Sea Power and the Asia-Pacific

The triumph of Neptune?

Edited by Geoffrey Till and Patrick C. Bratton
With particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region, this book examines the rise and fall of sea powers. In the Asia-Pacific region there has been significant expansion of sea-based economies together with burgeoning naval power. Many claim that these processes will transform the world’s future economic and security relationships. The book addresses the question of the extent to which the notion of ‘Asia rising’ is reflected by and dependent on its developing sea power. A central theme is the Chinese challenge to long-term Western maritime ascendancy and what might be the consequences of this.

In order to situate current and future developments this book includes chapters which analyse what sea power means and has meant, as well as its role, both historic and contemporary, in the rise and fall of great powers.

This book will be of much interest to students of naval power, Asian politics, strategic studies, war and conflict studies, IR and security studies.

Patrick C. Bratton is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Program Chair for Political Science and International Relations at the Hawaii Pacific University, Honolulu.

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The role of sea power in the rise and fall of nations and sometimes of empires is the theme of this book. The following chapters will explore this question with particular reference to the Asia-Pacific region, since this is now emerging as so manifestly maritime an area. How is the importance of sea power being seen in the region, how is it being developed and with what likely commercial and strategic consequence? The leitmotiv below these questions perhaps, is the broader issue of the modern day validity of the ideas of Mahan and other maritime strategists in the developing conditions of the twenty-first century. In brief, do such views continue to convince today? The following chapters will explore this claim more deeply by considering maritime development in some of the leading countries of the Asia-Pacific region. What emerges from these reviews is the dynamism of maritime power, a phenomenon that rises and falls, in ways that affect the relative power of nations and which can transform the strategic environment. The book will accordingly conclude with a section that looks at the concept and nature of maritime transition.

We would like to thank all our contributors for their timely delivery of chapters from around the world which address these issues. Their cooperation made possible our task of expanding and turning the results of a successful and of course enjoyable conference held at the Hawaii Pacific University in the summer of 2009 into a book that we hope will contribute to a developing debate about the importance of sea power in the Asia-Pacific region. Doing this electronically between two peripatetic editors, one based most of the time in Hawaii and the other, most of the time, in the United Kingdom has been quite a challenge and the discipline and good order of our contributors has helped a great deal.

The conference itself was only possible with the hard work and help of support teams both at Hawaii Pacific University and in the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies of the King’s College Defence Studies Department at the UK Staff College. The work of Sarah Somers, Lynda Hobbs and Lyn Reynolds in doing so much to organise a conference in a wonderful place they could not attend was particularly appreciated. At HPU the contributions of Professors Carlos Juarez and Russell Hart, as well as the
graduate students in the Diplomacy and Military Studies programme were critical to the successful organisation of the conference. We owe special thanks to Kevin O’Reilly for his patience in indexing the volume for us. We are grateful for the participation of many local experts like Denny Roy of the East–West Center, General (ret.) David Bramlett, and Captain (United States Navy) Jan Schwartzzenberg. Finally, we would also like to thank the administrative staff in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences who supported the project, particularly: Dean Dr. Stephen Combs, Associate Dean Bill Potter, and administrative assistants Joan Ishaque and Jean Zee.

Patrick would like to thank his darling wife Gwenaelle and his wonderful son Vincent for all their support and patience with this project. Grateful to his wife Cherry for putting up with yet another trip to Hawaii, Geoff likewise thanks her for unremitting support and counsel.
Abbreviations

