The Danish East India Company’s War against the Mughal Empire, 1642-1698

Kathryn Wellen
Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

Abstract

This article examines the violence surrounding a war that the Danish East India Company declared against the Mughal Empire during the mid-seventeenth century. To explain why such a small chartered company would declare war against such a formidable foe, the relationship between trade, violence and statecraft in both societies is discussed at length. The article further describes how the war was waged, including the complex legal situation surrounding it and the various ways in which the opponents tried to hold each other responsible for losses. Using the Danish-Mughal war as a vehicle for exploring relations between European and Asian merchants, the article argues that violence was the contingency plan of even the weakest European companies.

Keywords

Warfare – commerce – Danish East India Company – Mughal Empire – Bengal

Introduction

Halfway through the seventeenth century, when various European companies had already made their presence felt in Asia but colonial rule was still on a distant horizon, the Danish East India Company declared war against the Mughal Empire. Such a small and inconsistently supported trading company was no

* This is a revision of a paper presented at the Forum for European Expansion and Global Interaction at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina in 2010. I am grateful to the participants there for their comments and to Lincoln Paine, Michael W. Charney, Jerry H. Bentley, Jos Gommans and Archishman Chowdury for reading earlier drafts of this paper.
match for one of the mightiest realms in the world, thus damage to the Mughal Empire was minimal. Yet given critical differences in naval warfare capabilities, and, more importantly, in governmental willingness to develop and harness these capabilities, the Danish Company had the upper-hand at sea and preyed upon Indian commercial vessels for half a century.

The use of violence in early modern Indian Ocean trade was not exceptional. Revising a long-cherished view of violence for commercial gain as an aberration to the otherwise businesslike conduct of the European chartered companies, recent scholarship has both highlighted the violent nature of early modern European enterprise in Asia and documented an intersection between violence and commerce in certain Asian societies. Parallels between Asian and European regimes of violence include a tendency for coastal groups isolated from areas of production in their hinterlands to prey on the trade of others and rulers licensing specialists in violence to wage war against commercial rivals or extort tribute from merchants. The Danes’ use of violence was therefore characteristic of the time and place. Nevertheless the history of this war is instructive because of its scale: the Mughal Empire’s army was perhaps fifty times larger than Denmark’s entire population. Through the lens of this war between two unlikely opponents, this article examines the relationships

---


3 Some estimates of the number of people directly involved in the Mughal army are as high as 26 million. (Tapan Raychaudhuri, “The Mughal Empire,” in *Cambridge Economic History of India*, 1, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (Cambridge, 1982), 179.) Meanwhile,
between early modern governments, commerce, and warfare, thereby diversifying the view of a violent era.

Maritime Trade, Violence and Nation-Building in Europe

European chartered companies originated within the context of European commerce, which had a long tradition of violence. Violence was used to ensure the safe transport of goods and was key to the success of commercial enterprises in medieval Europe. In the maritime context, force meant guns and gun-carrying ships. While guns were used on board ships since at least the early fifteenth century, a string of technological advances during the early modern era facilitated the projection of naval power over increasingly great distances. These included better iron production, improvements in gunpowder technology, increases in the storage capacity of ocean-going vessels, the fusion of tactical mobility with heavy ordnance, and, eventually, the development of the ship of line. Crucially the demands of this technology encouraged fiscal administrative developments to finance the high costs of state-of-the-art naval technology as well as the establishment of permanent navies and armies. Thus cooperation between maritime trade and landed interests increased in conjunction with the evolution of ship technology.

Despite this enhanced cooperation, governments regularly lacked the ability to enforce their policies beyond their coastal waters. They had a variety of ways to engage entrepreneurs specialized in seaborne violence. During wars, states would authorize them to attack the vessels and trade of the state’s enemies. During times of peace, another technique was to issue “letters of reprisal” which allowed seafarers to attack and capture ships originating from other countries, justifying these attacks because of previous attacks on their countrymen. A third means was to grant a group of merchants exclusive trading privileges in a particular area accompanied by the right to use violence to

---

the seventeenth-century population of Denmark has been estimated between 500,000 and 600,000. (Hans Chr. Johansen, Danish Population History, 1600-1939 (Odense, 2002), 13.


defend these privileges. Such authorizations within the legal system of the sea-
farers’ country of domicile permitted the development of considerable ex-
pertise in seaborne violence.7

Violence and commerce were intertwined in other ways as well. Mercantilism,
the dominant economic theory in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe,
associated states’ strength with their economic dominance. It also emphasized
commercial competition. Such competition stemmed in part from the persis-
tent notion of finite wealth, a corollary of the belief that the wealth of one
nation must be obtained at the expense of another. Consequently mercantil-
ists sought to strengthen their own state and its economy and to weaken those
of foreign adversaries. The pursuit of military strength was closely intertwined
because it was believed that strength was needed to protect and augment
wealth while wealth was needed to generate and support strength. Thus across
Europe, rulers sought to consolidate their states’ power through the twin goals
of increasing national wealth and expanding the military.

Known as “the first princely Mercantilist,”8 King Christian IV (1588-1648)
sought to increase Denmark’s sphere of influence and its financial and eco-
nomic independence.9 The navy was important to his plans because it facil-
tated the administration of Denmark’s territories and the enforcement of the
Sound Tolls, a fee charged for the passage merchant vessels from Western
Europe into the Baltic. The Sound Tolls constituted an important source of
income for the Danish kings who used it to further enhance the navy and
finance other state projects. Christian IV undertook a wide variety of initiatives
but was repeatedly thwarted by political and economic conditions. The early
seventeenth-century Danish economy was based on cattle and grains, with a
large percentage of the population directly engaged in agriculture. Thus when
Christian IV encouraged the manufacture of glue, paper, and other goods in
an attempt to spare the cost of expensive imports, the Danish market could
not assimilate these products.10 Nevertheless he stimulated the establishment
of trading companies for Greenland, Iceland, and the West and East Indies.

