

Traps, Swans, and Plans: Some Strategic Considerations in World Maritime History¹

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In 1882, Prime Minister William Gladstone remarked that “the fashion in building ships of war is as fickle as that of ladies’ hats.”² His observation about late-nineteenth-century naval architects’ apparent caprice in designing warships reflects the strain that technological advances in hull construction, propulsion, and armament had put on naval establishments of the day. But if the process was fickle, it was so only in comparison with the hundreds of years of relative stability that characterized European naval architecture between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. This period was not completely lacking in change, but it takes something of a trained eye to identify the subtle differences from one generation of ships to the next, even as late as the launch of HMS *Warrior* in 1860. As Gladstone’s remark suggests, the technology of the ship was changing far faster than the institutional thinking about the use of ships. A decade later, “at the very time when new instruments of the Industrial Revolution were beginning to erode principles and theories upon which his doctrines were based,” Alfred Thayer Mahan set in amber the genius of the age of sail with his publication of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*.³ The book has never been out of print, but as with many works that seek historical antecedents for subsequent developments, it has been an awkward fit for naval strategists ever since.

With littoral combat ships, stealth destroyers, and drones joining a more established array of submarines, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and frigates, the fashion in warship design today can seem almost as capricious as it did 130 years ago. But naval strategy today is even more unsettled, complicated as it is by a host of non-ship-specific technological changes as well as competing ideas about how to assess the global strategic environment within which the U.S. Navy operates and about the value of history as a guide to strategic and tactical thinking. While history has a lot to teach us, however, it is more useful if we regard it as a set of examples against which to test our assumptions rather than as a library of patterns into which we can fit complex phenomena to make them appear more coherent.

These disparate uses of history are well expressed in two arrestingly named ideas that have been getting a lot of play lately, the Thucydides Trap and black swans, the former being an example of positivity bias, and the latter a case in point for why affirmative readings of history tend to blind us to the uncertainties of the world around us. My intention is to apply these concepts to the history of four distinct maritime powers: the Byzantine Empire of the late first and early second millennium, Habsburg Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, and Great Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I want to consider whether their experiences have any relevance for strategists and planners today, especially with

¹ This paper is based on a Lecture of Opportunity given at the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, in December 2015.

² “The fashion”: in Robert G. Angevine, “The Rise and Fall of the Office of Naval Intelligence, 1882–1892: A Technological Perspective.” *Journal of Military History* 62 (1998): 291–313, 296.

³ “at the very time”: G. S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy* (Cambridge, 1965), 124, in Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Ashfield Press, 1983), 177.

reference to China’s naval aspirations, the most immediate if perhaps too obvious object of American strategic concern.

In so doing, it is important to acknowledge that there is considerable confusion about the role of the military in American life. In the fall of 2015, *The National Interest* ran an article by Robert Farley, an expert on military doctrine, national security, and maritime affairs. In this piece, about the greatest threat to America’s military—which Farley believes to be the U.S. Air Force—he writes, “The United States military has, in effect, two jobs. The first is to fight and win wars, and the second is to strategically shape the world in favor of American interests.”⁴ This is more than a little alarming because it reflects almost nothing of the stated mission of the Department of Defense, which is “to provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country.”⁵

For an expert in the field to advance such a demonstrably incorrect explanation about what the military is for highlights a significant disconnect between the message that the Defense Department wants to send the world, including American civilians, and what all too many people believe about the United States and American intentions. Fighting and winning wars and deterring wars may in the end require the same sorts of tactical and operational abilities. But Farley’s aggression and the deterrence advocated by the government require distinct strategies, and the concepts should not be so casually confused.

The question remains: What, if anything, can the naval experience of the Byzantines, the early Spanish Atlantic and transpacific empire, the Dutch East India Company, and the world-girdling empire of the *Pax Britannica* possibly suggest to us about the state of the U.S. Navy in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Although the Byzantines, Spanish, and Dutch were geographically, demographically, culturally, and politically distinct from one another and from the United States, and operated at a time when naval strategy had not yet developed as a focused discipline, they were indisputably among the preeminent sea powers of their day. The British were among the first to articulate strategic doctrine per se and, thanks to their navy, the first to exercise sea power on a global scale. And although they imposed their will with a unilateral moral certainty that most non-totalitarian people find repugnant, most American navalists since Mahan have viewed their accomplishment with approval. None of these powers faced an operational environment like that of the early twenty-first century, but the broader strategic contexts do offer some parallels: the emergence of new rivals, a dynamic legal milieu, a rapidly evolving technological environment, and the obligations of safeguarding an accidental empire, or as Americans prefer to think of it, serving as policeman on a global beat.

