CHAPTER TWO

THE SWEDISH DYNASTIC STATE AND ITS NAVY

2.1 Naval power and political power

Studies about naval policy must avoid making naval power appear to be an end in itself. This has been common in Euro-American naval historiography, and Sweden is no exception. In this perspective, a navy is something that exists as a normal part of every maritime nation’s life, and politicians and taxpayers are there to support it and understand how it works. Actually, a navy is a costly instrument of political power. Taxpayers must make sacrifices for its existence, and political decision-makers must make choices about how it should be organised and used for political ends.

Naval power must be placed in a political and socio-economic context of domestic and international conflicts and compromises. A navy is created and maintained to serve a purpose, and studies of naval policy must try to find and analyse that purpose, how it may have changed over time, and how it may have created operational tasks for the navy. The concrete task of a navy is to achieve or deny control of important sea lines of communication. The connections between political power and naval power are most easy to see by asking why certain lines of communication were politically and economically important.

Navies are used to exercise political, military, or economic power. Studies of why a navy exists and why it changes are therefore studies of power in general, not of sea power as an isolated phenomenon. The tasks of a navy are determined by the power-holders, although they act in a context of international politics, domestic interest groups, economic conditions, and public opinion. The rulers’ and the ruling elite’s ideas about the purpose of their navy are formed by the interests, opportunities, and threats they are able to perceive, not by general and abstract ideas about sea power.

Permanent navies are, like other complex organisations, the result of long-term investments in several capabilities and expensive hardware, rather than reliance on short-term solutions to every contingency. However, they are also the results of changes in rules of human
interaction (institutions), which make it possible to achieve sufficiently broad coalitions of interests behind long-term investments. Rulers and taxpayers must at least tacitly agree about a naval policy that makes it possible to invest in an organisation controlled by the state. This could be based on a perception that organisation is superior to other solutions of the same problem. Naval and military transformation in early modern Europe is, to a large extent, the history of how earlier armed social institutions, such as local militias and fleets of merchantmen armed by trading cities, were replaced by permanent armed forces run by states. This was not possible without a change in those rules of human interaction which earlier had favoured local and temporary forms of protection.

This chapter is a chronological survey of Swedish naval policy, which also serves as an introduction to the development of the Swedish navy up to 1721. The intention is to explain why the navy existed. It did not replace any important armed social institution in Sweden, and it was not an outgrowth of a flourishing maritime and mercantile economy. It appeared suddenly as an instrument of an ambitious power-seeker who founded a dynasty. It continued to exist under various strategic and political conditions, at a time when rather few European states had permanent military and naval organisations. Why did the Swedish society accept the allocation of large resources to warships, naval ordnance, seamen, and naval provisioning? There are few easy answers in declarations of naval policy or political debates about the navy. In order to find answers, this chapter seeks the reason why the decision-makers allocated resources to naval power. Why did control of the sea matter, and which threats and opportunities impelled the creation of the navy? What role did it have in different phases of the dynastic Swedish state: its foundation and stabilisation, its growing ambitions in Baltic power politics, its successful conquest of an empire and its defence of that empire?

2.2 From Nordic Union to a Swedish dynastic state, 1448–1558

2.2.1 Before 1521: The Oldenburg campaigns for a Baltic empire

The break-up of the Kalmar Union between the kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway and its replacement by two early modern monarchies with articulated administrative, fiscal, and military structures was a slow process. The differences in language, culture, religion,