---

7 Jan Glete, Warfare at Sea, 1500-1650: Maritime conflicts and the transformation of Europe
   (London, 2000), 40-42.
   1589-1625 (Copenhagen, 1916), 320. More recent historical works have questioned the appro-
priateness of using the term “mercantilism” with reference to Christian IV’s commercial
policy and suggested “economic nationalism” as an alternative. See Paul Douglas Lockhart,
9 K. Glamann, “The Danish East India Company,” in Sociétés et Compagnies de Commerce en
10 Ole Feldbæk, Danmarks Økonomisk Historie, 1500-1840 (Copenhagen, 1993), 54.
It was hoped that these companies would encourage employment and trade, and they occupied a central position in the government’s plans for economic development. Their charters granted these companies the right to use violence in order to defend their trading privileges in other regions.

**Maritime Trade, State Participation and Violence in Asia**

Increased interest in trade during the early modern era was not an exclusively European phenomenon. There was also an expansion of Asian commerce during the fifteenth through mid-eighteenth centuries. This was characterized by a quantitative increase in international trade, a rise in trade between northern and southern regions, as well as openness, competition, and refined financial and commercial techniques. There emerged numerous port-centered states such as Aden and Melaka, while various larger states, such as Iran, Golconda, and the Mughal state, assumed a semi-agrarian, semi-commercial political character. Despite the wide spread of this increased interest, Asian attitudes towards maritime commerce varied greatly.

The Mughals are the classic example of a continental Asian empire with an aloof attitude towards maritime commerce. While there was an avid desire to accrue wealth, the majority of their income came from land-based sources. The imperial government was concerned with port revenues, the import of bullion, and the safety of pilgrims to Mecca, but by and large it left seaborne commerce to various groups of merchants. During the formative years of the empire, they assumed a laissez-faire policy that allowed merchants to develop sophisticated commercial techniques independent of the state. Influenced by

---

Iranian ideas regarding the combination of imārat (administration) and tijārat (commerce), the nobility took a greater interest in commerce during the seventeenth century. During the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1658) there was even a military campaign to improve imperial control over commerce in Bengal. However, the Mughal government per se did not have its own trade.

Other Asian powers were more deeply interested and involved in maritime affairs. Prior to a shogunal decree in 1635, Japan actively pursued overseas expansion, as exemplified by its invasion of Korea during the 1590s and by its issuing of certificates conferring protection to its people trading overseas. In Southeast Asia, most states pursued trade and ambitious rulers sought to exploit trade for the development of their realms and personal enrichment. Among them were the rulers of Gowa and Tallo who deliberately encouraged commerce and succeeded in transforming Makassar from a small port into a thriving, cosmopolitan emporium. In South Asia, various Malabari rulers sustained a keen interest in international commerce. The rulers of Calicut, for example, actively fostered the pepper trade and facilitated it by protecting and enforcing property rights.

---


16 During the early seventeenth century, numerous members of the royal family owned ships, including Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627), his wife Nur Jahan, Prince Khurram and the Queen-Mother. Indeed, it appears that the Portuguese seizure of Jahangir’s mother’s ship Rahimi in 1614 was one of the reasons for Jahangir’s attack on Portuguese settlements. Similarly, Jahangir’s successor Emperor Shah Jahan (1594-1666) participated in trade with both Red Sea ports and Aceh, and tried to monopsonize cotton textiles and indigo in the early 1630s. Also during Shah Jahan’s reign, local governments advanced money from the mint and the treasury to merchants, both European and Indian, for their business. M.N. Pearson, “Merchants and states” in The Political Economy of Merchants Empires, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge, 1991), 112; Ashin das Gupta, Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, 15; Satis Chandra, “Commercial Activities of the Mughal Emperors during the Seventeenth Century,” Bengal Past and Present 78 (1959): 93-95; H.W. van Santen, “De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in Gujarat en Hindustan, 1620-1660” (Ph.D. Diss., Leiden University, 1982), 162-169.


18 Ashin das Gupta, Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, 15.


In some instances Asian rulers also employed sailors specialized in violence to enforce their commercial policies. In the Malay world the sultan of the famed port state Melaka attempted to hire Chinese vessels to fight against his rivals; and Johor's rulers employed seafarers known as orang laut in their navy for both defensive functions, such as guarding sea lanes, and offensive purposes, including raiding passing ships. Merchant vessels in the maritory of Barkur on the Malabar coast were required to make a gift to the ruler. If they failed to do so, the ruler's fleet would pursue them and force them to pay double. In such instances Asian rulers were essentially extending their control of trade into the sea surrounding the port by employing naval forces and legitimizing their use of violence. Thus European rulers were not alone in their engagement of entrepreneurs who specialized in violence to enforce their commercial policies.

The Establishment of the Danish East India Company and Its Declaration of War against the Mughal Empire

The Danish East India Company was chartered in 1616 with the strong and sustained support of Christian IV. He exerted considerable pressure in order to raise the company's initial stock capital of 180,000 rix-dollars, contributing 17,000 rix-dollars of it himself. While 180,000 rix-dollars was a significant amount in seventeenth-century Denmark, it was just 1/14th of the starting capital of the United (Dutch) East India Company (VOC); thus from its start, the Danish Company was under-capitalized. Reflecting the involvement of Dutch entrepreneurs, such as Jan de Willem and Hendrik Rosenkrantz who organized the first Danish East India Company, Dutch influence was extensive. An essential difference, however, was in the Danish Company’s position vis à vis

---


23 The VOC’s starting capital amounted to more than 6,400,000 florins, or about 2,560,000 rix-dollars. (Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Coromandel Trade of the Danish East India Company, 1618-1649,” *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 38 (1989): 43.)

the crown. According to official theory, it was the Danish king who concluded treaties, leased territory, and owned forts, which he then permitted the company to use for its trade. The pre-eminence of the king’s role is apparent in the treaties concluded in Copenhagen with representatives of Asian realms: these treaties do not even mention the Danish East India Company. Thus even in the event of the company’s dissolution, which occurred in 1650 following the death of the company’s great benefactor Christian IV in 1648, its servants were obliged to maintain the establishments in Asia.