Despite all the differences in technology, methods of communication, understanding of the maritime environment, spiritual orientation and worldview, and state finances, among a host of other matters, navies and naval planners in the past faced many of the same problems we do today, at least in kind, if not in scale or complexity. As Admiral Michelle Howard suggested at the 2015 Current Strategy Forum, à propos one of the most obvious novelties of our time, vulnerabilities of the physical domain are replicated in the cyber domain. At the risk of drawing an obvious parallel,

⁴ “The United States military”: Robert Farley, “The Real Threat to America’s Military: (And It’s Not China, Russia or Iran),” *The National Interest*, October 26, 2015. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-threat-americas-military-its-not-china-russia-or-14164> (accessed November 25, 2015).

⁵ “to provide the military forces”: “About the Department of Defense (DoD),” www.defense.gov/About-DoD (accessed November 25, 2015).

this is why malicious code is known as a Trojan horse. If you’ve read the *Iliad*, the Homeric image is clear enough.

The Byzantines wrote about naval tactics, though they frequently got things wrong by relying too much on historical antecedents. But while there are glimpses of strategic thought, they had nothing that could be described as a strategic worldview. Military manuals were often composed by authors who had little or no practical experience of naval warfare and simply plagiarized ancient sources.⁶ This was a problem because ancient Greek triremes were built with heavy bronze rams intended for punching into enemy ships, while medieval *dromons*, which were another type of oared galley, did not mount rams below the waterline. Instead, they were fitted with heavy beams attached to the stempost above the waterline and designed to shatter enemy ships’ steering gear and oars. As a result, tactics applicable to rams were irrelevant to medieval warfare, and so were the tactical handbooks that described them.

The Thucydides Trap

We are not immune to seductions of false analogies based on historical principles, and the Thucydides Trap seems to be one of them.⁷ A project of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Thucydides Trap is based on the historian’s explanation for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War: “It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable.”⁸ The authors of the project, directed by Graham Allison, found sixteen examples of what they see as the challenge of a rising power that threatened to upset the status quo by usurping the role of a dominant power. In twelve of these, or 75 percent of the time, the rivalry resulted in war. While it is not unreasonable to suppose that the intent of the project is to identify useful paradigms for strategic analysis, it was designed from its inception to answer only one question: “Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?”⁹

While many have commented on the origins of the Peloponnesian War, it is remarkable that in the 2,300 years since Thucydides wrote, no one has identified his explanation of the conflict as having wider application. Certainly the Byzantines did not pick up on this idea, and not because they did not read Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War* was, in fact, a staple of their academic curriculum and highly regarded by historians. But they admired Thucydides chiefly for his

⁶ surviving manuals: John H. Pryor and Elizabeth Jeffreys, *The Age of the Dromon: The Byzantine Navy, ca. 500–1204* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 175–88.

⁷ “the structural stress”: “Thucydides Trap Project.” Presentation, September 22, 2015, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/25760/thucydides_trap_project.html (accessed April 20, 2016).

⁸ “It was the rise”: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.1 (<http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.1.first.html>); accessed April 20, 2016).

⁹ See Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015 (http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/25783/thucydides_trap.html), and Graham Allison, “Thucydides’s Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific,” *The Financial Times*, August 21, 2012 (<https://next.ft.com/content/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a>; accessed April 20, 2016). The project website is explicit about the program’s limited purpose: “The goal of the Thucydides Project is to illuminate the challenge both America and China face as China rises to rival U.S. predominance in Asia today, and in time the world.”

rhetorical style and as an exemplar of how to record speeches and write narrative history.¹⁰ Some Byzantine historians even referenced his accounts of naval actions, without realizing the differences between the warships of his day and their own.¹¹ As for the deeper truths that modern analysts have recently teased from his writing, while the Byzantines may have been unaware of the differences between ancient galleys and their own, and the tactical implications, they may have sensibly intuited that the circumstances that led to warfare between two small, neighboring city-states whose capitals were less than a hundred miles apart and whose people spoke the same language had little to do with the myriad challenges of their polyglot medieval state more than a thousand years later.

