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# Ocean flows and chains: sea power and maritime empires within IR theory

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**Abstract** *IR theory rests on territorial assumptions which shape our understanding of the nature of the state, the rise of the state system and the very concept of the international. The following paper asks, what if we moved away from a fixation on bounded territory to consider the influence of oceans and the maritime sphere? Humanity's interaction with the sea has shaped history from the earliest known polities and early modern history, in particular, saw the rise of several great maritime powers. It was these movements across oceans which essentially shaped the modern world we know today, yet, the maritime sphere is virtually absent from IR theory. Security scholars may discuss piracy or projecting naval power, but this article aims to provide a more comprehensive treatment of incorporating a view of the oceans into IR theory. An examination of early modern maritime empires shows how the British empire developed by seeking to control ocean flows and circulations.*

## Introduction

Oceans cover over 70% of the Earth's surface, but the study of International Relations (IR) firmly retains a 'terrestrial orientation' (Sharman 2019, 163) focused on the consolidation of sovereign power over delimited areas of territory. The very subject of the *inter-national* is based on an ontology of territorial sovereign states and their interactions (Blachford 2021). As John Agnew (1994, 53) argued, the geographical division of the world into mutually exclusive territorial states' has defined the study of IR as a discipline. The territorial ontology of Westphalian state-to-state relations does little, however, to explain the rise of British maritime power, the dominance of maritime empires, or the development of globalisation from the early modern period to today. It would seem ironic that IR as a discipline defines itself by looking to Hobbesian states and their territorial struggles, yet the very image of sovereign authority used by Hobbes is the Leviathan, a Biblical sea monster (Armitage 2004, 47).

Our modern world is dependent on the maritime sphere for resources, trade, and transport. The importance of the sea, the projection of sea power and the dependence of globalisation on oceanic trade is often forgotten with the land-sea dichotomy being viewed as superseded by airpower after the 1940s (Rosenboim 2015, 366). Yet, the Covid crisis and the 2021 Ever Given accident in the Suez Canal have highlighted the fragility of ocean-going supply chains and the continuing importance of maritime trade which encompasses

the globe. Over 80% of international trade is still carried via the sea and it would be difficult to imagine globalisation since the late 20th century without the development of the standard shipping container (Colás 2017). The maritime sphere has made our modern globalised world possible, but IR theory often acts 'as if the oceans are not there' (Leira and de Carvalho 2022, 1). When the maritime space is considered, it is normally only through a focus on specific maritime security issues, such as piracy, human trafficking or tensions over resources. Oceans are therefore reduced just to 'zones of anarchy outside any state's control' (Nevers 2015, 597). The processes of globalisation have been underpinned by British and then, the US maritime hegemony, and contemporary tensions over the South China Sea or the Arctic present challenges to concepts, such as the freedom of the seas and the freedom to trade, which are often taken for granted. Historically, it has been, access to the ocean and control of sea lanes which has allowed for global capitalism to develop and the sea acts as a natural resource, a conduit for travel and as an arena of social contestation (Colás and Campling 2018). The opening of sea lanes across the globe around 1500 is recognised as a 'benchmark' moment within IR (Buzan and Lawson 2012), but the wider theoretical implications of the opening of ocean-going travel and patterns of maritime circulation remain under-explored.

The following paper therefore argues that the rise of maritime empires and their expansion was constituted by the inter-imperial struggles for access to sea lanes and control of maritime networks. The development of the British state, in particular, shows how the consolidation of state power grew out of seeking to consolidate control over supply chains and oceanic routes of circulation, fuelling early modern globalisation in a relational process. The state, maritime routes, and early modern empire, therefore, evolved in a co-constitutive manner. This challenges the English School framework of the expansion of international society, which has taken empire and the state to be opposite ends of a spectrum (Watson 1992, 4). The paper begins by setting out the limits of a strictly territorial ontology of IR and highlights the work of Atlantic historians in forging the study of connections across ocean spaces. The second section then challenges the Eurocentrism of a Westphalian meta-narrative by showing how the opening of oceanic routes to the Americas and Southeast Asia fuelled inter-imperial rivalry as European powers sought to defend access to sea lanes. The third section will then examine how the British empire and the growth of the state was dependent on maritime trade to supply naval forces. Finally, the fourth section will examine how the development of state power and centralisation evolved in a co-evolutionary manner with the expansion of maritime travel. This will show how the mobility of ships and the accessibility of sea lanes has worked to structure the development of European maritime empires. In highlighting the significance of the maritime sphere, the following paper provides a way of looking beyond isolated geographical regions or closed-off territorial spaces and instead move towards an ontology that recognises the flows and circulations of the oceanic space as a zone of connections. The aim of this examination into the role of the ocean as a political space is not to challenge every aspect of IR's understanding of the state, or the importance of territory, but to illustrate some of the limitations in focusing exclusively on delimited territorial spaces.