AAT  Australian Antarctic Territory
ACV  Air cushion vehicle
ADF  Australian Defence Force
AFZ  Australian Fishing Zone
AIP  Air-independent-propulsion
AIS  Automatic identification system
ANZUS Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty
AO   Fleet oiler
AOR  Replenishment oiler
APCSS Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
ASC  Australian Submarine Corporation
ASCM Anti-ship cruise missile
ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASSeT Accompanying Sea Security Teams
ASW  Anti-submarine warfare
ATV  Advanced technology vehicle
AWACS Airborne warning and control system
BAD  British Admiralty Delegation
BPF  British Pacific Fleet
C4I  Command, control, communications, computer and intelligence
CARAT Cooperation afloat readiness and training
CENTO Central Treaty Organization
CINC/COMINCH Commander-in-Chief
CINCBPF Commander-in-Chief British Pacific Fleet
CINCPAC Commander-in-Chief Pacific
CINCPOA Commander-in-Chief Pacific Ocean Area
CINCSWPA Commander-in-Chief South West Pacific Area
CMC  Central Military Commission
CNF  Commonwealth Naval Forces
CNO  Chief of naval operations
CODOD Combined cruise diesel and dash diesel
CODOG Combined diesel or gas
COE  Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance
CSBA  Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment
CSI  Container Security Initiative
DDG  Guided missile destroyer
DDGH  Destroyer guided missile with helicopter
DDH  Helicopter-carrying destroyer
DE  Destroyer escort
DFZ  Declared Fishing Zone
DGPS  Differential global positioning system
DMS  Defence Maritime Services
DPRK  Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
EARL  East Asia Response Private Limited
ECDIS  Electronic chart display and information system
EEZ  Exclusive Economic Zone
ENC  Electronic navigation chart
ERZ  Exclusive Resources Zone
FF  Fast frigate
FFG  Guided missile frigate
FFH  Fast frigate helicopter
FFX  Future frigate experimental
GDP  Gross domestic product
HARTS  Harbour craft transponder system
ICJ  International Court of Justice
IJN  Imperial Japanese Navy
IMF  International Monetary Fund
IMSCB  Indonesian Maritime Security Coordinating Board
IONS  Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
ISPS  International Ship and Port Facility
ISR  Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
JMSDF  Japan Maritime Self Defense Force
KDX  Korean destroyer experimental
LCH  Landing craft heavy
LHA  Landing helicopter assault
LHD  Landing helicopter dock
LO  Liaison officer
LPA  Landing platform amphibious
LPD  Landing platform dock
LPH  Landing platform helicopter
LPX  Landing platform experimental
LSA  Landing ship assault
LSD  Landing ship dock
LST  Tank landing ship
MCM  Mine countermeasure
MMEA  Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency
MPA  Maritime and Port Authority
MSTF  Maritime Security Task Force
NATO  North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NATS  Naval Air Transport Service
 Abbreviations

NCAGS Naval Cooperation and Guidance of Shipping
NCS Naval Control of Shipping
NDPO National Defence Programme Outline
NEO Non-combatant evacuation
OSRL Oil Spill Response Limited
PAJ Petroleum Association of Japan
PCC Pohang class corvette
PCG Police Coast Guard
PLA People’s Liberation Army
PLAN People’s Liberation Army Navy
PLANAF People’s Liberation Army Air Force
POCC Port operations control centre
PRC People’s Republic of China
PSI Proliferation Security Initiative
QDR Quadrennial Defense Review
RAAF Royal Australian Air Force
RAF Royal Air Force
RAN Royal Australian Navy
RIMPAC Rim of the Pacific
RMN Royal Malaysian Navy
RN Royal Navy
ROK Republic of Korea
ROKN Republic of Korea Navy
RSN Republic of Singapore Navy
SAM Surface-to-air missile
SEATO South-East Asian Treaty Organization
SLBM Submarine launched ballistic missile
SLOC Sea lines of communication
SOLAS Safety of Life at Sea
SOSRC Singapore Oil Spill Response Centre
SSGN Ship submersible guided missile nuclear
SSK Ship submersible conventional
SSN Ship submersible nuclear
STOBAR Short take off but arrested recovery
SUA Convention Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation
TEU 20-foot equivalent unit
TNI-AL Indonesian Navy
TSS Traffic separation system
USN United States Navy
VLS Vertical launch system
VTIS Vessel Traffic Information System
VTS Vessel Traffic Services
1 Introduction

Sea power and the rise and fall of empires

Geoffrey Till

In the summer of 1747, the Emperor Quianlong had a Jesuit architect, Father Giuseppe Cartiglione, build him a summer palace to house his collection of European curiosities. It became known as the Calm Sea Palace. Maritime themes predominated. In the Garden of Perfect Clarity, stone dolphins sported in cascades of water. Everywhere, the European baroque style fitted happily with Chinese motifs and building techniques.

Everything about the place and, indeed, its process of construction showed that even the famous Middle Kingdom for all its often discussed self-absorption, was well aware of the cultural, intellectual, scientific and commercial benefits of this eighteenth-century version of globalisation. One of the results of this was the extraordinary collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European (and mainly British) gilt clocks still to be found on display in the Forbidden City. British clock-makers like James Cox even came to live in Guangzhou 1760–1 in order to teach their trade to the locals. In the nineteenth century, as a result, the Chinese made their own ‘European’ clocks.

These linkages echoed the close interaction of the Chinese and European porcelain trade that had started some 200 years earlier. The Chinese were first into the business of making porcelain. From the late sixteenth century, the Europeans wanted it, but for the next 150 years could not make it themselves. Accordingly they sent extensive orders, along with exact specifications of colour, subject and shape to Jingdezhen in China for local manufacture. This resulted in a trade of mass production measured in millions of pieces every year. But this was a two-way trade. The Europeans imported Chinese designs too and copied them; in turn European ideas affected the Chinese porcelain industry too.