In the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire encompassed people of innumerable languages, ethnicities, and religions in territories that sprawled 2,600 miles from southern Spain to Italy and Sicily, eastward across the Balkans and Asia Minor, and deep into the Caucasus Mountains; to the south, it spanned North Africa from Morocco to Egypt and continued into the Levant. Its neighbors and potential enemies included Franks, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Lombards, Bulgars, Avars, Persians, and Muslim caliphates. Over time, their borders contracted and the number and variety of their potential enemies increased to include, among others, Rus, Turks, Tulunids, Aghlabids, Fatimids, Mamluks, and unlikely as it must have seemed in the ninth century, when the Byzantines began abetting their slow rise, Venetians, Genoese, and Pisans. The Byzantine economy and its legal regime were vastly more complicated than that of classical Greece; in its diplomatic relations, the Byzantines had to negotiate with pagan tribes, Christian empires, kingdoms, and maritime cities, as well as major Muslim caliphates and emirates; and its military included permanent and temporary forces levied from among native Greek populations and—especially for the navy—resident foreigners in the capital of Constantinople.

We might see the conflicts between the Byzantines and the Islamic caliphates, emirates, and other political entities as examples of the Thucydides Trap, but this would assume a certain stasis in the development of Muslim states and in Byzantine-Muslim relations generally. To the contrary, they were extremely dynamic. I am not sure we should be any more eager to compare the geopolitical complexities of the early twenty-first century with the tensions that fueled conflict between Athens and Sparta than the Byzantines were to see their problems reflected in the work of an historian of the fifth century BCE—especially one who stopped writing a history of a war in which he participated a decade before it was over.

Apart from the fact that the ancient Greeks’ circumstances are so irreconcilably dissimilar from ours, another problem with using the Thucydides Trap as a model is that the authors’ criteria for determining whether the states in question are “ruling” or “rising” seems somewhat arbitrary. So, they deem Sparta the “ruling power” in the Peloponnesian War and consider Athens the “rising power.” Notwithstanding Thucydides’ explanation, one could argue that in the aftermath of the Persian War—and certainly by the 460s BCE—Athens was the dominant power in Greece, while Sparta’s best days were past. At the same time, most Americans would probably be confused by the notion that, in the Thucydides Trap scenario, China assumes the rôle of Athens, usually held up as the birthplace of democracy, while the United States is likened to Sparta—unless we are to take this as a thinly-veiled critique of American militarism.

¹⁰ rhetorical style: Anthony Kaldellis, *Byzantine Readings of Ancient Historians: Texts in Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7: Byzantine historians’ “interest in the historians of classical Greece was either rhetorical-stylistic or, to the degree that it actually was historical, it was in using them as models for writing contemporary history.”

¹¹ See, for example, Pryor and Jeffreys, *Age of the Dromon*, 131, 133, 219, and 272,

For reasons not explained, the Thucydides Trap Project confines itself to the period since 1500 and to European powers until the end of the nineteenth century, when China and Japan are included. Looking at the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the authors of the Thucydides Trap see the ruling Habsburgs being challenged variously by the Ottomans and Sweden. There is no question that the Habsburgs were a dominant power in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but to advance the idea that the Ottomans were an emerging power is inexplicable. The Ottoman dynasty was founded around 1300, more than two centuries before the Habsburgs, and the Ottomans had captured Constantinople and thereby ended the Byzantine Empire seventy-five years before the Habsburgs came on the scene. Contemporary Europeans did not see the Ottomans as an upstart dynasty, and the chief significance of the battle of Lepanto in 1571 was that it demonstrated that the Turks were not invincible.

The designers of the trap also force the issue when they place rivalries between first- and second-tier powers on an equal footing. So, they consider the seventeenth-century rivalry between the Netherlands—which they take as the status quo power—and their English challengers to be another example of the Thucydides Trap. The Anglo-Dutch rivalry is of particular interest to naval historians and strategists because it was for the most part a naval conflict. But how did the Dutch, as it seems, usurp the Habsburgs as Europe’s “ruling power?” They had fought an Eighty Years’ War of independence from Habsburg Spain between 1568 and 1648, but although during that time they harassed Spanish holdings in the Americas, the United Provinces never seriously threatened the integrity of Spain’s empire in Europe or overseas, and while their economic influence was undeniable, they had by no means replaced the Habsburgs as Europe’s dominant political or military power.