### The neglect of the seas

John Agnew's (1994) seminal essay 'The Territorial Trap' provided a broad critique of IR's fixation on state sovereignty and its exclusive control over a delimited territory. Agnew argued that systemic theorising within IR remains fixed to three geographical assumptions which reify the territorial state. First, that sovereignty is understood in terms of exclusive control of territory. Second, that IR's view of the state creates a simplistic binary distinction of inside and outside, and finally, that the state acts as a container of society (Agnew 1994, 2015, 43). The territorial trap of IR limits the processes of social and political-economic change to geographically fixed states as units that 'defy historical change' (Agnew 1995, 379). The following therefore looks to build upon Agnew's critique by challenging IR's territorial fixation and examining how turning to the work of Atlantic historians can illustrate the limitations of an exclusive terrestrial ontology.

The Westphalian model represents the absolute control by a sovereign state over a spatial area and serves as the core idea which continues to define the study of IR (McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018, 182). It is this exclusive control over a spatial area which defines the modern sovereign state and the sharp distinction of inside-outside further reinforces the nature of the division between the domestic and the international (Walker 1993). If the maritime sphere is considered by structural theorists, it is often seen as a barrier that only reinforces the logic of state sovereignty. The oceans are therefore commonly viewed in IR as representing the 'restraining power of water' (Deudney 2007, 126) or the 'stopping power' of water (Mearsheimer 2001, 237). Levy and Thompson (2010) argue that there is a qualitative difference between balancing power on land and at sea. It is the oceanic barriers of the Atlantic and Pacific which isolate the United States and explain a perceived reluctance to balance against American hegemony. The sea, therefore, acts as a geo-strategic barrier in which sea power is considered as 'benign power' (Blagden 2014), and the oceans act to insulate states and separate them from territorial entanglements. As critics have argued, structural theorists within IR have essentially suffered from a long history of 'seabindness' (Bueger and Edmunds 2017), which views water as a barrier rather than a vector of political development.

When state-centric approaches do turn to the maritime sphere, it has largely been understood in the limited terms of numerical accounts of sea power and measuring naval capabilities. The study of the oceans and geopolitics conventionally begins with the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan or Halford Mackinder and the emphasis for IR, is on the ocean as an anarchic space of great power competition. Accounts of naval power and the influence of the sea are therefore reduced to accounting for the rise and fall of great powers with a clear emphasis on their quantifiable naval capabilities (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016). Hedley Bull (1976, 1) understood sea power as limited to just a simplistic account of 'military power that is brought to power at sea'. For Bull, even the commerce of the merchant marine, fishing fleets and oceanographic ships were all understood solely through their wartime utility. While for Andrew Lambert (2018), *seapowers*, not sea powers, are states that are culturally aware of the importance of naval mastery and military capabilities at sea. For Lambert, a seapower is understood as an ideal type of state devoted

to developing the capabilities of a great naval power. This emphasis on military capabilities as the singular way to understand the oceanic projection of power continues to influence debates within security studies (Gartzke and Lindsay 2020).

The focus on military capabilities reflects a common approach of the social sciences that critics argue has broadly taken only a utilitarian view of the oceans as a resource frontier for fisheries and energy (Hannigan 2017). This disguises the social construction of the oceans as a political space and downplays their impact in shaping today's globalised world. Philip E Steinberg (2001) has argued that contemporary conceptions of the sea portray oceans as a blank social space which is frictionless and empty of meaning. But Steinberg argues that social understandings of the sea have shaped the possibilities of political order and the structures which determine control of the sea. Modern maps often depict the ocean as an 'undifferentiated, featureless space'. This is in stark contrast to the cartographers of the 18th century who depicted ships and routes as a 'space of movement' and mobility (Steinberg 2009, 485–488). In following utilitarian approaches to the sea, IR has largely overlooked the importance of maritime connections, but the focus on movement across the sea and networks of power across oceanic space has been a common theme of study for historians of empire and the school of Atlantic historians. The work of Atlantic historians has been to challenge state-centric assumptions and consider how movements across the oceans, from trade to colonisation, and exploration have shaped the modern world (Games 2006).

