



Thalassocracies in the Making? The Case of the UAE and the Western Indian Ocean Region

Brendon J Cannon

New thalassocracies — states possessing significant assets to assert their power over maritime spaces — are reportedly rising in the western Indian Ocean region as a consequence of shifts in distributions of power in the international system and the meteoric rise of Arab Gulf states. Using a case study of a historical quasi-thalassocracy, Oman, for comparison, this article assesses that the United Arab Emirates cannot be classed as either a strategic or politico-cultural thalassocracy, given its limited capabilities to project power or tap into existing trade networks across the western Indian Ocean.

Cover photo: The UAE's first Baynunah-class corvette, built by a French shipbuilder, sails out for the first time on 24 June 2009 from a port in northern France. AFP/Jean-Paul Barbier

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Thalassocracy means “rule of the sea” in Greek. Used in the strategic sense by the naval theoretician Alfred Thayer Mahan, the term refers to states, regions or rulers that control or have dominion over a large expanse of sea or possess naval supremacy either in a commercial or military sense.¹ In short, it describes a political entity that uses its naval and/or merchant fleet to assert its power and unite possessions separated by water.

Examples of historical thalassocracies include Athens, Venice and the Dutch Republic, although the great modern scholar of sea power states, Andrew Lambert, argues that true thalassocracies are the product of conscious cultural and political decisions by the entire society.² As such, thalassocracies understand the power asymmetry in play between a sea power, Great Britain, for example, and a continental hegemon like Napoleonic France. The sea is the source of their power, and

¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1980).

² Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (Yale University Press, 2018).

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The differences between strategic, Mahanian conceptualisations of sea power and those of Lambert, which emphasise a maritime culture, are prescient because some see the emerging contours of a political order driven, in part, by Arab Gulf states. This order (and the power that underpins it) may, in the short or long term, come to resemble historical thalassocracies. At the heart of the matter are the actions of Middle Eastern states in the maritime spaces and the littorals of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean.

Middle Eastern states and peoples, particularly those from the Arabian peninsula, have long been involved with their near abroad, particularly on the opposite, African shore of the Red Sea. The growing military and economic engagements of certain states inhabiting the Middle East regional security complex³ such as the United Arab

³ A regional security complex (RSC) is characterised by an intense degree of security interdependence. In

other words, an RSC is “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely so that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another.” Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post–Cold War Era* (ECPR Press, 2008), p. 190.

Emirates (UAE), involving ports, bases and concessions, have reportedly resulted in emergent thalassocracies. For example, the UAE's leadership recently "began to make moves that laid the foundations for a new geopolitical order This emerging new maritime order stretches out in a broken continuum of ports, naval bases and strategic locations across the Indian Ocean."⁴

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Particularly after the 2008/9 recession, competition between regional actors for this maritime space and littoral ports has led to a race “between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey to build naval and military bases right across the Horn of Africa. This threatens to change the naval balance in the north-west Indian Ocean.”⁵ The intrigues surrounding the actions of the UAE and other Middle Eastern states involving ports and basing concessions in the region have reportedly “facilitated geopolitical tensions and regional rivalries that risk militarising the region and impacting human security by reinforcing more state-centric conceptions of security concentrated on territorial and border disputes.”⁶

⁴ Nisha Mathew, “Old Problems, New Solutions: An Emirati Perspective on the Southern Tier in the Middle East”, *Insights* 206, Middle East Institute, NUS, 6 May 2019

⁵ David Brewster, “Base Race in the Horn of Africa”, *The Interpreter*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/base-race-horn-africa>

⁶ A Kabandula & T M Shaw, “Rising Powers and the Horn of Africa: Conflicting Regionalisms”, *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 12 (2018), 2315–2333.

This article questions these analyses — long on rhetoric and short on facts — and attempts to demonstrate the limited extent to which Middle Eastern states such as the UAE are currently involved in the Horn of Africa and its maritime near abroad.⁷ Relatedly, the article catalogues the UAE’s limited capabilities to effectively project power or tap into existing trade networks across the region for the periods of time necessary to shift power balances. This is not to say the UAE does not punch above its weight given its small size. Rather, it proves that power is finite and that states — all states — are often hindered in achieving their intentions because of their capabilities. These realities call into question the validity of assertions that the UAE, with its nascent string of ports, should be considered a thalassocracy.