This trading relationship also blossomed into tea and silks but it depended absolutely on the passage of hundreds of merchantman sailing between Western Europe and China, Japan and other parts of the Far East. It was a thoroughly maritime enterprise.

Had he known about the palace and more about the porcelain trade Alfred Thayer Mahan would probably have cited it as evidence of his major thesis that sea power was central to human development and to the rise
and fall of empires and nations. As he said: ‘Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world … [and] is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations’.1

**Defining sea power**

Sea power was and is not simply about what it takes to use the sea (although that is obviously a prerequisite). It is also the capacity to influence the behaviour of other people or things by what one does at or from the sea. This approach defines sea power in terms of its consequences, its outputs not the inputs, the ends not the means.

It is, moreover, about the sea-based capacity of states to shape events both at sea and on land. As that other great master of maritime thought, Sir Julian Corbett, never tired of saying, the real point of sea power is not so much what happens at sea, but how that influences the outcome of events on land:

> Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life, or else by fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.2

Sea power is clearly a larger concept than land power or airpower, neither of which encompasses the geo-economic dimensions of human activity to the extent that sea power does. As a Bangladeshi author has interestingly remarked:

> Unlike the army and the air force, whose size and firepower have to be related to that of potential adversaries, the size of the navy is determined by the quantum of maritime assets and interests that you have to safeguard.3

There are two main components to sea power, its military, naval dimension and the other, maritime, commercial aspects of sea-faring. Considerations of naval power dominated Mahan’s writings. What he emphasised were the advantages of navies with great warships and effective weaponry, with better tactics and more advanced technology, and above all perhaps with first-rate commanders able to wield their fleets with ruthless efficiency. The Portuguese broke into the Indian Ocean because they had all these advantages and so prevailed against the much larger navies they encountered there. If there was a revolution in maritime affairs at this time, it was the combination of the maritime nail and naval artillery of the Portuguese men of war. Local vessels, held together by coconut fibre could
not stand the shock of heavy artillery. Their practice was to ram and board – fighting, infantry style, at close quarters. At the battle of 1502 off the Malabar Coast a small Portuguese fleet under Vicente Sodre faced a huge local armada in which several hundred Red Sea dhows joined forces with the fleet of the King of Calcutta; the Portuguese simply stood off and battered their adversaries to pieces from a distance.

Such fighting and geo-strategic advantages were not, however, the exclusive property or the invention of the Portuguese or of anyone else. After all, many of the navigational advances made towards the end of the European middle ages derived from contact with the Islamic world, even down to the use of the word ‘Admiral’ which in Arabic once meant the ‘Prince at Sea’. Across the other side of the world, the Koreans deployed the first armoured warship and, of course, China of the Song dynasty (from AD 1000–500) boasted ‘the world’s most powerful and technologically sophisticated navy’.4

But what was distinctive about the European approach to sea power in the sixteenth to the twentieth century was that they had discovered and were able to exploit the huge advantage to be derived from the close association between the military and mercantile aspects of sea power. A recent school of thought has taken this argument a little further and sought to explore the association of this all round maritime supremacy with systems of beliefs and of styles of government. The argument goes like this:

The world’s nations can be divided into two categories, ‘maritime’ states and ‘territorial’ ones. The latter concerned with the defence of their land borders against external attack and internal insurrection, tended to be dominated by warrior elites, with centralised forms of government and financed by enforced levies. ‘Maritime’ states on the other hand were either islands, big and small, or protected from attack by the physical conformation of their borders. Seafaring and trade produce merchants. Merchants accumulate wealth and political power in order to defend and develop it. Their much more sophisticated financial institutions facilitated long-term borrowing of the sort that could sustain the fleet. Often they will prevail in government, and enforce their ideas on others. ‘The essence of the merchant ethic’, says Peter Padfield, ‘was freedom’.5 These are the ideas that encouraged trade in the first place: freedom of information and therefore of opinion, open and responsive government, fair taxation, social enterprise – all the liberal values so familiar today. In the seventeenth century, the English marvelled at the freedoms of the Dutch. Thus Sir William Temple, the English Ambassador reported that ‘strange freedom that all men took in boats and inns and all other common places, of talking openly whatever they thought upon all public affairs both of their own state, and their neighbours’.6 A century later the Frenchman, Montesquieu said much the same thing about England calling it ‘the freest country in the world’. That freedom was both a product of commercial enterprise and something that facilitated it. Because of the wealth and the
resources it generated these freedoms were at the heart of maritime power. Nicholas Rodger makes the essential point: navies need consensus because they require the maximum involvement of seafarers, ship owners, urban merchants, financiers and investors. Autocracies manage armies well enough, because that is much more a matter of simply mobilising manpower and the equipment it needs.\(^7\)