Oceanic history, like the study of globalisation, emphasises the processes of exchange and the fluidity of circulation in contrast to the fixed 'boundedness' of the territorial state (Armitage 2004, 49). In looking at the 'kaleidoscopic' movements of ideas and peoples across the Atlantic Ocean, these developments have revitalised the study of transnational history and sought to connect once disparate historical studies (Armitage and Braddick 2009, 1). Atlantic historians therefore directly challenge Eurocentric accounts of history by transcending the 'internal logics and exceptionalist narratives' (Adelman 2018, 75), which result from the problems associated with 'methodological nationalism' (Armitage 2014, 232). A focus on the history of the oceans explicitly connects regions encompassing the continents of Africa, Europe, North America and South America. These histories have emphasised the role of the 'Black Atlantic' and the history of slavery (Gilroy 1995), and the role of empire in forging the modern world (Nimako and Willemsen 2011). The development of Atlantic history has led to a broad range of scholarship which also seeks to study the transnational connections across the Indian Ocean (Parthasarathi and Riello 2014), the Mediterranean (Abulafia 2011), and across oceanic history more broadly (Armitage, Bashford and Sivasundaram 2017, Abulafia 2019). These historical approaches seek to bridge across regions and show how the sea acts as a gateway to forging connections across the globe.

Atlantic history has been largely bypassed within IR debates and the concept of the 'Atlantic' is commonly understood within IR only as a post-1945 security community, which is 'usually embedded within an Anglo-centric narrative of the development of European civilisation' (Shilliam 2009, 74). This overlooks the Atlantic as a vector of uneven and combined development that shaped the histories of people on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Shilliam

2009, 72). Yet, there is good reason for IR to engage with the work of Atlantic historians. The study of oceanic histories presents a way of viewing political order as 'polycentric' (Armitage 2004, 47), which by its very nature focuses on multiple and intertwined histories (O'hara 2009).

### **The Westphalian narrative and maritime expansion**

The discipline of IR developed during a period of western oceanic hegemony in which the connections between the state, empire and the sea were neglected (de Carvalho and Leira 2022, 4). The traditional focus of IR has therefore always been on the consolidation of state power over territory and the recurring great power conflict among European powers that drove military innovation and state building. This Westphalian meta-narrative however, takes states as a prior assumption (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 293) in which the adoption of Charles Tilly's famous dictum, 'war made the state and the state made war', presumes that there is already a space outside of the state in which the state can make war (Powell 2020, 548). As Tarak Barkawi (2010) has argued, IR as a subject was 'founded amidst empire' and yet, found only a 'world of sovereign states and their collective action problems'. A turn to the oceans highlights the historical connections between the development of a European state system and the global reach of European great powers in early modernity. The following section, therefore, seeks to build upon the work of oceanic historians in order to better understand the development of the state system, maritime empires and the construction of international order as a process which happened in parallel.

The Westphalian narrative of a European state's system centres on a history of recurring great power conflict among European powers. IR's resulting neo-Weberian view of states as units with dominion over a territory seeks to explain only the monopolisation of violence within a territory (Bartelson 1995, 37) and the wars fuelled by the modernising projects of absolutist kings (Teschke 2003, 14). Critics of this approach argue that the Westphalian narrative is steeped in Eurocentrism in which the state, international society and political order are viewed as solely 'endogenous to Europe' (Hobson 2009, 671). Postcolonial approaches have therefore sought to provincialise Europe and decolonise our understanding of international history by highlighting the imperial connections to the development of the state and state system (Kayaoglu 2010, Pourmokhtari 2013). This has led to a rise of revisionist approaches to understanding the expansion of European society (Dunne and Reus Smit 2017). As Andrew Phillips and Sharman (2015) have shown, early modern expansion across the Indian ocean was shaped by the interaction between diverse polities, including private companies, such as the English and Dutch East India companies and the territorial empires of Asia. European expansion was driven by a symbiotic relationship between private companies and the state (Phillips and Sharman 2020; Blachford 2020; Srivastava 2022), which supported imperial interests and often consisted of relatively weak armed groups that relied on naval supremacy (Sharman 2019). The development of European international society was therefore constituted by maritime concerns that included the freedom of the seas, norms of piracy and international law, and control over maritime routes to the Americas and Asia (Colás 2016, Shirk 2017).