The Danish East India Company’s first expedition was sent to Asia in late 1618 under the command of Dane Ove Giedde (1594-1660). The Danes’ initial ventures in Ceylon were unsuccessful, but they had better luck on the Coromandel Coast. In 1620, they concluded a treaty with Raghunatha Nayaka of Tanjore (1600-1634), which granted them a lease on the fishing village of Tarangambadi. Here they constructed Fort Dansborg and founded Tranquebar, which became the center of Denmark’s trade in Asia. The enterprising first governor of Tranquebar, the Dutchman Roland Crappe (admin. 1621-1636), established a far-flung string of Danish factories from Malabar to Makassar. Thanks to the strong royal support that the company enjoyed, it was able to focus on trading between these ports rather than on sending regular cargoes to Europe.

Bengal was one of the numerous locations where Crappe tried to establish a Danish presence. Unfortunately, initial Danish ventures in Bengal were unsuccessful. In 1625, Jupiter was lost on the coast of Orissa along with a score of men and valuable goods. Despite unfulfilled requests for compensation for these losses, the Danes established a manned factory at Pipli in 1626 which,
according to Dutch reports, did well during its first year.\textsuperscript{29} Also in 1626, Crappe sent a delegation including Erik Grubbe and Willem Leyel to Bengal. The intention was to send Grubbe to Agra bearing gifts for the Mughal emperor to persuade him to grant the Danes favorable commercial terms, yet this mission could not be completed for lack of money.\textsuperscript{30} Unable to make an appropriate gift, the Danes were forced to conduct their trade on a legally informal basis.\textsuperscript{31}

The foundations that Crappe energetically established for the Danish East India Company in Asia were not maintained by his successor Bernt Pessart (admin. 1636-1643). Encumbered by large debts from the start of his administration, Pessart attempted a number of risky ventures to make money. While trade with Bengal continued,\textsuperscript{32} Pessart ignored the Danish company's most profitable commercial contacts, such as Tanjore and Makassar, and endeavored to trade in less certain places like Persia. He also ignored Tranquebar, which fell into chaos,\textsuperscript{33} and opted to reside in Masulipatnam. There he became

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{29} "Manifesta justificaçao," 8.24.1644, f. 1, VI B, "Correspondance og diverse Akter,” 246
\textsuperscript{29} "Willum Leyels Arkiv," Dansk Kancelli B (Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen) f. 2. (I am grateful to Jorge Flores of the European University Institute and especially Paulo Pinto of the Portuguese Catholic University for their generous help with this document.) W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., \textit{Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden van Heren xvii Der Verenigde Oostinische Compagnie}, 1 (Den Haag, 1960), 186, 205.
\textsuperscript{31} Gunnar Olsen, \textit{Dansk Ostindien 1616-1732: de Ostindiske Kompagniers Hane på Indien} (Copenhagen, 1967), 102.
\textsuperscript{32} Coolhaas, ed., \textit{Generale Missiven}, 1, 627, 721.
\textsuperscript{33} Pessart left Tranquebar under the ineffectual leadership of Jacob von Stackenborg. During his tenure, two scandalous Danish priests, Christian Pedersen Storm and Niels Andersen, created such havoc in Tranquebar, and behaved so violently, that traders avoided the settlement. Danish relations with the Naik of Tanjore were also strained because of Danish neglect in paying their annual tribute; therefore the Danes could not depend on the Naik for any type of assistance, commercial or otherwise. According to British records, “The Affairs of the Danes in 1638 are described as so low at Trincombar, that unless supplies arrived from Denmark, would be ruined.” (Olsen, \textit{Dansk Ostindien}, 120-121; Kay Larsen, “Rebellerne i Trankebar: Et Stykke Dansk Koloni-Historie,” \textit{Gads Dansk Magasin} (1907): 621; Kay Larsen, \textit{De Danske-Ostindiske Koloniers Historie}, Vol. 1, Trankebar (Copenhagen, 1907), 32-34; “Observations on Trade carried on between Denmark and Asia,” Home Miscellaneous Series, Reel No. 22, Manuscripts 57-59, (India Office Library, London; read on microfilm at University Malaya Library, Kuala Lumpur, f. 1.)
\end{flushleft}
involved in the diamond trade, but his ventures were unsuccessful and Danish debts soared.\textsuperscript{35}

Although there is some evidence pointing to Danish seizure of Bengali ships in the 1630s,\textsuperscript{36} the immediate catalyst for a formal declaration of war was the loss of the \textit{St. Jacob} in 1640. On a voyage from Makassar to Masulipatnam, the \textit{St. Jacob} was driven by foul weather into Bengali waters where local authorities allegedly prevented the provision of assistance. Subsequently the ship wrecked, its crew was allegedly poisoned, its passengers were imprisoned, and its cargo was seized. While the surviving Danes escaped, and the passengers were freed, the Danes could not negotiate the release of the cargo.\textsuperscript{37} Dutch records suggest that the \textit{St. Jacob}'s cargo was seized because of Danish debts, but the Danes viewed the seizure as a tyrannous act.\textsuperscript{38} Appalled, Pessart sent a formal declaration of war in 1642 and sent two of Tranquebar's best ships north to attack Bengal, where they captured a ship they renamed \textit{Den Bengalske Prise}.\textsuperscript{39} Pessart left the service of the Danish East India Company in 1644, but his successor, Willem Leyel (admin. 1643-1648), continued the war with vigor, and he himself may have written a declaration of war in Persian, a language of which he had some knowledge.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{34} Coolhaas, ed., \textit{Generale Missiven}, I, 626; and William Foster, ed., \textit{The English Factories in India 1637-1641: A Calendar of Documents in the India Office, British Museum and Public Records Office} (Oxford, 1912), 44.