It would be easy to fall into the trap of concluding that these values were Western values, but they are not. They are trading values and have been espoused by other peoples at various times. The China of the 500-year-long Song dynasty was one example of this. Despite overland threats from the North and West, naval power was important to the regime, and it had a distinctly mercantile approach. Protecting the merchant fleet against some particularly powerful and well-armed pirates was a high priority. This resulted in the construction of a chain of naval bases along the coast, the development of a convoying system and encouragement of new and sophisticated means of boarding and close engagement, since it was much better to seize or destroy pirate ships than merely to drive them away.\(^8\)

Arguably, the connections between maritime power, liberalism, trade and prosperity are as true now as such authors claim they were then, although the economic success of the guided democracy of Singapore and, so far, of China’s state capitalism, may suggest the need for some modifications of this view. For all that, as trade-efficient economies, democracies are used to the free exchange of information which is at the heart of successful trade and it seems no coincidence that they are also the leaders of the information revolution.

But for many these were, and maybe remain, unsettling thoughts. Some regimes, discerning the risks and the challenges inevitably associated with maritime power, have deliberately pulled up the drawbridge against its apparent advantages and opportunities. One Chinese emperor did that quite consciously. After nearly 500 years of deeply impressive and rounded maritime endeavour, the construction of all sea-going ships and foreign travel were banned because China’s rulers did not know where it would all end.\(^9\) A little later, in 1639, the Japanese under the Tokugawa shogunate followed suit, turned their back upon the sea and based their system on domestic peace and agricultural taxes. Japan’s culture flourished, but the Japanese fell further and further behind global developments until their self-imposed isolation was rudely shattered by the United States Navy in 1853.

The Russians, too, have always been ambivalent about the sea. Peter the Great developed and built a navy specifically to attract trade and Western ideas and even moved his capital to St Petersburg in order to accommodate all this. His navy was full of foreigners; he personally learned about ship-building in Amsterdam and Deptford. He did everything he could to turn Russia into a trading nation. For many of his subjects and his
successors this was all too much. Despite its periodic brilliance (especially at the end of the eighteenth century under the great Admiral Ushakov), the navy was seen by conservatives as basically un-Russian and a source of ideas dangerous to the existing system, which of course it was. When Stalin shot most of his admirals in the late 1930s he was in one sense conforming to an ancient Russian tradition of eliminating possible sources of insurrection; but paradoxically the admirals he spared were exactly those who said that the Soviet navy needed to modernise and follow the general lines of development set by the British, American and Japanese navies.

In this, Stalin was tacitly acknowledging the difficulty of insulating his regime from the pervasive influences of modern maritime power. The Japanese and Chinese had already discovered this. According to K. M. Pannikar, the Indians’ neglect of the sea (after an earlier period of maritime endeavour) led in their case to three centuries of dominance by the Portuguese, Dutch and British.¹⁰

**Sea power: a virtuous circle**

Sea power can also be represented as a tight and inseparable system in which naval power protects the maritime assets that are the ultimate source of its strength and effectiveness. The likes of Mahan would claim that a virtuous circle was at work for from maritime trade, the Europeans were able to derive maritime resources that could be diverted to naval purposes when the need arose. Partly this was matter of having ports, merchant hulls and seamen that could be used to support the navy directly. Partly naval strength rested on the ability to build, and even more important, maintain and supply, warships that came through governments having access to the sophisticated financial infrastructures¹¹ that maritime trade encouraged.

All this underpinned naval strength in a whole variety of ways:

- Mercantile finance could be used to fund naval effort. This meant it was much easier for the maritime powers (that is naval powers with a strong mercantile element) to build a navy than it was for the merely naval powers. At the end of the seventeenth century, the French (at this time much less maritime than the British) showed that with a real effort they could out-build the British and produce a bigger and indeed very fine fleet – but they could not maintain it. The British simply outlasted them. Maritime powers could devote huge resources to building and maintaining a fleet but at less real cost, and they often had enough left over to support the wider war effort and, in Britain’s case to subsidise allies as well.
- Mercantile finance from the profits of trade also funded access to a mass of industrial and technological developments. The Royal Navy of the eighteenth century and all of its supporting dockyard and
manufacturing infrastructure for example was the world’s biggest industrial enterprise by far.12

• This could be translated into specific military advantage. The British industrial lead in coke-smelting techniques and steam machinery for example meant it was much easier for the Royal Navy than the French to copper-bottom its ships – making them more nimble and faster than old ships would otherwise have been.