A turn to the maritime sphere demonstrates that inter-European imperial competition was driven by access to the sea in a rejection of monarchical absolutism (Van Ittersum 2010). The opening of oceanic routes to the Americas acted as a catalyst for the formation of European state-building and political order. Pope Alexander VI's three Papal Bulls of 1493 along with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 gave the Iberian powers control over all American lands and waters west of the Azores and control over the 'oceanic routes' to the New World (Miller 2015, 88). It was this politicisation of oceanic space and control of maritime routes which sparked the rise of European maritime empires as the Dutch and English in particular sought to challenge Spanish claims to universalism (Mancke 1999; Scott 2019). The very concept of the freedom of the seas is seen as a foundational part of international society (Watson 1992), but there was nothing inevitable about this norm being accepted across the international sphere. States have often sought to territorialise and claim oceanic spaces, but it was the acceptance of the sea as a space of open passage that has made a globalised world possible (Mancke 1999). The English School has broadly viewed Hugo Grotius as a key thinker in the development of international society and Adam Watson (1992, 192) interpreted the freedom of the seas as a Dutch concept originating solely to regulate intra-European relations. Grotius, however, was not really seeking the freedom of seas for states, but 'free access' to networks of trade for private companies, such as the Dutch East India Company (Borschberg 2006, 34). Grotius's legal arguments in favour of the freedom of the seas was a 'radical concept' at the time (Brown 2011, 252). For Grotius, the monarchical universalism of the Spanish and Portuguese empires meant that they were 'blockaders of the sea' and in attacking this absolutism, the defence of maritime commerce was vital to securing Dutch liberty (Blachford 2020, 1237). The development of the freedom of the seas was therefore not a product of inter-European sovereign negotiation, but of sea-borne imperial interest seeking access and travel to the New World.

The recognition of naval power within the European expansion narrative highlights the neglect of the maritime sphere in European state formation and the development of the modern international system (Sharman 2019, 165). The Westphalian framework is centred on disciplined, drilled armies with the escalating size of armies seen as key to the competitive dynamic of a European state system (Sharman 2018, 499). Less attention is paid to the competitive dynamic of building large ocean-going warships of the Renaissance era, known as the 'sovereigns of the sea', which demonstrated dynastic status and the power of the state (Konstam 2008). Prior to the 17th century, ship owners and merchant captains would often operate in a dual role, but it was the shift towards larger naval fleets from the 17th century, which provides the 'most unambiguous practical example' of the increase in state control (Parrott 2012, 290). The following section therefore examines how British imperialism was driven, not by the modernising projects of territorial states, but by the aim to control circulatory maritime networks.

### **Chains and flows: the British maritime empire**

A consideration of the oceans as a vector of movement and exchange can demonstrate how maritime empires were shaped by seeking to control and

influence the circulation and flows of people, resources and trade. It has become a standard mantra to pronounce that national security and the territorial model of sovereignty is challenged by globalisation, but this oversimplifies the connections between the state and the mobilities of power arising from networks of exchange. As the following explains, the British empire evolved concurrently with the ability of the state to control flows and circulations of goods, resources, people and capital.

The development of the British maritime empire provides perhaps the clearest example of a state which developed in tandem with the expansion of sea power. In contemporary strategic debates the British navy is often used as an example of offshore balancing in which naval power is restrained by the 'stopping power of water' (Mearsheimer 2001, 237). Realists argue that the American adoption of a British style approach to sea power would represent a strategy of restraint which relies on an 'over the horizon' force to contain aspiring regional rivals (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016, 75). However, the story of Britain acting as an offshore balancing power has been simplified by the realist reading of history. As Richard Rosecrance (1992, 66) argues, contrary to conventional wisdom, 'Napoleon was not brought to heel by a rapidly organised and powerful counter coalition'. The long struggle against Napoleon was instead, driven by British naval superiority, which was able to pay for various allies within the changing coalitions to fight directly and use British naval power to cut off access for the French Napoleonic empire to colonies and shipping routes. It was therefore control over movement on the sea and networks of trade that helped Britain to overcome a continental power. Britain did not retreat to a static 'over the horizon' force within an isolated island but actively used its naval forces to project a network of power on a global scale (Davey 2015).