\textsuperscript{35} These debts burdened the Danes for decades. In the 1660s a merchant from Masulipatnam, Khwaya Sulaiman, extorted money from individual Danish merchants in Makassar and Banten in order to compensate for the Danish debt in his home port. While Khwaya Sulaiman's actions would have been justified in the European system by a letter of reprisal, the Danes eventually stipulated that the money he seized be restored, or at very least the Danes outstanding debts in Masulipatnam be nullified, as a prerequisite for the conclusion of peace. ("Miss. Til Eskel. Andersen", 22.10.1669, 22 "Ostindiske Sager 1668-1699" f. 68v.-69, Dansk Kancelli C (Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen) and "Instrux for Skibet Havhesten", ff. 58-58v, 22 "Ostindiske Sager 1668-1699" Dansk Kancelli C (Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen).)

\textsuperscript{36} Letter from Poffeul Hansen in Dansborg, 17.9.1646, DK B 246 c III W. Leyels Arkiv, Instructioner 1644-47.

\textsuperscript{37} Kay Larsen, \textit{De Dansk-Ostindiske Koloniers Historie: de bengalske Loger, Nikobarerne}, 11 (Copenhagen, 1908), 15.

\textsuperscript{38} Coolhaas, ed., \textit{Generale Missiven}, I, 625.


\end{small}
Additionally, a manifesto justifying his position was written in Portuguese for the information of “all the Christian nations in these parts of Oriental India” and “the most important people and lords of all parts of India.”41 Dated August 24, 1644, the five-page document enumerates the offenses that the Danes wanted to redress. It begins during the reign of Jahangir with the loss of Jupiter in 1625, including its valuable Makassarese cargo, and the imprisonment of its captain and crew. It also describes the kidnapping of a Danish boy who was forced to become a Muslim and was never seen again. It then recounts the foundering of Nattergalen in 1626 and the subsequent forced transport of the captain and crew to Cuttack where they were ransomed. The document blames the Mughal governor for both of these instances as well as for obstructing their potentially profitable voyage to Makassar. It then describes how the Danes stopped trading in Bengal because of these “robberies, offenses and tyrannies” and the impossibility of obtaining compensation but later reversed this decision at the request of “Moors from Bengal” who promised to treat them fairly. It also depicts other offenses during the reign of Shah Jahan. These include the Mughal governor’s obstruction of commerce, the assault on Danish factors at Pipli, and the poisoning of shipwrecked Danish servants. Recounted with expressive detail about how the poison ravaged the victims’ livers to pieces, the tale of poisoning has been doubted by scholars.42 It is not, however, the most colorful episode in the manifesto. There is also a rather unlikely account of how a Mughal official not only refused to allow people to assist a Danish ship in distress but also pitched a tent on the shore from which to watch it founder. Furthermore, according to the document, the Mughals’ injustices drove the Danish company’s commander Pessart to such a state of despondency “that he took refuge in an unknown place where he remains until now.”43

41 “Manifesta justificaçao,” ff. 1-5.
42 Numerous scholars have doubted the likelihood that the locals would have deliberately poisoned the Danes. See for example W.H. Moreland, From Akbar to Aurangzeb: A Study in Indian Economic History (London, 1923), 48-49, and V. Srinivasan “The Danes in India,” Journal of Indian History 8 (1934): 315.
43 In actuality, Pessart had not taken refuge in hiding but rather absconded to Japan with 30,000 rayskins and Dansborg’s best cannons. Japan was an exceptionally good market for rayskins and Pessart hoped that he would be permitted to trade there because of his Dutch nationality. He was, however, intercepted in the Straits of Melaka by the VOC and taken to Batavia where his cargo was confiscated. The Raad van Justitie officially sanctioned the seizure, but the legal basis for this confession was questionable, so an agreement was struck between Pessart and the VOC. Pessart’s ship and crew were returned to him but the rayskins were confiscated. The VOC would sell these themselves in Japan. In their place, Pessart received a cargo of pepper, cinnamon, and cloth which he was to try to
also emphasizes repeated Danish attempts to obtain compensation from “the Moors of Bengal, the governors and other servants of the King of Hindustan,” their enemy’s lack of morality and shame, and their own continued willingness to negotiate.44 By concluding its narrative with references to widows of deceased company servants, the document stakes a final claim to the moral high-ground, as if deceased Indian merchants did not leave widows.

At Sea versus on Land

To the Danish company’s servants in Asia, the formal manifesto and its distribution lent legitimacy to their predation. The Danish agents believed that they were fighting a justified war and that the uncompromising Muslims of Bengal were “responsible for all deaths, destructions, losses and damages that they shall suffer.”45 Despite their outrage, it is clear that the Danish company servants were very much concerned with financial gain. Insufficiently supported by the motherland, the Danes used the war to finance their presence in Asia. This source of revenue was especially important during the twenty-nine years from 1639 until 1668 during which the company was dissolved and resurrected, and no reinforcements were sent from Denmark to Asia.46

---

44 “Manifesta justificaçao,” ff. 1-5; “Breff Hannom Thilschreffuit Fra Danisborgh,” f. 3 verso. Intended to satisfy numerous audiences, this manifest exemplifies the manner in which European company servants tried to justify the use of force. In Europe during the seventeenth century there raged a debate among scholars and jurists as to the legality and morality of maritime violence. Among company servants in Asia, however, pragmatic concerns often overrode the principles of natural law and freedom of the seas deliberated in Europe, and company agents wrote complicated, and sometime convoluted, arguments to justify their use of violence. Often they compiled long lists of grievances, made assumptions about who was responsible for losses incurred, and supplemented these with accounts of unsuccessful attempts at obtaining compensation. Typically they presented the use of violence as the last resort. (Clulow, “European Maritime Violence and Territorial States in Early Modern Asia,” 78-79.)