This article begins with a historical case study of the UAE’s neighbour, the Sultanate of Oman, a historical quasi-thalassocracy. It then catalogues and analyses the UAE’s current maritime strength and its so-called “string of ports” strategy before assessing whether the country is indeed a thalassocracy.

Oman as a Quasi-thalassocracy

The term thalassocracy applies somewhat to historical Oman because it has “the advantage of indicating that political rule [was] exercised over a network by means of maritime power and connection rather than

⁷ In line with this critique, see B J Cannon & F Donelli, “Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa”, *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2020), pp. 505–524; see also, F. Donelli, F., & B J Cannon, “Power projection of Middle East States in the Horn of Africa: Linking Security Burdens with Capabilities”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2021), pp. 1–21.

through the operations of a centralising state.”⁸ In order for Omani governors in Mombasa or Zanzibar — often African slaves in the service of Omani Arabs — to impose taxes and control trade, Muscat’s sultans relied on a dense network of Indian traders and Balochi mercenaries.⁹ Both groups were amenable to Oman’s light political touch and adhered to these arrangements because Omani money paid for their cooperation, or because they benefitted from the trading networks.¹⁰ Thus, mercenaries, combined with the vessels available to Omani and Indian merchants, allowed Omani rulers to approach something akin to a mercantile thalassocracy from 1792 to 1865. Often overlooked in this period, nonetheless, are the political decisions made in combination with other “ingredients” that allowed Oman’s rulers to become a maritime power in the first place.

“The political decisions made in combination with other ‘ingredients’ that allowed Oman’s rulers to become a maritime power in the first place were often overlooked.”

Muscat’s rise was, in large part, a result of the intense rivalry for maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean — and ultimately dominance of India — between France and Great Britain. France’s island possessions in Mauritius and Reunion triggered London’s quest for friendship with Muscat, forced or not. The result of this European

⁸ J Jones & N Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 35.

⁹ B Nicolini, *Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar: Three-Terminal Cultural Corridor in the Western Indian Ocean, 1799–1856* (Vol. 3), (Brill, 2004), p. 32.

¹⁰ B Nicolini, *Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar*, pp. 34, 36–40.

rivalry was the 1798 Treaty of Muscat,¹¹ which forced Oman to give up the port of Bandar Abbas, offered Oman the theoretical protection of Great Britain's powerful navy against France, and gave Omani rulers the opportunity to exploit existing networks to establish its short-lived status as a maritime power.

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In addition, while geography may form a great deal of a state's, or ruler's destiny, Oman's sultans made a choice to engage with and utilise the tools and agents at their disposal *at this particular juncture in time.* They made their decision based on their limited ability to project maritime power and control of the sea (as compared to the power of their neighbours).¹² In other words, Oman's limited capabilities would not have given the sultanate the status of a quasi-thalassocracy. Rather, Oman's sultans opted to take a “position within the ‘globalising’ world-system by extending and enhancing [their] participation in the existing Indian Ocean networks”, to include British naval protection.¹³ It was Britain's naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean and Muscat's treaty with

¹¹ Also known as the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation. See S B Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (Vol. 2), (Harrison and Sons, 1919), p. 281.

¹² For more on the choice of states and rulers to become maritime powers, see D W Blagden, J S Levy, & W R Thompson, Sea Powers, Continental Powers, and Balancing Theory, *International Security*, 36, no. 2, (2011), pp. 190–202.

¹³ J Jones & N Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, p. 44.

London, as well as its foreign policy priorities that largely avoided provoking London, which saw Oman's maritime empire flourish.

The UAE's Naval Assets and "String of Ports"

The UAE currently has a small merchant marine.¹⁴ Its navy, on the other hand, counts 67 vessels as comprising its naval force.¹⁵ This substantial number, however, includes vessels under 30m, which many do not count when reporting their fleet size. Since the establishment of the Emirati naval forces in 1967, their priority has been and remains the protection of territorial waters, particularly the country's offshore oil and gas facilities. Hydrocarbons are the lifeblood of the UAE, and their protection comprises the core economic and security interests of the country. In terms of projecting force to its near abroad, the UAE navy began multi-country operations only in 2009. However, the UAE's contribution to these operations was limited because of sustainability at sea issues, demands for vessels for other missions, a shortage of vessels with required capabilities such as high-speed transports, and a dearth of ships with qualified crews. In the wake of the Yemen crisis in 2015, the UAE did send Baynunah-class corvettes to patrol the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Yemen, undertaking blockading and force protection operations in the process.¹⁶ However, the UAE navy had to hire

¹⁴ The UAE hosts a number of large ship owners, including branches of international owners. It does flag vessels, but most shipping is done by offshore companies, although they maintain offices in Dubai. See Ince and Co., LLP, "Shipping in The United Arab Emirates", *Lexology* (2019), <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=22b7cf33-d11a-4b82-b21c-231abd6c3365>

¹⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *IISS Military Balance 2020*, p. 382.