The development of the British state is intertwined with the growth of its maritime empire (Black 2004, Scott 2013). Britain was the state 'which most conspicuously succeeded' in developing economic and military power and yet, it was the one state 'which declined the challenge of the military revolution' (Rodger 2011, 121). The territorial European armies of the early modern era, and even up to World War One, were according to N.A.M Rodger (2011, 120), in many ways socially similar to the 13th and 14th century, with a hierarchy of an aristocratic elite leading the lower classes towards battle. The armies of the 17th century, for example, relied on aristocrats raising their own troops and living off the land, which suggests that 'armies grew larger without changing' their essential nature. The British example however, shows that the direct increase in state control over armed force, 'came not with land forces, but with navies' (Parrott 2012). The British state developed through the professionalisation of a large bureaucracy, coupled with the financial interests of the City of London (Knight 2013), to maintain the resources and logistics needed to support a global empire-spanning naval force (Morriss 2010). Coalitions of shared maritime interests were also supported by a strong trust in the taxation powers of the state and cooperative relationships with the economic power holders in society (Hou 2020). The development of the British state can be seen as an example of a 'fiscal-naval state' (Rodger 2011) in which the navy, the British empire and the British state itself developed in a co-evolutionary manner.



The development of this fiscal-naval state played a 'central role' in fostering the conditions for industrialisation (Page 2015, 180) and rested on a blurring of the public-private distinction as the naval forces of the state relied simultaneously on a contractor-state model of private business interests (Knight and Wilcox 2010, Bannerman 2018). The development of naval technology also drove state building as bigger naval guns required bigger ships and increased bureaucracy to organise and pay for the costs of naval development (Glete 2002, Janzekovic 2020). Buzan and Lawson (2015, 259) further show that the naval arms races, beginning with the shift from wood and sail, and then to iron and steam, was a historic shift to 'qualitative arms racing as a permanent feature of modern great power relations'. This transformation is notable because of the speed and scale of this change, with the qualitative shift from wood and sail, to steel and steam, taking just fifty years. It was developments within naval forces that therefore underlie the development of the modern state and drove the dynamics of great power competition.

The example of the British navy is significant for the way in which British state building was based on an imperial network of logistical nodes that helped build and supply an ocean-going force. Naval power allowed the British state to transport troops around the globe using colonial ports and a trans-oceanic network of naval stations that enabled the projection of imperial power (McAleer 2016). It is common to take a geographical determinist position and ascribe British naval power to its isolation as an island nation (Brewer 1989), yet this overlooks the nature of early modern entangled empires and the crisscrossing vectors of ocean-going forms of power projection. As ocean-going ships developed greater armaments, the weight of cannons would require stronger joints in the building of ships (Grainger 2014). The requirements of stronger woods for ship hulls meant that British hegemony was intertwined with the global distribution of energy sources and ship-building resources. The development of ocean-going wooden ships tied the fortunes of British naval power to various locations across the world. Norway and the Baltics originally acted as informal peripheries which provided a flow of goods including supplies for masts, pitch, tar and hemp (Astrom 1970, Hiono 2020). Ships such as HMS Victory required vast amounts of supplies of wood, with over 6,000 mature oaks needed to build such a first-rate ship of the line. Additionally, a range of other timbers were needed, including the softwoods of fir and pine (Crevier 2019, 467). To fuel the ever-growing appetite of timber for ship-building, admiralty agents surveyed forests from Burma to the Cape, the Black Sea and Portuguese South America (Crevier 2019, 469). Locations such as New Brunswick and Lower Canada essentially became 'virtual timber colonies' for the supply of the British navy (Crevier 2019, 467). This circulation of timber resources was not always a hub and spoke model with timber flowing to the metropole centre, but contained a dispersed network of disparate nodes. From the 1740s, masts were transported directly from New England to the West Indies (Hiono 2020, 22). These processes of circulating materials drove empire building and were simultaneously a key element of the rise in state centrism, as state authority sought to control the circulatory networks of empire (Norton 2017).