During the Dutch revolt, the English had allied with the Dutch against the Spanish, but they never posed an existential threat to Spain, either. Although the Spanish Armada of 1588 did not achieve its intended results, its catastrophic ending was a result of bad weather rather than English military genius, and the Spanish held on to the Spanish (Southern) Netherlands, until the early eighteenth century. To the extent that the English did challenge Spain successfully, it was in North America. Here they established colonies in defiance of Spanish claims (which were backed by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century papal bulls and treaties with Portugal) to all lands not yet ruled by Christian princes. But the reason they were successful was because while the English felt that fish, furs, and wood were good inducements for expansion, there was nothing on the east coast of what are now the United States and Canada that was of much value to Spain. This same territory was also thought a good place to dump malcontents, religious dissenters, and “suche needie people of our Countrie, which now trouble the common welth, and through want here at home, are inforced to commit outragious offences, whereby they are dayly consumed with the Gallowes.”¹² But fishermen and petty criminals are hardly a demographic calculated to challenge one of the world’s great powers, which Habsburg Spain unquestionably was in this period.

Other candidates for the roles of Athens and Sparta are given as Germany and Great Britain, respectively, at the end of the nineteenth century, another period that is a favorite of naval strategists because it involves one of the largest and best-documented naval arms races in history. Yet is it helpful to view the geopolitical situation of the decades around 1900 in terms of a binary competition?

¹² “suche needie people”: Sir Humphrey Gilbert, *Discourse of a Discoverie for a New Passage to Cataia*, in David B. Quinn, ed., *The Voyages and Colonising Enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1940), 1:160–61.

True, there was a naval rivalry between Great Britain and the newly formed German Empire. But there had also been overt naval competition between Great Britain and France and Russia earlier in the nineteenth century, though the designers of the Thucydides Trap reduce the mid-century challenge to one that pitted France and Britain against Russia in the Crimean War. Britain’s concern about meeting the combined power of the fleets of France and Russia was enshrined in the Naval Defence Act of 1889, which also did much to address the fickleness in warship design complained of by Prime Minister Gladstone.¹³ There are other reasons to question the overall significance of the Anglo-German rivalry. Britain’s response to the German naval buildup was to continue enlarging its fleet according to the two-power standard—that is, ensuring that Britain’s naval strength was equal to that of the next two largest navies combined. Had the British been concerned with only Germany, they would have been content to build only to counter their efforts. But the British also had their eye on the Americans, who were flexing their strength in the Pacific and increasingly concerned about German and British expansion into Central and South America in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine.¹⁴

The fact that the *casus belli* of World War I cannot be attributed to Anglo-German competition is further evident from the fact that immediately after the war, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s, there were a host of familiar and new naval antagonisms and rivalries: between the United States and Great Britain; between Italy and France; and between Japan and the United States and Great Britain, to name only the most significant. If we think of the two world wars—and the “interwar” hostilities that raged in China, Spain, Ethiopia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere—as something like a global thirty years’ war rather than as an assortment of discrete, unrelated conflicts, viewing any aspect of them in terms of the binary schematic of the Thucydides Trap puts us at risk of oversimplifying inordinately complex situations, which, in turn, can lead to our drawing irrelevant conclusions. Worse still, adopting the imaginary of the Thucydides Trap strips us of agency, and war become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Black Swans

If the Thucydides Trap exemplifies a tendency to want to impose order on chaos, black swans force us to be more nimble in our thinking and to cast a more critical eye on the world around us as well as on the past. The black swan is that rare bird (the *rara avis* of Juvenal) whose existence is either very hard or altogether impossible to imagine. The term was given new life by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a professor of risk engineering, who defines a black swan in terms of three attributes: “First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme ‘impact.’ Third, despite its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable.” Black swans, he continues, explain “almost everything in our world, from the success of ideas and religions, to the dynamics of historical events.” But of particular note here is his emphasis on their “retrospective (though not prospective) predictability.”¹⁵

¹³ Naval Defence Act: Lawrence Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare, 1815–1914* (London: Routledge, 2001), 161.

¹⁴ flexing their strength: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (New York: Scribner, 1976), 246–47.

