

Advocating Credible Naval Power

A Comparative Book Review of *To Provide and Maintain a Navy* by Capt. Henry. J . Hendrix (Retd.) & *Seablindness* by Seth Cropsey

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It is often argued that India's best chance at countering China in the Indian Ocean Region and Bay of Bengal is a much higher investment in capital platforms for its Navy. India is also increasingly growing closer to the US in many collaborative geopolitical frameworks, including the Quad, in part to counter China's maritime influence.

Knowing the "fleet in being" of allies, and their medium- and long-term capabilities, is the first step in countering any shared adversary. This review of two recent books on US naval power is a microcosm of such a pursuit; one that is hopefully underway in Indian strategic circles.

Capt (Dr.) Henry J Hendrix (Retd.) is a prominent name among the US Navy veteran intellectual circles. He is famous for his insightful articles and commentary on US maritime strategy, naval aviation, and strategic forecasting, perhaps in that order. His book 'To Provide and Maintain a Navy' is a quintessential US Navy officer's perspective on maritime power, condensed into a monograph.

As advertised, Hendrix writes a cautionary narrative that appeals to the American people to wake up to what Hendrix believes is the lifeblood of their nation, credible naval power. Hendrix sees trends indicating that US and allied 'sea power' is diminishing and may not be able to safeguard his nation's strategic interests, or those of the wider free world.

Through a quick retelling of the history of western strategic thought and invoking the usual suspects -- Mackinder, Mahan, Corbett, Clausewitz and Jomini -- he quickly stratifies many states and regimes, both past and present, as continental (i.e., land-centric) powers and maritime powers. The book has the ambition to end up on the recommended reading list of military commanders worldwide, and such an exercise in classification is a tried-and-tested way to make that leap.

Through this historical narrative, Hendrix asserts that the western way of life is dependent on an international system that, in turn, can never exist without free and speedy commerce enabled by the seas.

He minces no words in declaring that the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China (PRC) are the foremost threats to US security in our times. He identifies Russia and PRC as authoritarian regimes who fundamentally perceive threats to their security and interests from a US-led international order where access to the high seas is guaranteed for all without prejudice.

In Hendrix's opinion, both Russia and China seek to impede the freedom of navigation along certain maritime zones of contention. He sees Russian and Chinese actions as attempts to 'firewall'

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approaches to these zones and their interests in them. He opines that these actions, if not opposed, will result in a maritime order where access to such zones will be limited to only parties that are agreeable to Russia and China.

He singles out Russia's ambitions and push for the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a way for the Kremlin to charge a toll for access to an increasingly viable trans-shipping route.¹ He echoes many others in the western world on his concerns for the Arctic region. It is a cause of concern for the West's military and seaborne trade interests that the Arctic doesn't fall to the de-facto shadow of their geopolitical adversaries, including Russia and China.

It is no secret that Russia has the most potent heavy icebreaker fleet in the world and can offer unparalleled piloting and search and rescue services in the Arctic region.

Hendrix acknowledges US Naval Services' shortcomings in fielding comparable capabilities to operate armed ships above the surface in the Arctic. He also worries that the US hasn't built ice-hardened ships -- capable of plying through the Arctic in the thick of winter -- since the Second World War. However, his idea that Russia wants to make NSR 'akin to US's Mississippi River' comes off as an overblown alarmist sentiment.

Although similar in theme, 'Seablindness' by Seth Cropsey takes a very different approach to the subject. This is partly due to the date of publication: Hendrix's book came out at a time when it became clear that Donald Trump will be a one-term President, and thus there is no major reference to his administration.

Cropsey's book, however, came out in 2017 and makes considerable reference to Trump's vision for expanding the US Navy. 'Seablindness' is noticeably harsh on the Obama administration, and has a rose-tinted recollection of George W Bush's time as President and Commander in Chief.

It might be fair to say that both books make similar arguments, but from two different perspectives. 'Seablindness' is affected by the energy of the Trump era's US political narrative, which sought to fix the US's follies and make it 'great again' after decades of complacency and neglect.

One interesting point that Cropsey echoes is that the US Congress requires the US Navy to maintain a fleet of eleven Aircraft Carriers. This can be thought of as a mandated lower limit to arrest a dip in credible force levels.

The obvious caveat -- that maintaining such a large fleet may result in imperial overstretch, which is commonly associated with the ruin of many maritime powers -- doesn't figure in Cropsey's narrative. Rather, there is a lot of American exceptionalism and speculation to the 'scenarios' approach that certain parts of his narrative take. The chapter titled 'The Invasion of Estonia' especially goes off the far end, presenting a worst-case scenario where NATO maritime power is in such a desperate decline that the Royal Navy has mothballed its twin Queen Elisabeth class Aircraft Carriers and Russia has built a supercarrier, bizarrely christened *Yekaterina Velikaya* (Catherine the Great).

In the real world, as of this writing, the Russian Navy is desperately trying to repair and extend the life of its sole decrepit aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov. The ship suffered a major setback when a crane crashed through its flight deck, damaging it severely and extending the time it would spend out of action (*Naval News*, 2021). While the Royal Navy has deployed its now commissioned HMS Queen Elisabeth and HMS Prince of Wales on exercises, with a mixed airwing of US and UK advanced aircraft (Coterill, 2021).

In conclusion, it would be fair to recommend both books but for different reasons. Capt. (Dr.) Hendrix's sobering insights are the best representation of contemporary US maritime strategic thought. Seth Cropsey, on the other hand, has an entertaining set of fictional scenarios; although a bit alarmist, these ultimately convey the same message as Hendrix, that the US needs to renew its emphasis on credible naval power.

To Provide and Maintain a Navy: Why Naval Primacy Is America's First, Best Strategy by Capt. Henry J Hendrix, Focsle LLP, 2020. Pages 146.

Seablindness: How Political Neglect Is Choking American Seapower and What to Do About It by Seth Cropsey, Encounter Books, 2017. Pages 304.

Notes and References:

The Kremlin has designated the development of the Northern Sea Route(NSR) and its Far East Region as a national priority and has laid out an official plan to increase the shipping volumes and construct essential infrastructure. The Russian State Nuclear Energy company Rosatom which operates Russia's nuclear powered heavy icebreaking ships is now incharge of the NSR's development. The aforementioned focus on the NSR is seen as a geopolitically significant move by the West whereby Russia may be looking to de-facto monopolise the Arctic.

Naval News. 2021. Russian MoD Calls for Accelerating Repairs to Aircraft Carrier's Dock. Accessed April 18, 2021. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/04/russian-mod-calls-for-accelerating-repairs-to-aircraft-carriers-dock/>

Cotterill, Tom. 2021. "This Is When You Can See HMS Prince of Wales Setting Sail from Portsmouth." The News. The News, June 4, 2021. <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defence/hms-prince-of-wales-to-set-sail-from-portsmouth-as-hms-queen-elizabeth-unite-with-french-aircraft-carrier-3261133>.