45 “Manifesta justificaçao,” f. 4.

The Danes' focus on private ships in the Bay of Bengal as opposed to the main Mughal port of Surat suggests that they were more interested in making money quickly than attacking the Mughals. Their desire for financial gain is also clearly apparent in numerous sets of instructions ordering the arrest of as many Bengali ships as possible and the seizure of cargoes as prizes of war. Instructions specify that special attention should be paid to Bengali ships coming from Jaffapatnam or Ceylon that may carry pearls or money, and from Pegu that might carry rubies or other gemstones. Further orders give specific instructions for seizing ships with elephants which were to be delivered to the ruler of Arakan. This is in accordance with the Danish desire to arrange for free trade at Arakan and, if possible, for an alliance with Arakan against the Bengalis. Instructions also order the seizure of any objects on board which could be useful, such as anchors or tools, or anything which could be sold for a profit. Special effort to capture ships returning from Southeast Asia was also prescribed because their cargoes were particularly valuable. Instructions also specify how to make a profit from captured people and ships. Captives could be baptized and sold as slaves or put to work for the company as sailors or carpenters, and the vessels could be used for intra-Asian trade. Especially when the Danish company's ships fell into such disrepair that they had to be scrapped for firewood, new vessels became essential.

The most information available about the prizes seized by the Danes dates from the 1640s. Examples include the Christianshavn's seizure of a Bengali ship near Nakapur in December 1643. The captured ship was 250 lasts, a year and a half old, and contained a cargo of iron. The following year, the Danes captured a small ship coming from Pipli containing twenty-one packages of pepper and nineteen slaves, a much larger ship coming from the Maldives with valuable cowries, and a Bengali ship returning from Southeast Asia with four valuable

---

49 In 1646, the Danish Company wished to send a Bengali ship to Makassar in place of Fortuna. (“Breff Hannom Thilschreffuitt Fra Dansborgh”, f. 4.)
50 This was the case with Christianshavn in 1649. (See “Copia Aff det Breff som her brudt hiem till Danmarck med de Engelsker,” 11.11.1652, f. 1 verso, 169 “1616-60 Diverse Breve, Dokumenter og Akter det ostindiske Kompagni vedk.” Dansk Kancelli B (Rigsarkivet, Copenhagen.)
Acehnese elephants. These elephants were given to the King of Golconda, and the ship was incorporated into the Danish fleet. The calculative, business-like manner in which Danish company archives record these seizures obscures the human suffering involved. Only slightly more revealing is Leyel's letter to the company's managing shareholders in which he reported that they were doing their best to cause the Bengalis as much harm as possible. Without a doubt the Danes gravely impacted the business and careers of individual merchants not to mention the lives of captives. As a result, traders in Bengal did not want to go to sea for fear of being captured by the Danes.

Resistance against the Danes appears to have been ineffective and uncommon. Danish colonial historian Gunnar Olsen describes resignation on the part of the Bengalis, writing that "the Bengalis seem to have given up in advance on any form of resistance against the Danish ships." While this often may have been the case, there was resistance on some occasions. For example, in 1644 off the Gingeli coast the yacht Walby seized two large Bengali ships with elephants on board. Some of the elephants reportedly died in the skirmish, documenting the use of violence. People died, too. Indeed, the Makassarese ruler Sultan Hasanuddin (1653-1669) refused to admit the ships Fredericus and Morningstar, which the Danes had captured from Muslim traders, because they had killed the people on the ships. Clearly not all of the vessels that the Danes seized surrendered without protest.

The inefficacy of resistance stems from crucial differences between European and Mughal capabilities in sea-borne warfare. Mughals ships were

---

52 Ibid. and “Brev til Kongelige Mayestats Ost Indische Handels Forvaltere”, 22.11.1644, Emeldy.
53 “Breff Hannom Thilschreffuitt Fra Dansborgh”, f. 3 verso.
54 Coolhaas, ed., Generale Missiven, 11, 386.
55 Olsen, Dansk Ostindien, 140.
56 “Brev til Kongelige Ma yestats Ost Indische Handels Forvaltere”, 22.11.1644, Emeldy.
57 Coolhaas, ed., Generale Missiven, 111, 414. Sultan Hasanuddin is famous for his resistance against Dutch encroachment in South Sulawesi and his eloquent articulation of an open door trading policy. Dutch records record him as having told the Dutch that God had created the world “so that all mankind could have the enjoyment thereof, or are you of the opinion that God has reserved these islands, so removed from your nation, for your trade alone.” F.W. Stapel, Het Bongaais Verdrag, (Groningen, 1922), 62. This translation is from Leonard Y. Andaya, The Heritage of Arung Palakka a history of South Sulawesi (Celebes) in the seventeenth century (The Hague, 1981), 46.
not always unarmed but there appears to have been differences between the quality of Asian and European weapons and the sailors’ levels of experience in handling them. Arguably Asian cannons and gunpowder were inferior to their European counterparts, and when European-made weapons were obtainable, Asians often used them awkwardly. Seventeenth-century Dutch sources record the opinion that guns on Asian vessels were ineffective because they were mounted in the wrong place and the Asians did not know how to use them. Writing in the eighteenth century, Robert Orme also noted that Indians had “no conception that it was possible to fire, with execution, the same piece of cannon five or six times in a minute; for in the awkward management of their own clumsy artillery, they think they do well if they fire once in a quarter of an hour.” Thus Europeans, including the comparatively poorly equipped Danes, often had a technical advantage over Asians, including the potent Mughals, in warfare at sea. This difference, however, was not so large that it could not be surmounted when Asian states adopted a policy of using maritime violence for commercial and political purposes.