All this made for an approach to war that was uniquely cost-effective and does much to explain why the maritime powers predominated over the merely naval ones and in most cases in the last few centuries over the continental ones too.

The interconnections were perfectly summarised by the French Minister of Marine in 1901, J. I. de Lanessan,

> If we wish to become a great commercial democracy, which will necessitate a great development of our mercantile marine and important progress in our Colonial empire, we must possess a fleet of such strength that no other power can dominate to our detriment the European waters on which our harbours are situated, or the oceans where our merchant ships circulate.13

The failure of de Lanessan’s project to develop France into a great maritime power, however, demonstrates that this virtuous circle was not a closed system – it could be influenced decisively from outside. In this case the overland threat from Germany essentially broke the circle up. Much the same thing happened to Oman and China when their land borders were threatened by neighbours.

The conclusion that seems to emerge from this is that sea power has two aspects to it which are closely related, naval power on the one hand and, on the other, the commercial maritime power that derives from seaborne trade, the fishing industry, ship-building and so forth. Sea power is much more intimately connected with the socio-economic forces of human development than is either land power or air power. Maritime strategy, in turn, may be seen as a much broader, more flexible and ultimately more effective source of national power, prosperity and success than its land or air equivalents – provided of course that statesmen wield it intelligently.14 The British of the era of the Napoleonic wars understood this point very well. For them ‘maritime power’ meant a potent mix of a small relatively agile army, and extensive naval and economic power which in turn made possible a wide ranging grand strategy based on economic pressure exercised through sea power. As Liddell Hart put it, there were two aspects to this maritime strategy, ‘one financial which embraced the subsidising and military provisioning of allies; the other military, which embraced seaborne expeditions against the enemy’s vulnerable
extremities’. In the Napoleonic wars ‘whatever was said and hoped by Englishmen who day-dreamed of quick victories, the method pursued in the end was financial attrition’. Even with the cost of the war spiralling from £29 million per annum in 1804 to over £70 million in 1813, ‘Britain was able to sustain a level of expenditure that far outstripped that of every other country in Europe’.15

What made this possible was the simple fact that the British Empire was founded on sea power, and that sea power was founded on trade. The Royal Navy maintained the international stability in which trade could flourish; it protected the trade routes and the merchant ships that plied them; its command of the sea made possible the movement and supply of land-forces who protected the colonies and Britain’s commercial interests from overland attack and internal disorder. The Royal Navy was disposed and deployed accordingly around the world to protect the imperial system – a system that depended on safe and rapid communications of all sorts.16 Trade and the Royal Navy, in short, held the empire together and made Britain the wealthiest and most powerful of all nations.17

All of this would seem to suggest that Mahan’s prognostications were, in essence, right and that perhaps four characteristics of the sea explain what, to him, were the manifest strategic, cultural and economic advantages of sea power, and which remain so today.

In brief, they were:

- The sea is a resource for protein in the shape of fish, minerals of various sorts, oil and gas – which explain why nations contest its ownership. Although this is a global phenomenon this maritime competitiveness is particularly prevalent in the Asia-Pacific region where jurisdiction over parts of the North East Pacific and the East and South China Seas is now the subject of bitter dispute.
- The sea is a medium of transportation and exchange. The world trading system is manifestly sea-based. This explains why countries closely linked to the sea benefit economically. It also explains why the sea routes, and especially the choke points are so important strategically. It was the advent of steampower, above all else, that knitted the British Empire together.18 The defence of trade, and the conditions for trade was consequently the Royal Navy’s top priority.
- The sea is a medium for information and the spread of ideas. Maritime trade and the exchange of ideas and information appear inseparable. To a large extent this maritime equivalent of the World Wide Web has been taken over by the real thing, of course. But even today the world’s reliance on the many undersea fibre-optic cables means that the sea retains some of its importance as a medium of information. Moreover the sea itself is a great storehouse of scientific knowledge that is as yet largely untapped, a great quarry of ‘unknown unknowns’.
• The sea is a medium for dominion over other countries, peoples and markets. Thus as Corbett said only sea power explained how it was ‘that a small country [like Britain] with a weak army should have been able to gather to herself the most desirable regions of the earth, and to gather them at the expense of the greatest military powers’. Naval power provided command of the sea which in turn allowed and supported fast, effective, maritime interventions ashore wherever British interest required it. The British intervention against Ethiopia in 1867 was a classic, if brutal example of the kind.