¹⁶ The UAE now has six 71m corvettes (Baynunah class). Unlike their roles in most navies, these are multi-mission corvettes designed to undertake a range of tasks including patrolling, minelaying and anti-surface warfare operations. Technically, they can operate

additional support vessels to assist it with moving equipment and personnel to Yemen and within the region because of the aforesaid shortcomings.¹⁷

“The Omani sultanate possessed no navy and limited merchant vessels, primarily dhows.”

Comparisons with the historical Omani mercantile empire are instructive here. The sultanate possessed no navy and limited merchant vessels, primarily dhows. Instead, as noted, it paid dearly for mercenaries and transported those mercenaries on Indian merchant vessels or local dhows.¹⁸ It also relied on the naval power of Great Britain to provide the secure space for trade networks — into which the sultanate tapped — to flourish between Oman, Zanzibar and the subcontinent.¹⁹ What Oman did end up with were ports and trade hubs such as Mombasa. These had developed for commercial reasons historically and only later became the focus of limited Omani political control, which ceased, except in theory, whenever Britain intervened.

both in shallow waters and blue water. However, significant extra weight has been added by the vessels’ multiple weapon systems, possibly compromising their performance. Athol Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2021), p. 267.

¹⁷ Athol Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, p. 269.

¹⁸ Oman’s rulers preferred expensive but loyal Baloch mercenaries to the “untrustworthiness of Arab troops and the potential risks they could have posed” to the regime. B Nicolini, *Makran, Oman, and Zanzibar*, p. 34.

¹⁹ British naval support for Omani interests in the western Indian Ocean was never guaranteed. See J Jones & N Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, p. 45.

What of the UAE’s “string of ports” dotting the littoral of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa? Do these constitute evidence of a thalassocracy in the making akin to even the imperfect case of Oman, let alone a cultural and strategic thalassocracy like Venice? The similarities are limited because these ports do nothing to further the UAE’s “political rule [as] exercised over a network by means of maritime power and connection.”²⁰ The UAE is not tapping into existing trade networks to tax or control trade, thereby becoming politically powerful. Rather, Dubai’s DP World is refurbishing and expanding ports to create trade, in the case of Berbera in Somaliland, or to expand it, in the case of Djibouti. DP World certainly earns money from a variety of revenue sources in doing so, but this is not used directly to further the political power of the UAE. Even if DP World’s actions fitted into the political aims of the UAE’s leadership, Abu Dhabi (as the most powerful emirate) does not possess the maritime assets to establish political control, nor does it have a treaty with a great power that — even theoretically — provides it with the force needed to “protect trade.”

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Some scholars have argued that commerce and security are interlinked in the UAE and therefore have concluded that DP World, while admittedly a commercial entity, is also one that acts on behalf or at the behest of Abu Dhabi’s political rulers. DP World, however, is not a national entity; it is a Dubai-based company beholden to its board. While

²⁰ J Jones & N Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman*, p. 35.

it would do nothing to contradict the general contours of UAE foreign policy, its actions are driven — as befits a commercial entity — by profit.²¹ The cases of ports in Berbera and Djibouti are instructive.

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Berbera. The port, located in the de-facto independent but internationally unrecognised Republic of Somaliland, represents a low-risk, low-to-medium return on investment for DP World.²² Despite this, the connection made by some between ports deals, the UAE’s growing political power and its military adventurism is understandable. The tripartite deal signed by DP World, Somaliland and Ethiopia in May 2016 did coincide with the conflict in Yemen and the UAE’s deployment of troops there in mid-2015. Yemen also played a role in a subsequent February 2017 agreement between the UAE’s military and the government of Somaliland for the construction of a small military facility

²¹ Author’s interview with senior DP World official, Dubai, UAE, January 2020.