With warfare on land, the balance of power was completely opposite. It appears, however, that there were only two isolated instances of conflicts between the Danes and the Mughals on land. The first was during the early 1640s before the war was declared. The Danes stationed at Pipli under Poul Nielsen had tremendous financial difficulties. One Persian merchant in particular owed the Danes a considerable amount of money and refused to pay his debts despite repeated requests. The Danes then decided to take justice into

---

59 A. Jan Qaisar notes that Indian ships were equipped with artillery as early as the 1610s. (A. Jan Qaisar, “Shipbuilding in the Mughal Empire during the Seventeenth Century,” Indian Economic and Social History Review 5, no. 2 (1968): 168.) With specific reference to this war, a register of captured Bengali goods and slaves lists the various weapons that the Danes seized from an Indian ship. These were eight unmounted iron cannons; another small, short, thick cannon; three wagons for the aforementioned unmounted cannons; and twelve cast iron cannons. (“Fortegnelse paa erobret bengalsk Gods og Slaver.”)


62 The work of Tonio Andrade has shown that when non-Western powers, such as the Ya’rubī Dynasty in Oman and the Zheng state in China, espoused a policy of using maritime violence to advance commerce, they were able to “beat Europeans at their own game.” (Tonio Andrade, “Beyond Guns, Germs and Steel,” 183.)
their own hands and imprisoned him within his own home. When this failed, they seized one of his slaves and impounded some of his goods at the Danish trading post. Presumably viewing this as a breach of sovereignty, the Mughals were unwilling to accept such behavior. They sent a force of three hundred men to seize and burn the Danish trading station. All of the goods were confiscated and the factors were imprisoned, although Nielsen and others eventually escaped to Tranquebar.63

A second instance occurred during the mid-1640s after the war had already begun. A ship with a crew of six Danes was wrecked off the coast of Bengal. The crew reached the shore safely only to realize that they were in enemy territory. They hid in the forest until after dark when they headed towards the river mouth near Pipili. Upon arrival they sighted a Dutch ship anchored in the river and risked being detected by the locals to signal it. The Dutch sent a boat to pick up the castaways and promised to take them to the Christianshavn which was anchored nearby. In the event, however, the Bengalis learned who the castaways were and demanded their surrender. Wanting to maintain good trading relations in Bengal, the Dutch acquiesced and the Bengalis imprisoned the castaways. Coincidentally the Danes on board Christianshavn sent a boat ashore that very evening for fresh water and provisions. When they stopped to chat with people on board the Dutch ship, they learned the fate of the Danish castaways and decided to launch a rescue mission that night. Nielsen led a team of sixteen men, and his familiarity with Pipili enabled him to proceed directly to the governor’s house where the castaways were reportedly being held. They attacked the guards, drove the governor away, and searched the house but could not find their comrades. Nielsen then suggested searching the town hall, part of which was sometimes also used as a prison. The town hall was guarded by a party of soldiers who had heard the commotion and stood alert with unsheathed daggers. The Danes overpowered several of the guards at which point the others fled, and the Danes broke into the town hall. Inside they found the castaways in heavy iron chains. While it was impossible for the chained men to run and difficult to transport them back to the Christianshavn, they eventually succeeded with few casualties and no fatalities.64

In both cases, the Mughals could have easily used much larger forces. They certainly had the resources at their disposal, but there was no call for an exceptional display of force in the first instance. Three hundred men were more than sufficient to accomplish the task of burning the Danish trading station down and seizing the men and goods. A larger or better-armed contingent of guards

63 Bredsdorff, The Trials and Travels of Willem Leyel, 80.
64 Ibid., 134-135.
would have prevented the Danes from freeing their comrades in the second instance. Presumably such a contingent was not used because the need was not anticipated. The Danes caught them by surprise and succeeded for this reason alone. By all measures the Mughals were a force to be reckoned with on land; their weakness was only at sea.

The Limits of Negotiation

Given their limits in naval power, the Mughals sought other means of putting an end to Danish aggression. Within just a few years of the start of the war, they made numerous attempts at concluding peace. In 1645 they made a peace offer which included 80,000 rupees in compensation but, hoping to receive 436,500 rix-dollars or to force himself into a profitable Bengali trade, Leyel declined and intensified the fighting instead. By 1647, the Danes had five ships in the sea fighting against Bengal. The adversary once again sought to compromise with the Danes in 1647 or early 1648, but negotiations did not result in a lasting peace. Danish instructions from 1647 only allowed for the conclusion of peace with the Bengalis on the condition that they make a large cash payment, that they grant the Danes the same trading privileges as the Dutch, and that they arrange for the pardon of all of the debts which Pessart accrued in Masulipatnam.

Their attempts at direct negotiation with the Danes having failed, the Mughals tried to exert pressure on other Europeans to stop Danish aggression. When the Danes seized two large ships, one of which carried goods worth 50,000 pieces of eight belonging to the Emperor Shah Jahan, Prince Shah Shuja (the second son of Shah Jahan), and Mirza Malik Beg (the governor of Pipli), and burned two other ships near Orissa, the Mughals were enraged. They could not, however, seek redress by using their military might because the Danes no longer had any settlements in Mughal territory. Therefore, the Prince Shah Shuja threatened the Dutch that they must put a stop to Danish aggression or leave Bengal, but he was eventually talked out of the ultimatum. Local officials made a similar attempt in 1649. They refused to grant the VOC favorable trading conditions unless the Dutch would guarantee the safety

---

65 Olsen, *Dansk Ostindien*, 139-141.
67 Feldbæk, “No Ship for Tranquebar for Twenty-nine Years,” 35.
of their merchants from the Danes. Although the Dutch found this proposal absurd and refused, the ‘Gentlemen XVII’ (Heeren XVII) who governed the VOC eventually condoned the protection of Muslim merchants who traded in Ceylon against the hostilities of the Danes. The Mughals also tried to work through the English. When the Danes seized eight valuable elephants in 1647, it was declared that “as the Danes and the English were alike Christians, any damage done by the former would have to be satisfied by the latter.” The Mughals may have become more assertive in this policy by the end of the seventeenth century. In 1691 the Danes seized a ship belonging to the influential merchant Abd al-Ghafur. As a result, the local government at Surat confined all of the Europeans in that city, blocked their trade, and demanded restitution. Upon learning that the Danes were in fact responsible, Abd al-Ghafur argued convincingly that the English should be held responsible anyway because most pirates were English.