And all this provided what Niall Ferguson has called ‘world dominion on the cheap’. The British devoted rather less than 2.5 per cent of their GNP to defence, maintained only 215,000 soldiers but a navy of 100,000. Before the First World War, they built 27 dreadnoughts, the Death Stars of their time, for £49 million, less than the annual interest charge on the national debt.

**Sea power: qualifications and limitations**

If all this can fairly be said to encapsulate the views of Mahan and other navalists of his persuasion, then balance requires us to look, at least briefly, at the reasons why others are sceptical of such claims, before embarking on a review of maritime developments in the Asia-Pacific region.

The apparently persuasive Mahanian narrative rests quite heavily on the success of the European version of maritime power over the past 400 years or so. But to what extent does that example actually sustain Mahan’s view? Portuguese success, for example, was arguably less inevitable and preordained than often claimed. It was helped by the fact that many key African and Asian states and polities looked inwards rather than out to sea but nonetheless the Portuguese stumbled into an Indian ocean dense with mercantile activity. Globalisation – or at least global connectedness – was not a European project. Moreover disease, unfamiliar topography, climates the Europeans found hostile, the limitations of distance and inter-European disputes and rivalries all limited what their navies could do. There were perhaps only 7,000 Portuguese between Sofala and Macao in the 1540s. Even so, naval power helped, and better sources of market information ensured, that they came, stayed and prospered. The real take-over only came with the onset of European industrialisation, a sophisticated system of credit that could finance distant enterprise and the more developed concept and achievement of command of the sea, based on naval power of the machine age. Even then, trade was the objective not the establishment of empire. Where they could the British were content to trade with advantage as in South America and China (with its treaty ports) without having to assume the burdens of empire.
All this should not be taken to mean that the maritime powers always prevail, for manifestly, they do not. Being maritime, brings vulnerabilities as well as opportunities. Sophisticated maritime powers depend on a complex network of shipping that imports raw materials, food and uncompleted goods, and exports finished and manufactured products. This can be a delicate system, and a dangerous source of vulnerability especially when the distracting effect of continental threats, or governmental neglect, or the appearance of a stronger maritime adversary produces a navy insufficient to protect the wider maritime system on which it ultimately depends. Concerns about these centrifugal tendencies were widely felt even by the British at the apparent height of their imperial power. Thus Rudyard Kipling’s elegy to empire at the time of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee of 1987:

Far-called, our navies melt away;  
On dunes and headlands sinks the fire;  
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday  
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!23

As the fate of the Netherlands in the late seventeenth century and Japan, more dramatically in the mid-twentieth century show, not just the interests but the very survival of the maritime power may be at stake if their inescapable vulnerabilities are successfully exploited by others.

Many argued at the time of the Cold War, that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had such dangerous vulnerabilities too. As its name suggests, it was an alliance as much separated by the ocean as it was joined by it. Its strategic coherence and economic survival depended on sea-based transportation which sometimes seemed dangerously exposed to the burgeoning Soviet Navy and land-based air-forces. Accordingly much of NATO’s naval resources were directed at the defence of those unavoidable maritime vulnerabilities. This combined with the often remarked superiority of the offence at sea meant that much of NATO’s maritime effort was devoted to ensuring that NATO did not lose a possible war with the Soviet Union, rather than providing a means by which NATO could win it.

In short, the demanding but essentially protective function that sea powers usually have, limits their capacity to impose their will on others, and may make them dangerously vulnerable to external pressure both at sea and from overland. The great British geographer, Halford Mackinder and his followers saw this as a grave, historic and developing weakness.

Such geo-politicians pointed out that many long-lasting empires had moreover been based on land power not sea power. Mahan and others had made too much of the Columbian era, which was in fact the exception to the rule. The Mongols for example created a massive empire lasting some 500 years that was about as far from the sea as it is geographically possible to get. The great Eurasian empire of Genghiz Khan and his successors stretched from Europe to the Pacific and took in South Asia and much of
the Middle East as well. But this was an empire based on horsepower not sea power, although in places the Mongols did approach the sea. Moreover, the Mongol Empire turned into a great force of ‘global connectedness’ if not globalisation. Genghiz (1206–27) with speed, surprise and the ability to operate across incredible distances conquered more peoples and territory in 25 years than Rome had managed in 400, and it was at the time the most densely populated areas of the world’s surface. Genghiz galvanised the Silk Route and established what was in effect a free trade zone stretching from Korea to the Balkans, introduced a universal alphabet, the first international postal system and a body of law and regulation that encouraged trade to flourish, German miners to work in China and Chinese doctors to practice in Persia. Tamerlane carried this still further dominating the great overland trunk road of Eurasian commerce. The rise of Muscovy over Gogol’s ‘golden green ocean of the steppes’ echoed all this in some respects. This was a Eurasian Sparta that exploited the trade routes of the interior of the Mackinder’s ‘world island’ but which rested in practice on social and political oppression.