The qualitative shift from wooden ocean vessels to coal and steam also demonstrates similar circulatory logics of empire. The British empire of the 19th and early 20th century relied upon a series of ports and bases to fuel and maintain the Royal Navy. The fuel needed for a naval fleet did not just appear at refuelling

stations, but was transported by a separate logistical flow led by private contractors who sourced, transported and supplied ports and coaling stations (Boyns and Gray 2016, Gray 2017). Commercial collieries and agents managed contracts to supply and transport coal around the world with commercial tramp ships delivering coal to ports. Refuelling for coal could be required up to once a week or 3 to 4 days for smaller destroyers (Gray 2015, 170) and demanded a fluid network of resources and constant supply. It was the British control over coal and refuelling which gave it a distinct advantage over rivals (Goldrick 2014). This was most notably seen with the defeat of the Russian fleet against Japan in 1905 after the British refused access for the Russians to use its coaling stations (Ediger and Bowlus 2019, 442). The Westphalian state centrism of IR explains military adaptation through the logic of an anarchic state system, but the transformation of naval power to steam-going vessels was not an automatic process and the demands for new forms of energy are also not a guarantee of a future transition (Ediger and Bowlus 2019). The resources and supplies needed for a naval fleet relied upon transnational circulatory networks in which state-centrism arose from seeking to control and rationalise across the heterogeneous boundaries of the empire (Norton 2017). This view of imperial power suggests sovereignty can be seen as a social process that is 'constantly renegotiated', by both public and private actors, and is 'enacted through the mobilities of the "things" being sought, governed or controlled' (Havice 2018, 1293). The development of underwater cables later in the nineteenth century would further reinforce the connections between British imperial nodes in the world economy. The ease of communication through a submarine telegraph system strengthened state control over vast maritime distances (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 76). The British state therefore developed in a co-constitutive manner with the circulations of a maritime empire.

Jonathan Eacott (2012) has shown how British imperial history links developments in the Atlantic to the structure and colonies of the British presence in East Asia. But the expansion of the British state and its empire was driven less from an overarching grand design and more from a range of particularly mercantile interests, which were facilitated by maritime primacy and the projection of power along maritime corridors (Darwin 2013). Contemporary maritime security theorists observe that security itself is deeply intertwined with 'global connectivity and contemporary capitalist circulation' (Bueger, Edmunds and Ryan 2019). Yet, the connection between security, the state, and oceanic circulation is under theorised within IR. An ontology which looks to the ocean as a transnational space can provide IR with a way to reconceptualise our understanding of 'space, time, movement' and connectivity in contrast to the 'static simplicity of landed place' (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 305). The British Empire and its control over the circulatory networks needed to fuel naval power presents a way of viewing the international as a social space of flows and interactions based on mutual constitutive developments across regions and across periods of time.

### **Maritime empires and the power of the state**

The neglect of oceanic space within IR theory is intertwined with the reluctance to study empires within IR as an analytic, with empires often just seen as a form of larger territorial unit (Zielonka 2012, 509, Kadercan 2017). As the

following argues, it is a mistake, however, to view an empire as merely a larger form of territorial state and to overlook maritime empires as a process, or as patterns of flows and circulations.

The expansion of European international society is often taken to be a rather uniform process, but this overlooks the uneven and irregular control of European maritime empires which often involved overlapping claims to power and entangled imperial interests (Mulich 2020). One of the reasons for this is that European empires did not develop as a 'smooth limitless space', but as a disjointed 'assemblage of places' (Ryan 2019, 1064) initially dictated by ocean access. The development of European mercantilist empires was built on a history of seeking to claim 'exclusive rights to maritime trade routes' (Steinberg 2018, 238), with European maritime empires often controlling only 'narrow bands, or corridors' (Benton 2005, 700). The geographical distribution of these maritime routes was also determined by oceanic currents, the depth of water, the safety of sea lanes, wind speed and direction and scientific instruments, such as the compass (Lane 1963, Peters 2020). The geographical reach and success of imperial maritime power could also depend on scientific knowledge and the ability to thrive in hostile environments with adequate medical care and vaccinations, such as the effect of diseases carried by mosquitoes, determining the success or failure of the European empires (McNeil 2010). The development of the international system was therefore a story of uneven and combined development, which was often determined by the ease and access of maritime travel and projection of sea-borne violence.