¹⁵ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007), from chapter 1, excerpted in the *New York Times*, April 22, 2007 (http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/books/chapters/0422-1st-tale.html?_r=0, accessed April 20, 2016).

Black swans in a strategic context were the subject of a panel discussion at the Army War College’s forum on First Principles on 21st Century Defense in the spring of 2015. If a black swan is a thing completely unanticipated, history at least provides us with an idea of the sorts of things we should look out for, even if we don’t know the precise form they might take, or the actual circumstances that might bring them about. In this instance, history allows us to construct a typology of problems that might arise, the strategic planning equivalent of the essentials of damage control: “an understanding of those inherent characteristics [of ships] which provide resistance. Knowledge which results in correct and prompt action has saved many a severely damaged ship. Ignorance which results in improper measures can cause unnecessary loss.”¹⁶ And if nothing else, this exercise allows us to see that not all black swans are responsive to the dictates or imperatives of military doctrine, experience, or historical precedent.

Black swans take many forms, from the beneficial and benign to the virulent and catastrophically destructive. Some are natural events, others the result of human activity. Among catastrophic natural events are earthquakes and tsunamis. Virulent black swans include plagues, like those that enfeebled that Byzantine Empire in the sixth century; or the Great Plague of 1665, which ravaged London and contributed to England’s defeat in the Second Anglo-Dutch War; or the influenza of 1918, which killed more people worldwide than died in World War I—and more than twice as many U.S. servicemen as died in battle.¹⁷ Beneficial black swans include the discovery of penicillin, and more especially the development of a means of mass-producing it in 1942, which was responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of lives in World War II. Thanks to enormous strides in our understanding of disease and disease control—the damage-control training of the medical world—we have dodged a few bullets recently, including mad cow disease, bird flu, and Ebola. Nonetheless, the growing frequency of such outbreaks, and the increasing alarms about disease-resistant bacteria, to say nothing of advances in genetic manipulation, suggest that an uncontrollable pandemic is more rather than less likely in the near future, so continued vigilance is essential.

What about cultural black swans, like religions or political ideologies? Most, like Christianity, take a long time—centuries, in some cases—before they begin to spread rapidly; others, like Islam, move with remarkable speed at the outset before entering a relatively quiescent period. Among the many interesting aspects about the rise of Islam in the seventh century is that it occurred at a time when the region’s two superpowers—the Byzantine Greeks and Sassanid Persians—were engaged in one of their many periodic wars. In 626, four years after the hegira that marks the start of Islam, a Persian army was on the shores of the Bosphorus, within sight Constantinople. Three years later, the Byzantines seized the Persian capital of Ctesiphon on the Tigris River.

Within a decade, this centuries-old dynamic—the Sassanid Empire dates to the year 224, about a century before the founding of Constantinople—was completely upended. Armies of the Orthodox Caliphate seized Byzantine Damascus in the 630s, and shortly thereafter they overthrew the Sassanid Empire in its entirety. Next, Byzantine ports from Tyre and Alexandria to Carthage and Ceuta fell to new Orthodox and Umayyad masters who went on to rule in whole or part almost every major island and archipelago in the Mediterranean, and the Byzantines’ chief military

¹⁶ “an understanding”: U.S. Navy, *Handbook of Damage Control* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office 1945), 19.

¹⁷ more than twice as many: Carol R. Byerly, “The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919,” *Public Health Reports* 125 Suppl. 3 (2010): 82–91, table 3, “Total deaths in the U.S. Army including Marines attached to it: April 6, 1917, to July 1, 1919.”

adversaries were a succession of caliphates and emirates that rose and fell from Southwest Asia to Spain.

Quite apart from its spiritual message, which had wide appeal, and the fact that many of the people who fell under Islamic rule were glad to be rid of their Byzantine and Sassanid overlords, the emergence of Islam was beneficial in other ways. As heirs to ancient Persian, Greco-Roman, and Judeo-Christian cultures, Muslims were active promoters of the arts, history and geography, and law, and Muslim courts became vectors for the transmission of some of the most important texts of classical philosophy to renaissance Europe. From a European perspective, one unintended consequence of their forays into the waters of Sicily and Italy was that they helped launch Venice and Genoa on their path to commercial and naval dominance in the Mediterranean. The reason for this was the rejuvenation of Mediterranean trade coupled with Muslim mariners’ greatest achievement, which was to spin webs of commerce across the Monsoon Seas from the Red Sea and East Africa to the Persian Gulf and India, through Southeast Asia, and into China. These Islamic trade networks, which ran overland and overseas across innumerable religious, linguistic, and political boundaries, fed the revived markets of the Mediterranean world; and in so doing, they helped open European eyes to a wider world. But the first beneficiaries were the Italian city-states.