Further, the geo-politicians argued that the ‘world political potential of sea power had been in full retreat long before the first submarine had plunged below the surface and the first plane had taken to the air’. This was because land communications were improving. Transcontinental railways were facilitating the concentration of industrial capacity as a route to power rather than the acquisition of colonies. Clearly, the German economic rise of the late nineteenth century did not depend on sea power.

In some cases, these arguably non-maritime empires were able to develop ever better means of exploiting the vulnerabilities of the maritime powers. Their continental riches enabled them to develop significant naval forces (like the German U-boats of the First and Second World Wars) that had no protective function to distract them and which could be wholly devoted to offensive campaigns of sea denial against the maritime powers that, by definition, depended on their capacity to use the sea. Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany were countries that did not conform to the Mahanian stereotype of navies based on mercantile strength and their arguably associated liberal values. And yet, despite that, the German Navy’s campaign of sea denial based on a first-rate if small surface fleet and, even more, on its submarine arm caused the Western allies major difficulties during the First and Second World Wars. Nor could those same allies afford to disregard the challenge posed from the late 1960s by the Soviet Navy.

The navy of imperial Japan did not fit all aspects of the Mahanian narrative, either. For one reason or another, merchant classes in Japan only achieved political prominence in the period after the Second World War. Before then, information exchange was limited and governmental power was unchecked constitutionally. Instead of reflecting the liberal, trading values identified by Peter Padfield, the Imperial Japanese Navy was imbued with the samurai spirit of medieval times. As far as the imperial Germany
of 1914 was concerned the business and industrial class were politically important, but this certainly wasn’t an example of the liberal sea-based democracy of the British or American sort. In both cases sea power served different kinds of states and pursued different kinds of purposes. Neither navy, for example, was concerned about the need to protect trade. Moreover, the contemporary rise of Chinese sea power, and perhaps the recovery of Russian sea power too, is associated with a regime of authoritarian rather than liberal capitalism.

Most empires were not, finally, either ‘sea powers’ or ‘land powers’; they tended to be both, in varying degree. The Ottoman Empire for example exploited the position of Constantinople to dominate maritime communications and trade in the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Mediterranean and developed the kind of navy that went with it. But at the same time, it had a large standing army centred on the janissaries, a tightly disciplined force of infantry. It was the same with the Mughal Empire in India. Enriched by extensive sea-based trade with the Middle East and benefiting from the size and sophistication of its own internal market, Mughal India was a still a prosperous and sophisticated empire with a mighty army when the first Europeans arrived to perch uneasily on its flanks in their factories.

Imperial China likewise rested on a mix of both land power and sea power, the balance between the two shifting from one dynasty to another. The Chinese had extensive sea-based trading links with the rest of Asia and the Indian Ocean and a sophisticated economy linked by a network of internal waterways. From the Tang to the Song dynasties sea-based trade was more important than the Silk Road to Central Asia and beyond. In 1403–24, Emperor Yung-Lo engaged in ambitious naval adventures, being determined to take over Vietnam. At the same time, there occurred the famous voyages into and across the Indian Ocean of Zheng He. His successor, however, concerned about the effects of all this on the nature of Chinese society and the political system, famously turned his back on the sea and focussed instead on attempting to deal with the Mongol tide lapping at the Great Wall. Maritime trade was restricted to internal waterways and coastal waters though maritime raiding, smuggling and piracy remained rife. If this was sea power, it was arguably of a different kind from the version dominating the Mahanian narrative.

China’s turn from the sea under the later Ming and through the early Qing dynasties did not lead to national decline moreover, and the Chinese empire founded on its continental strength and an artful combination of hard and soft power was arguably at its apogee in the second half of the eighteenth century. China retained most of its links with the outside world, but the sheer size of its internal market (bigger than the whole of Europe’s) meant that in relative terms China’s international trade was quite small. China’s view of the fundamental unimportance of maritime trade was expressed by Emperor Quianlong to Lord Macartney in 1793:
Our dynasty’s majestic virtue has penetrated into every country under heaven, and kings of nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country’s manufactures.\textsuperscript{37}

But under the later Qing this world gradually fell apart. The dynasty failed to recognise the challenge of the sea-borne West. The Opium Wars and the 1884 destruction of China’s new if wooden fleet by the French in a dispute over Vietnam\textsuperscript{38} revealed some of the consequences for China of a systemic neglect of sea power even in a strategic and cultural system preoccupied with other things. When the lessons of this were hammered home by the Taiping rebellion and the naval defeat at the hands of the upstart Japanese in 1894–5 led to a search for a new and more effective way of constructing China, and their discovery of Mahan.\textsuperscript{39}

China’s turning away from the sea did however allow a sudden explosion of Japanese maritime endeavour for a century from 1540, but here too the Japanese in their turn maintained only carefully controlled links with the outside world and later became much more introspective.\textsuperscript{40} The Japanese took the maritime failures of the Qing dynasty to heart and subsequently embarked on a course of determined navalism that became one of the great challenges to Western maritime power in the Pacific in the twentieth century.

