



The U.S. Navy and Its Cold War Alliances, 1945–1953 by Corbin Williamson.

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The crisis in Hong Kong and COVID-19 have strained US-China relations and exacerbated regional security issues in the western Pacific. In July 2020, the Chinese Air Force repeatedly breached Taiwan’s air defense identification zone and performed maneuvers near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. A few days later, the United States responded by conducting a joint exercise with Japan and Australia in the same region. US Navy Capt. Russ Caldwell, commanding the USS *Antietam*, stated that this drill was intended to “reinforce our mutual commitment to international maritime norms and promoting regional stability,”¹ words indicating a determination to deter Beijing from challenging America’s “blue rampart” in the western Pacific. In his new book, historian Corbin Williamson (US Air War College) demonstrates that the US Navy’s evolving cooperation with other navies can be traced back to the early years of the Cold War.

Williamson challenges those who argue that the US Navy (USN) had no interest in strengthening its ties with allies in the postwar period. He points out that the partnerships between the United States and its allies in personnel exchanges, training, and combined exercises marked “the US Navy’s pursuit of close peacetime relations with its closest allies after World War II” (164). He stresses that the USN and the British military recognized immediately after the fall of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan that the Soviet Union posed a dire potential threat because of its acquisition of “advanced German submarine technology” (5). This realization galvanized American admirals to consolidate a peacetime naval league in order to avoid the mistakes made during ill-prepared combined US, UK, Dutch, and Australian naval operations in the 1942 Battle of the Java Sea. The USN accordingly broke with its tradition of eschewing joint maneuvers and began “exercising with foreign navies on a regular basis, in particular the British and Canadian navies” (181). The author details interactions between the USN, Royal Navy (RN), Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the form of officer exchanges and joint exercises, training, and education. Despite tactical discrepancies stemming from their differing war experiences, the author concludes that close naval cooperation allowed them to “compare their respective strengths and weaknesses” (197).

A strength of the book is its emphasis on the legacy of the Cold War naval alliance. While the participant navies had their distinctive tactics and communication methods, Williamson explains that the United States and its allies sought common ground by compiling publications for future naval cooperation. In 1952, the USN, RN, and RCN published a volume titled *Allied Naval Maneuvering Instructions, Allied Tactical Publication 1* (ATP 1). Access to the book was not restricted to ministries in Washington, London, and Ottawa. Its translation from English into other relevant languages allowed NATO members to collaborate more easily. ATP 1 is now used, Williamson notes, “by dozens of navies throughout the world” (162).

1. “South China Sea: Australian Warships Join US and Japanese in Chinese Confrontation,” *Express* (26 July 2020) – available online.

The author's vivid depictions of postwar naval cooperation infuse flesh and blood into what might otherwise be an arid military history. Spicing up his narrative with little-known anecdotes, he highlights the crucial role of personal contacts in Cold War naval coalitions. Naval officers' direct contacts ensured a more effective and "timely approach to various problems" (224) than did official dispatches and reports. But personal animus sometimes damaged such connections. The author discusses the quarrels between George Dyer and his British counterparts to reveal how leaders' personalities, command styles, and operational preferences could complicate naval relationships between the United States and its allies.

Williamson also delves into the challenges that naval collaboration posed for the USN. For example, America's postwar naval coalition was fraught with competing military and political concerns. While close naval ties with the United Kingdom and Canada enabled the United States to stabilize regional security and relieve its financial burden, they could also be construed as undermining the UN and NATO, both strongly supported by President Harry Truman's administration and American public opinion. Correspondingly, American admirals had to "avoid the public criticism and possible damage to relations with other navies of appearing to play favorites" (170). In practice, the USN could pursue naval cooperation and maintain personal contacts "so long as the links remained out of the eyes of the public and press" (129). Informal military commitments helped the USN balance its pursuit of naval networks with a respect for US foreign policy goals.

The author's handling of Cold War and naval history is eye-opening, but omits essential questions of historical background. He reckons that the USN relied on superior equipment, while its British counterparts focused on techniques for maneuvering ships at sea. This is a useful distinction to make, but the reader does not learn about any historical developments underlying it. Nor does the author adequately assess the bearing that traditional US vs. British strategic thinking had on their postwar naval cooperation.

While Williamson contends that navy-to-navy links were supposed to be implemented under the table due to political concerns, he neglects critical "internal factors" in the United States. How, for instance, did the Army-Navy dispute over leadership in the Pacific, naval demobilization, and the "Revolt of the Admirals" affect the formation of a postwar naval league? The author sheds welcome light on naval cooperation in the Atlantic and combined operations during the Korean War. But he might also have shifted his focus from the Atlantic to the western Pacific to examine (a) how the United States and Britain deployed naval strength prior to the Korean War and (b) how the Far East/Pacific Commands interacted with the RN in postwar East Asia. And what were the political implications of the US-UK joint maneuvers in the South China Sea in 1950 (205)?

Last but not least, some parts of this book require further exploration. The author suggests that relations between the USN and RN were discordant in the 1920s and early 30s (15), yet both sides informally cooperated with some success in East Asia. How was that possible? Williamson claims, regarding joint US, British, and Canadian anti-submarine warfare, that "the matter of closer cooperation in training lay dormant until 1947, when two groups of American officers visited the United Kingdom to discuss cooperation in undersea warfare" (173). We never learn the reason for the tripartite collaboration's strange dormancy.

These reservations aside, Corbin Williamson offers his readers an original, global approach to grasping the twists and turns of the early Cold War naval alliance. He has also laid the groundwork for studies of naval developments during Dwight Eisenhower's presidency.