The growth of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa was also facilitated by the Byzantines, who increasingly turned to Italian merchant mariners to carry their trade and granted these small-town traders increasingly favorable commercial privileges, including residential quarters in Constantinople. The results that were certainly unanticipated. The commercial acumen the Italians developed in sailing to the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean left them well-placed to capitalize on the rise of the crusader states in the Holy Land between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries—less out of love for the crusades than for the profits that trade with the Levant generated, especially that in Asian spices, for which a European market had at long last developed.

One underappreciated aspect of this rich commerce, which involved Orthodox and Western Christians, Muslims of various stripes, and Jewish merchants, was the development of new legal regimes that merchants had to craft in order to satisfy the demands of their various religious laws, all of which had proscriptions on lending money at interest. The resulting commercial revolution would likely not have come about—or it would have taken a dramatically different form—had it not been for the competing and overlapping interests that these various groups represented, and their differential access to goods and markets. Certainly, there is little evidence of anything like this kind of commercial ferment on the Mediterranean before the rise of Islam. (That the Indian Ocean world did not undergo a similar market revolution is probably due to the more laissez-faire attitudes towards trade that seem to have prevailed in the Monsoon Seas, and which presented few if any of the religio-legal barriers found in the Mediterranean world.)

All this played out over the course of centuries—four hundred years from the start of the Venetians’ involvement in the trade between Byzantines and Franks, and their capture of Constantinople in 1204; less than two centuries from the First Crusade in 1097 to the loss of Acre and the end of the Crusader kingdoms in 1291. But are there any parallels worth exploring in this period that have any bearing on the faster-paced world of today?

Modern Parallels

A few analogues stand out. One is the problem of a nation’s surrendering the carriage of its trade to third parties, as the Byzantines did to the Italian city-states. The United States has been doing this for decades, because it is cheaper for individual commercial entities to do so and it fits well

with the current emphasis on free markets and free trade regardless of the ultimate cost. Some blame the outsourcing of U.S. trade on the high price of unionized labor, or the high price of shipbuilding in the United States.¹⁸ Whatever the explanation, the fact is that foreign-flag ships carry 99 percent of our country’s foreign trade, and even a brief boycott by one of the primary carriers could paralyze the U.S. economy.¹⁹ It is difficult to envision a military response to such an act of economic passive-aggression. U.S. vulnerability to a trade embargo is a systemic problem of political economy that does not admit of any preemptive or retaliatory military solution apart, perhaps, from a denial of service in the cyber-domain, but this would have its own suite of unintended, but entirely foreseeable, consequences.

A second parallel is between the stunning emergence of Islam in the seventh century and the rise of radical Islamism today, although this is not because Mohammedan Islam and militant Islamism are equivalent ideologies. What we see in various militant Islamic groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant seems derivative and more akin to the nostalgic, secular evil of Nazism. Civilians and military alike have to face squarely Bernard Haykel’s observation at the 2015 Current Strategy Forum that militant Islamism should be viewed as a cultural phenomenon and not just a political ideology or collection of violent, attention-seeking tactics.

You can think of Islamism as a culture. It’s not just a political ideology or a set of tactics. It’s not, also, a mindset that is concerned exclusively with violence or sadism, as we would often think of them when looking at the beheading videos that they put out. But rather, it’s a culture. And this culture is one that uses poetry, that uses history, that talks about fashioning a new kind of Muslim. And unless we think of them as a culture, I don’t think we can fully understand their appeal and their durability, and their endurance as a political movement.²⁰

After all, Nazism was not just about anti-Semitism and militarism, either, and many millions, confused and disenfranchised by the forces of modernity and economic privation, were seduced by the propagandistic attractions of German romanticism and folklore, complete with Wagnerian soundtrack. It may turn out that this latest, violent strain of Islamism is crushed or driven underground, but unless it is accompanied by something more akin to a Marshall Plan than to martial law, it is unlikely anyone can eradicate the underlying appeal: the desire for a pure Islam that replaces corrupt, authoritarian, secular governments in thrall, as radical Islamists see it, to a decadent modernity imported from the West.