The existence of these mixed empires of land and sea-power (as nearly all of them were) raises another set of issues and questions. Which of the two kinds of national power were the most important? Did land-power in the shape of both concentrated commercial and industrial power plus the existence of strong ground forces provide the conditions for the construction of naval forces, or was it generally the other way about, as Mahan argued? Paul Kennedy has tended to argue for the former, pointing out the extent to which Britain’s industrial decline, relative to its rivals, undermined the basis for its naval supremacy.\textsuperscript{41}

Transitions

In consequence of its relative economic decline, Britain passed the baton to the United States as the leading maritime power through the Second World War, arguably sometime between the North African and Normandy landings, in one of the clearest examples of a peaceful great power transition. The United States emerged from that conflict with what, according to many observers, everyone but Americans recognised was soon to become an unofficial empire. By 1955, the US economy dominated the world system, it had around 450 military bases in 36 countries and its navy stood supreme.

Britain and its empire in the shape of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, propped up by the United States eventually merged into
what some have called the Anglosphere. ‘The Anglo-American alliance’, says John Darwin, ‘was a remarkable example of cooperation between a declining imperial power [which expected to recover] and its most obvious successor’. Not surprisingly, then, this was a ‘liberal empire’ and one that bore many similarities with its British predecessor:

The world system today as managed by the United States preserves most of the chief features key features of the British system that existed before World War II: a liberal, maritime, international order that promotes the free flow of capital and goods and the development of liberal economic and political institutions and values.

Two points need to be made about this. The first is the emphasis on the word ‘liberal’, the notion that certain characteristics of government facilitate economic growth and development and so should be actively encouraged. These include such things as secure property and contract rights, personal liberty, stable, responsive incorrupt government and so on.

Second, Mead’s emphasis on the word ‘maritime’ is significant because the British Empire was plainly not based on demographic advantage, nor on the size of its commercial activity, which at its peak in the 1870s amounted to no more than 9 per cent of the world’s GNP. It was the consequence of entrepreneurial skill, industrial and technological prowess, a general capacity to win wars (though often losing the first round) and perhaps above all on naval strength. Mahan wrote of the ‘overwhelming power, destined to be used as selfishly, as aggressively, though not as cruelly, and much more successfully than any that had preceded it. This was the power of the sea’. This was and continues to be a ‘maritime order’, based on sea power, both naval and commercial – and one that has indeed shaped the world.

The fact that in so many ways the rising powers of India and China seem to be recovering the maritime aspects of their pasts and also to be following the Western trajectory towards full involvement in, and part ownership of, a globalised sea-based trading system, and that the development of their naval power seems increasingly central to their concerns, suggests that for all his terrible simplicities, and despite all the qualifications and limitations to the central argument discussed earlier, Mahan might have been right after all.

Notes

5 P. Padfield, Maritime Dominion and the Triumph of the Free World (London: John Murray, 2009), p. 3.
11 Typically it was the maritime Dutch who invented the world’s first lottery loan system, the world’s first central bank and the joint-stock company. The maritime British followed suit, later developing modern insurance. Niall Ferguson, The Ascent of Money (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 35, 128–33, 186.
14 This essential point is made with much insight in Martin Robson, Britain, Portugal and South America in the Napoleonic Wars: Alliances and Diplomacy in Economic Maritime Conflict (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 1–5, 13, 19–20ff.
19 Corbett, op. cit., p. 49.
20 Ferguson, Empire, op. cit., pp. 176–7. Such operations were known at the time, with devastating candour, as ‘butcher and bolt’.
23 Rudyard Kipling, Recessional, 1897.
34 Horner, *Rising China*, op. cit., pp. 43–52. Some historians indeed believe the Zheng He voyages to have been a military mission with the strategic aim of out-flanking the Mongols.
41 This issue is discussed later, in Chapter 13.
44 Ferguson, *Colossus*, op. cit., p. 179.
46 Mead, *God and Gold*, op. cit., p. 86.
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