Peace negotiations were also complicated by a sense of loyalty felt by some of the Danish Company servants. As previously mentioned, Christian IV’s relationship with the Danish East India Company was very close; indeed he had become “Head and Lord of the whole Company” in 1629. He had also steadfastly refused to liquidate the Company, despite its unprofitability, for fear of losing prestige in Denmark and abroad. After his death in 1648, however, the first Company was dissolved in 1650. While the isolated Danish factors in Asia were aware of its demise, they were obliged to maintain the settlements in Asia because they were owned by the Crown. Thus they carried on to the best of their abilities, using the prizes seized from the Bengalis as one of their main sources of income. When the Dutch tried to convince the Danes to stop the war because it was causing problems for their trade with Bengal, the governor

---

69 Coolhaas, ed., Generale Missiven, 11, 386.
70 Ibid., 111, 864.
72 John Ovington, A voyage to Suratt in the year, 1689: giving a large account of that City, and its Inhabitants, and of the English Factory there . . . ., (London, 1696), 410-411.
73 Robert C. Ritchie, Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates (Cambridge, 1986), 131.
74 Bredsdorff, The Trials and Travels of Willem Leyel, 22.
76 The irony of this situation was that King Frederick III (r. 1648-1670) tried to sell Tranquebar. (See Feldbæk and Justesen, Kolonierne i Asian og Afrika, 76, and Henri Froidevaux, "Un Projet d’Acquisition de Tranquebar par la France en 1669," Revue de Géographie 41 (1897): 88-96.)
of Tranquebar Eskild Andersen Kongsbakke (admin. 1655-1674) replied that he was duty-bound to his king to continue to fight the Bengalis. The Dutch recalled the sailors that they had lent the Danes as a result, but Kongsbakke was commended for his exceptional loyalty.

Renewing the War

Direct relations between Copenhagen and Tranquebar were re-established in 1669. With the new powers it had under the absolute monarchy, the Danish Crown dispatched the frigate *Færø* to Asia in 1668. Its successful expedition inspired Danish investment and the re-establishment of the Danish East India Company complete with a new charter granted in 1670. At this point the war gained the explicit approval of the government in Denmark, but instructions urged the factors in Asia to conclude peace if it could be done advantageously; otherwise as much damage was to be done to the Bengalis as possible. Shortly thereafter in 1672 Christian V (r. 1670-1699) wrote a letter to the Mughals requesting compensation for the losses of Danish subjects in Bengal, including the loss of *St. Jacob* in 1640. This compensation was never granted.

With moral and material reinforcements from Denmark, the Danes grew increasingly brazen. They even launched an attack in Bengal itself, as opposed to Bengali merchants at sea. In 1671 the Danes chased two big ships near Hugli and blew them up. This is remarkable because Hugli is located thirty five kilometers north of Calcutta in Bengali riverine waters, well upstream from the mouth of the Ganges. The violence continued during the following years when the Danes captured a large ship of 170 lasts near Balasore and took it to Tranquebar in 1673, as well as another ship near Kalingaptam carrying Maldivian cowries.

In time, however, the Danes came to miss the Bengali market, and they renewed negotiations. The Danes’ request for 400,000 rix-dollars in reparations was countered with a request for compensation for the more than thirty ships

---

77 Gunnar Olsen, *Dansk Ostindien*, 168.
81 Ibid., 907.
that the Bengalis had lost during the war. The claims were considered to nullify each other and a provisional peace was agreed upon in 1674. Furthermore, Malik Kasim, the governor of Hughli, granted the Danes the right to trade without duties in Pipli and Balasore and to construct a new lodge.

Yet this peace did not last. In so far as the Danes were plundering individual Bengali merchants for financial gain under the pretext of redressing the wrongs of Mughal officials in Bengal, things continued as usual. In 1682, the Christianshavn wrecked near Balasore, and the local faujdar (commander responsible for administering sub-districts) was blamed for its loss because he hindered the Danes’ attempt to get help. As a result, hostilities were renewed against Bengal. The governor of Tranquebar Wulff Henrich von Calnein (1686-1687) believed that the Danes were entitled to compensation for their losses and opted to press the issue. During his administration, the Danes captured four large Bengali ships and at least as many small cargo boats.

The Danes also terrorized peaceful merchants. The archives of the VOC provide details of one merchant’s encounter with the Danes during this period of renewed hostility. A report made by Nakhoda Qamar in 1685 describes how he was unable to complete his voyage because of Danish harassment. He had obtained passes for his ship, but rumor had it that a Danish captain was going to attack him. A Danish captain did indeed board Nakhoda Qamar’s ship and Nakhoda Qamar paid him 200 Spanish reals and 60 reals worth of cloth in an attempt to get him to leave peacefully. The Dane then seized the anchor keys and kept them overnight. The next day, he returned the anchor keys and the two parted company, firing a salute. This was not, however, the end of the encounter. Subsequently Nakhoda Qamar was followed by the aforementioned Danish ship for two days. On the third day a Malay ship going to Aceh with the permission of the Danes followed him shooting twice. The Danes then attacked Nakhoda Qamar’s ship and seized various goods. They continued to follow him but they did not take anything more.