There is a third parallel, between the evolution of commercial law, as merchants attempted to reconcile competing religious doctrines in the medieval period, and the emergence of more highly nuanced articulations of economic philosophy today. The second half of the twentieth century saw a fairly clear demarcation between capitalist and communist societies, with the lion’s share of global economic coordination being engineered by industrialized, capitalist economies. But now the sheer growth of socialist market economies like that of China, as well as a more pronounced divide between Europe’s various social-democratic approaches to capitalism and

¹⁸ high price: John Frittelli, *Cargo Preferences for U.S.-Flag Shipping* (CRS Report No. R44254) (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 8, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44254.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2016).

¹⁹ 99 percent: *ibid.*, 1 n.3.

²⁰ “You can think of Islamism”: Bernard Haykel, “Current Strategy Forum 2015: Strategy and Maritime Power in a Contest Environment,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-hWRVZOOSo>, 28:00–28:42 (accessed February 20, 2016).

American advocates of extreme winner-take-all capitalism will almost certainly lead to a rethinking of core trade agreements in the foreseeable future, and these will certainly have unpredictable strategic implications.

Insofar as legal regimes go, however, the most obvious milestones mark an uninterrupted path from the ecclesiastical and diplomatic settlement of territorial disputes between Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries right up to the establishment of the exclusive economic zones and Chinese claims to sovereignty over islands, natural and otherwise, within the Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea.

As they gathered strength, the Dutch, English, French, and others openly challenged the Iberian powers’ claims of sovereignty, which had been refined and expanded upon in a series of bilateral agreements from the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 to the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529. Legally speaking, the biggest breakthrough came at the start of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) recruited Hugo Grotius to draft a defense of the VOC’s capture of a Portuguese ship in Malaysian waters. In *The Free Sea*, Grotius maintained that “it is lawful for any nation to go to any other and to trade with it,” and that Portuguese claims to a monopoly of trade on the basis of papal grants, territorial possession, or custom were groundless.²¹ Not everyone agreed with this sentiment: the Portuguese, of course; the English, who held an absurdly expansive view of their territorial waters—essentially from the British Isles to North America; and even the Dutch. Having wrested the trade of Southeast Asia from the Portuguese, the VOC promptly abandoned the ideals of the free sea to preserve their own monopoly against encroachment by the English and restricted where, and even what, indigenous mariners could trade.

Such claims to hegemony or the exclusive right to navigation or interference in internal affairs is not limited to European or, now, Asian countries. The Monroe Doctrine is of a type with all these claims to special privilege on the waters of the world, and it is remarkable—even shocking—that this endured as U.S. policy until 2013.²² If China’s Nine-Dash Line, first illustrated as an eleven-dash line on a map of 1947, seems outrageous today, it must be remembered that it was President Harry S Truman who is credited with starting to walk back the doctrine of the free sea when, in 1945, he unilaterally extended U.S. jurisdiction to cover all natural resources on the continental shelf out to 200 miles—the size of the exclusive economic zone now accepted as part of the Law of the Sea.²³ So while the world watches as China builds islands in the South China Sea, and wonders why there are no laws against it, we can only wonder what changes to the established order and understanding of things these reclamation efforts will bring about.²⁴

A final point of comparison between the present-day and an earlier time has to do with nonstate actors in the maritime domain—not pirates and terrorists, which are something of a constant in maritime history, but commercial entities. When the Portuguese monopoly on trade

²¹ “it is lawful”: Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea*, trans. by Richard Hakluyt and ed. by David Armitage (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), chap. 1 (p. 10).

²² John Kerry, “Remarks on U.S. Policy in the Western Hemisphere,” Organization of American States, Washington, D.C. (November 18, 2013), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217680.htm> (accessed February 20, 2016).

²³ Harry Truman: “The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (A Historical Perspective),” www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_historical_perspective (accessed February 20, 2016).