The mobilities of ocean travel are also intertwined with the rationalisation of state power and the production of knowledge. Naval ships acted to project power and reinforced state control in two main ways, firstly, by projecting European law along maritime corridors of travel and secondly, through scientific expeditions. As Lauren Benton (2010) has shown, the development of international law was intimately connected to European maritime expansion across trade routes and riverine estuaries. Territorial control was not necessarily the primary objective, but there was a drive for control over shipping routes and access to markets. Ships themselves acted as 'islands of law' with their own power and regulations but equally acted as 'representatives of municipal legal authorities- vectors of law thrusting into ocean space' (Benton 2010, 112). The mobility of ships further reinforced state power through scientific expeditions. Maritime questions of the globe, its shape, geography, magnetic and atmospheric properties, as well as questions of meteorology, winds and tides were all linked to voyages of discovery (Sorrenson 1996). State sponsorship of maritime exploration led to ships acting as moving laboratories which spread outwards across the oceans to expand our understanding of physics and the natural environment (Adler 2014). Maritime exploration and European expansion was therefore part of a co-constitutive process as the centralised power of the state developed in parallel with the development of scientific knowledge. State sponsorship of scientific expeditions, including Captain Cook's famous voyages, therefore had a direct impact on facilitating movement and the production of knowledge thereby increasing the influence of the state to project power globally (Hasty and Kimberley 2012).

European oceanic empires 'assembled uneven and incomplete control over irregular and interconnected territories and maritime spaces' (Benton and

Mulich 2015, 151). These early modern European empires did not exist as a discrete single network, but as multiple overlapping and intersecting networks (Mulich 2018, Strootman, Eijnde and van Wijk 2020). Historical developments such as colonialism, empire, dispossession and sovereignty, migration and identity formation can therefore be considered as ‘transoceanic phenomena’, which developed through such crisscrossing networks of exchange (Poppenhagen and Temmen 2018, 151). Imperial power has been used to construct secure sea lanes and to control mobility across the globe. The results of this expansionary process can continue to be seen with the islands which have often acted as relay points in the construction of imperial power, a legacy that is still apparent today with Guam and Diego Garcia (Mukherjee 2020). A reconsideration of the history of the oceans as a political space, therefore, highlights the importance of maritime empires in driving historical processes of globalisation and the construction of international order.

## Conclusion

The very basis of IR is centred on examining the *inter-national*, or state-to-state relations, with the state understood as having sovereign power over a clear demarcation of territory. It is the exclusive control of the state over a fixed territoriality, which is seen in IR theory as defining modernity (Ruggie 1993). There is therefore a ‘broad agreement’ that the study of the state system should explain this ‘geographical compartmentalisation’ of power and authority over a given territory (Goettlich 2019, 204). The assumptions of the territorial trap also result in the reification of the state and make non-territorial spaces ‘difficult to imagine’ within IR theory (Goettlich 2019, 207). But as this paper has argued, the maritime sphere connects developments on land to the oceanic space and deserves further attention and investigation. The rise of the modern international system, the development of states and globalisation can only be fully understood if the Westphalian narrative is expanded to include maritime empires.

The modern state, maritime empires and international order have developed in a co-constitutive manner with the rise of naval power and control over maritime flows and mobilities. Structural theorists within IR assume the presence of the state before then conducting studies on war, trade, institutions and even non-state actors (Shirk 2017, 145). But the rise of European maritime empires developed in parallel with the growth of the state. The British fiscal-naval state offers the clearest example of this process, but there is a need for further research on the rise of European maritime empires and the development of the state within Europe as a co-constitutive process. Looking to the sea as a political space and oceanic mobilities presents a more nuanced view of European expansion consisting of a polyarchy of entangled empires. Further research is needed to untangle these intertwined maritime networks, but a turn to the ocean challenges the historical master narratives commonly used by IR, by de-centring our focus away from state-centrism to consider the polycentric nature of international political order. This paper has therefore begun a modest attempt to create an interdisciplinary dialogue by focusing on the sea and oceans as a political space and as a zone of movement and connections.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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