²² Should the port expansion proceed as outlined, it would allow for the export of mainly livestock from Somaliland and Ethiopia. Equally important, there is a huge demand to import cement, gypsum and edible oils into Ethiopia. The volume of traffic at Berbera port, as of early 2020, had already increased 60 per cent since 2017 (from 80,000 TEUs to 128,000 TEUs), and this even before the construction of roads, expansion of the port and implementation of a free zone have been completed. Author’s interview with senior DP World official, Dubai, UAE, January 2020.

and naval dock near the port of Berbera.²³ The two agreements were, nevertheless, separate.²⁴

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In addition, Berbera could not have been used for naval support of operations in Yemen or elsewhere — even if the UAE had greater naval capabilities. The port was moribund, only accepting small vessels as late as September 2018, when DP World embarked on the first of four planned phases to upgrade and expand the port.²⁵ Furthermore, the port lacked the facilities that would routinely be found in naval ports.²⁶ Finally, DP World’s interest in Berbera preceded Abu Dhabi’s decision to deploy its military to Yemen.²⁷

²³ As a further signal that the UAE’s strategic interests in its near abroad were predicated on the war in Yemen, the military facility planned near the airport has since been cancelled. Given the UAE’s decision to withdraw from Yemen in mid-2019, Abu Dhabi simply sees no need to build the facilities. See Jama Farah, “UAE cancelled the construction of military base in Berbera,” *Horn Diplomat*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.horndiplomat.com/2020/03/04/uae-cancelled-the-construction-of-military-base-in-berbera/>

²⁴ Author’s interview with senior DP World official, Dubai, UAE, January 2020.

²⁵ Author’s interview with DP World manager, Berbera, Somaliland, May 2018.

²⁶ These include a security perimeter, accommodation facilities, munitions bunkers and medical facilities.

²⁷ For background and details, see Brendon J Cannon and Ash Rossiter. “Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa”, *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2017): 13.

Djibouti. In the case of Djibouti, DP World had significant concessionary agreements to run the country's largest container port at Doraleh prior to the Berbera deal. Allegations of mismanagement and corruption levelled by the Djiboutian government against the Dubai-based ports operator, however, culminated in the forcible removal of DP World in February 2018. The subsequent response of the UAE is both telling and worth noting. Although DP World and Abu Dhabi remain angered by the loss of Doraleh — fiscally estimated at over US\$1 billion — the company's forceful expulsion from Djibouti resulted in no action from the UAE to “protect its investments” other than DP World taking the government of Djibouti to court to press its claims. This, more than anything else, resembles Oman, its maritime trade empire, and the inability of its rulers to maintain their “thalassocracy” in the face of either British de-facto rule (1890–1963) or local actions (revolution and independence movement in Zanzibar, 1963–1964).

A New Thalassocracy?

The preceding sections began to answer whether we are witnessing the birth of a new thalassocracy. To conclude, a brief discussion of the actions of the UAE and those of its ports operators is appropriate. DP World, for instance, currently operates ports or portions of ports in Berbera, Sokhna in Egypt, and Jeddah. However, it withdrew from Aden in 2012. Its subsidiary, P&O Maritime, is reportedly operating and refurbishing the small port of Bosaso in the autonomous Puntland region of Somalia. Abu Dhabi Ports, arguably the ports operator of choice for the rulers of Abu Dhabi, currently has no operations in the


Red Sea or Horn of Africa.²⁸ While the UAE, with the assistance and acquiescence of local forces in Yemen, reportedly maintained brief control of other small ports such as Mukalla during its involvement in the Yemen conflict, these are hardly trade entrepôts akin to Oman’s historical ports in Zanzibar and Mombasa.

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The UAE, while a strong ally of the United States, lacks a great power partner like Oman had in Great Britain. London, from time to time, was willing to enforce Oman’s trading privilege — if they were congruent with Britain’s interests. While the UAE began to recently tap into existing trade networks, this has occurred in a highly limited fashion, and it is only one of many countries to do so.

Possessing neither the ships nor naval capabilities to significantly shift distributions of power in its near abroad, the UAE is far from resembling a strategic thalassocracy à la Mahan. It is even farther from Lawson’s politico-cultural thalassocracies, which purposely choose to foster a national maritime culture to balance against more

²⁸ AD Ports is the master developer and regulator of ports and industrial zones in emirate of Abu Dhabi. It has only one foreign operation, the Kamsar Container Terminal in Guinea, West Africa, which it operates on behalf of Emirates Global Aluminium, a global aluminium company jointly owned by Abu Dhabi and Dubai government investment companies.

powerful continental states. In sum, the UAE should not be classified as a thalassocracy. 

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