian puts it, “Moroccans, Ottomans, Gujaratis, Burmese, Malays, Japanese, Chinese, and countless other peoples had guns, germs, and steel, too, so what else lies behind the rise of Europe?”¹⁷⁹

Mindful of their weakness, Europeans rarely challenged Asian empires on land before 1800. On the occasions they did, such as English, Dutch, and Russian clashes with the Mughals and Chinese in the seventeenth century, the Europeans lost.¹⁸⁰ There is thus a three-century gap between European expansion into Asia from the end of the fifteenth century and European dominance and territorial conquest from the end of the eighteenth century that cannot be explained. How could Europeans expand for 300 years and build the global international system from a position of military and economic inferiority? This puzzle can

only be resolved with the realization that European-Asian interactions in the intervening period, both war and trade, were fundamentally maritime affairs. Even after this point, right throughout the nineteenth century and beyond in East Asia, when Europeans did come to dominate, they exercised this domination primarily via naval force in pursuit of essentially commercial ends, not by conquering territory.

As with the rest of the global periphery not incorporated into formal Western empires, from Latin America to the Near East, much of international politics was primarily maritime in its means and commercial in its ends. Gunboat diplomacy reigned supreme in these regions well into the twentieth century. Once again, this perspective is in sharp contrast to the view that international politics occurs only on land, and that war is a matter of high politics, unsullied by considerations of profit, aimed at defeating armies and occupying territory. Although this view may provide a reasonably accurate picture of international relations in Europe, it is fundamentally misleading in trying to understand international politics outside this atypical and unrepresentative region.

Now there are no companies with navies; the very idea sounds far-fetched. Yet, this implausibility reflects the comparatively recent consensus reserving the exercise of organized coercion to the state. Almost as incredible is the notion of the United States openly threatening foreign states with naval bombardment to resolve trade disputes, or of member governments of the Paris Club lenders sending warships to blockade countries defaulting on sovereign debts. Only a little more than a hundred years ago, however, such responses were not only commonplace, but also explicitly endorsed as upholding the letter and spirit of international law. The current absence of such a historically common phenomenon is a remarkable, if seldom noticed, development that should serve as a reminder of both the importance of varying patterns in the use of force over time, and what in broader historical perspective looks like the strangeness of our own contemporary era.

Yet, if the historical discontinuities are fundamental, there are some continuing echoes of this past. Although power is no longer openly deployed in the service of private profit, the West has retained its taste for capital- and technology-intensive intercontinental expeditionary warfare. And for all the changes since the period of initial European expansion, maritime power remains an essential prerequisite for states seeking to exercise coercive power outside their immediate region, a lesson learned and re-learned by Imperial and Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and most recently China. Then as now, global power demands

naval power.

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1. See, for example, Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Richard M. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003); Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); R. Charli Carpenter, “Vetting the Advocacy Agenda: Network Centrality and the Paradox of Weapons Norms,” *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 69–102, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818310000329; and Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, “How Civil Wars End: The International System, Norms, and the Role of External Actors,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Winter 2017/18), pp. 127–171, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00305 .
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