²⁴ The United States conducts “freedom of navigation” operations to protest the attempts by China and other nations (thirteen in 2015) to enlarge their territorial seas. See U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation (FON) Report for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 19, 2016) http://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/gsa/cwmd/FON_Report_FY15.pdf.

between the Monsoon Seas and Europe was broken around the turn of the seventeenth century, the culprit was the VOC. This was both a trading entity and an instrument of the state chartered by the Dutch government and invested with the powers to wage war, contract treaties, establish forts, administer the law, and in most respects act as an arm of the Dutch government, which in effect it was. The English East India Company operated with a similar brief, but although it predated the VOC, it did not come into its own commercially and militarily until the eighteenth century.

Private institutions like the East India companies operated as they did so long as the nation states they represented could neither justify nor afford an overseas presence of their own, and so long as the companies' operations generated enough profits for them to build, arm, and man trading ships themselves. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growing wealth, sophistication, and public acceptance of nation states, the development of centralized standing navies, the impact of industrialization on the differentiation between merchant and naval ships, and a more robust international order made it possible and worthwhile for companies to abandon the exercise of violence to protect their trade.

This familiar Westphalian world order has begun to fray in recent years, not because of the rise of China, but thanks to the new democratization of violence and the fact that lethal technology is once again affordable to companies, and even individuals, who might want to use it. We have seen this in the rise of private military contractors who sell their protection services to the Department of Defense, the State Department, and the CIA, while the rise of piracy off Nigeria and Somalia and in Southeast Asia has raised the specter of companies employing hired guns to protect their ships. As anyone who has tried to decipher the chain of responsibility for a simple shipwreck knows, assigning liability is complicated by the overlapping jurisdictions that govern the ship, its nominal owners, the charterers, the insurers, the beneficial owners, the crew, and any injured parties.

What happens when you overlay this with a private security company and multinational corporation whose American identity is unclear, or when the needs of the United States and those of a nominally American company diverge? Should the U.S. Navy go to war to protect a company that has engineered a corporate inversion or found some other way to avoid paying taxes? Here we confront the real problem of whether the military's mission should be "to provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country," as the Department of Defense maintains, or "to strategically shape the world in favor of American interests," however nebulous these might be. If a multinational U.S.-based corporation refuses to pay taxes to the U.S. government, does it forfeit the right to that government's protection?

The speed with which a black swan incident resulting from confusion about what constitutes a private, commercial interest and a national security one might set us on the path to war is captured in the *Perdicaris* Affair of 1904, which took place against a backdrop of escalating geopolitical tensions and naval rivalries. Ion *Perdicaris*, the son of a Greek father who had become a naturalized American and a South Carolinian mother, was kidnapped from his home in Tangier by Ahmed ibn-Muhammed Raisuli, a Berber chief who sought to leverage his hostage for political advantage in Morocco. The American consul in Tangier relayed the story to Washington. In response, President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched seven warships, including the entire South Atlantic squadron, to Morocco to right this grave injustice. As events were coming to a head, however, a North Carolina cotton broker wrote the Roosevelt administration to say that in 1863 he had been in Athens where he met *Perdicaris*, who had gone there "for the express purpose, as he stated, to become a naturalized as a Greek citizen," to avoid having real estate inherited from his

mother confiscated by the Confederate government.²⁵ The episode was wound down before shots were fired, but given the delicate state of relations among Morocco, Spain, France, Great Britain, and the United States—the parties immediately involved in the incident—the affair could have spiraled out of control quickly.

Notwithstanding improvements in record keeping and communication, a century later the possibility of a similar occurrence in an even less stable part of the world and involving even blurrier lines of authority and influence seems to grow day by day. But perhaps such a black swan is a misplaced fear. Perhaps America’s greatest concern should be Russia, or ISIL, or the climate. Or perhaps we should listen to the experts who say that the real long-term problem is going to be containing China, or the U.S. Air Force. The difficulty is that, given the speed with which things are changing these days, it is hard to say. Just how difficult is clear from a single line in an encyclopedia entry on strategy published in 2007. “Once again,” wrote British naval historian Andrew Lambert, “the sea is the strategic domain of one nation, with its allies.”²⁶ Since that confident thought was published a decade ago, the *Naval War College Review* has published at least thirty-seven articles about Chinese naval strategy, capability, and ambition. We live in interesting, if fickle, times.

²⁵ “for the express purpose”: Barbara Tuchman, “Perdicaris Alive or Raisuli Dead,” in *Practicing History: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 104–17, 112.

²⁶ “Once again”: Andrew Lambert, s.v. “Strategy,” in John H. Hattendorf, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.55.