---

82 Olsen, *Dansk Ostindien*, 184.
84 Larsen, *De Dansk-Ostindiske Koloniers Historie*, 11, 22.
87 “Relaes van den Moorse Annachoda Chiamer wegens sijn terrugkeeren uijt vreese voor de Deenen uijt dato 19 Februarij 1685” VOC 1415, Malacca, ff. 781v-782, (Nationaal Archief, Den Haag).
During the closing years of the seventeenth century, when the Danes wished to reestablish their presence in Bengal, they again tried to negotiate peace. Despite decades of aggression they were well received. In 1698, Andreas Andræ, accompanied by Thomas Schmertz, was sent to Bengal with ships, Indian servants, money, wares, and Danish people to settle and trade. He was able to conclude peace with the Bengali governor Mohammed Ajumadi, after which both sides renounced their demands for previously seized ships. The Danes also made a gift to the prince of 15,000 rupees and four cannons. Furthermore, Andræ signed a lease to a piece of land at Gondalapara near French Chandernagore for 30,000 rupees to be paid over ten years. This became Dannemarksnagore where the Danes established a factory which served as the basis for their presence in Bengal.

Conclusion

The question of how and why western Europeans came to exert dominance, however tenuous, over large parts of the world is central to early modern world historiography. One of the most provocative explanations is the military revolution paradigm. This posits that Europeans held a small but crucial advantage in military technology over other Eurasians during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which helps to explain why it was difficult for seaborne Indian merchants to resist Danish attacks. More importantly, this paradigm has stimulated a tremendous body of new research. Some of this has shown that when Eurasian governments chose to adopt a strategy of using naval force for commercial ends, they could quickly appropriate the necessary technologies and strategies and succeed in defeating western Europeans in naval combat. Indeed, technological differences appear to have been

---

88 Coolhaas, ed., Generale Missiven, VI, 59.
more easily surmountable than the underlying differences in the relationships between governments, maritime violence, and commerce.

The differences between governments and their relationships to maritime commerce and violence is exceptionally well illustrated by the Danish East India Company’s war against the Mughal Empire. The contrast between the opponents’ size and power is striking. By all measures, Denmark was small and poor compared to the Mughal Empire. Yet the Danish government was willing to exercise state power to facilitate and protect seaborne commerce. Indeed King Christian IV offered the Danish East India Company unconditional support, refusing to liquidate it even in the face of considerable losses. Meanwhile the Mughals were not among the Eurasian powers that chose to adopt a strategy of using naval force for commercial ends. Their attitude towards maritime merchants was largely laissez-faire and their relationship to them was less direct than that of the Danish state to the Danish East India Company. Thus when Mughal governors attempted to negotiate with the Danes, they did not enjoy the sort of backing from the empire that might have been offered by a “precocious” western European state.93

Also striking is Danish fearlessness in declaring war against one of the world’s mightiest realms. This exemplifies an arrogant naïveté that was common among Europeans in the sixteenth century. Danish ignorance about Asian realms was first apparent in their willingness to sign a treaty with the Emperor of Ceylon who did not exist.94 While this predated the company’s

---

93 “Precocious statism” is a term coined by John H. Wills, Jr., to denote the early modern willingness to use military, legal, and bureaucratic power to for the advancement of overseas trade. See John H. Wills, Jr., “Was There a Vasco da Gama Epoch? Recent Historiography,” ed. Anthony Disney and Emily Booth, Vasco da Gama and the Linking of Europe and Asia (Oxford, 2000), 350-360.

94 During the process of organizing the Danish East India Company and planning its first expedition, the Dutchman Marcelis Michielszoon de Boshouwer presented himself at the Danish court as a representative of the “Emperor of Ceylon.” He was in fact a representative of the King Senevirat (1604-1652) of Kandy, the ruler of one of the three main Ceylonese kingdoms, who sought help in defending his country from the Portuguese. In 1612 King Senevirat had concluded a treaty with the VOC which granted the Dutch permission to construct a fortress, the right of unrestricted commerce, and a monopoly on cinnamon, pearls, and precious stones in exchange for military assistance against the Portuguese. In 1615, however, when King Senevirat actually sent Boshouwer to Holland to obtain this long-promised help, the VOC was preoccupied with Java and the Moluccas, and the States-General with the Thirty Years War. Boshouwer’s request for Dutch assistance was refused so he tried his luck in Copenhagen. There he not only misrepresented King Senevirat as an emperor but also surpassed the limits of what King Senevirat had authorized him to do. (See P.E. Pieris, Ceylon and the Portuguese 1505-1658, (Delhi, 1986),
first excursion to Asia, their knowledge of Asian society remained limited. If they had known the magnitude of the Mughal Empire, they probably would have been too scared to declare war. Like other Europeans, however, they were unaware of the extent of their opponents’ power. A classic example of this naïveté is the estimate of the Jesuit missionary Francisco Cabal in Macao who believed that China could be conquered with a paltry force of three thousand Japanese soldiers.95

The Danish East India Company’s war against the Mughals also provides a poignant reminder of the normalcy of violence in early modern commerce. The Danes’ lack of reverence for nationality and convention, as is exemplified by their indiscriminant seizure of goods and their intentional stealth, is surprising. The violence itself, however, was ordinary. While the historiographical tendency has been to circumscribe the use of violence in terms of a European-Asian balance between relative strength and weakness at sea and on land, any such balance succeeded only in limiting, and not in preventing, violence.96 It was not only critical to European enterprises in Asia but also significant to the commercial enterprises of some Asian governments like Barkur and Johor. Indeed violence permeated the age.97 That the Danes dared to declare war on the Mughals exemplifies the inextricable link between violence and commerce in the seventeenth century European mind.98

---

97 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, The political economy of commerce: southern India, 1500-1650 (Cambridge, 1990), 254.
98 Sanjay Subrahmanyam offers other examples to demonstrate this link, such as contracts specifying fixed rates of compensation for injuries sustained defending commercial vessels. See Subrahmanyam, The political economy of commerce, 289-290.