

# Chinese Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century: The Turn to Mahan

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*James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, Chinese Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century: The Turn to Mahan, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 167, ISBN 10:0-415-77213-3 (hbk).*

In order to gauge the likely direction of Chinese foreign and security policy, it is important to follow Chinese commentary on how Beijing should manage its ascent to 'peaceful rise' which is claimed to be replete with references to 'history' and 'strategic theory'. The past does not predetermine the future, but by no means is it inconsequential. While holding this as a premise, Holmes and Yoshihara argue that Chinese analysts have turned to the works of the American sea-power theorist, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, who urged turn-of-the-century America to build up a powerful United States (US) Navy to help maintain order in East Asia, discourage a partition of China among the great imperial powers, and guarantee the US a share of the China trade. There are two essential premises held in this study which are claimed to be systematic ones. They are as follows:

1. Chinese will turn to Alfred Thayer Mahan instead of Norman Angel who in years leading up to World War I, Angell inveighed against Mahan and other theorists and practitioners of realpolitik, and predicted 'international economics would render warfare moot' (sixth chapter).
2. Chinese will support the theory of sea power as noted by the Mahanian School as it is at once obsessed with 'economic development' and 'increasingly reliant on seaborne commerce' (fifth chapter).

China's turn to follow the Mahanian approach is attributed to the logic that "The surge in economic activity and the leadership's determination to maintain this momentum has produced two visible effects related to marine affairs." The first chapter which describes China's turn towards the sea argues that China's seaborne commerce has exploded along China's coastline. Second, the security of energy supplies transiting critical sea lanes has become a top foreign-policy for China. While this is well supported by empirical evidence, it does not factor in China's drive towards investing in infrastructure for "over the land" supply

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and commerce. Is this to reduce Chinese anxiety about the possible vulnerability attached with seaborne commerce and energy supply?

The second chapter claims that Beijing will find Mahanian axioms and prescriptions more and more compelling as it comes to terms with China's 'unique maritime geography'. Mahan's analysis of the challenges and opportunities before turn-of-the century American bears a striking resemblance to Chinese strategic thinking about the seas. It is argued that Beijing has designed a maritime posture for the next decade that will pursue strategically defensive goals, however Beijing defines them through highly offensive operations and tactics. This is true while considering the fact that the evolution of modern strategic thinking is based on a perception of 'weaknesses confronting 'strength'. The concept of 'active defence' is located within this contextual Chinese understanding of 'strategic reality'.

There are a few methodological concerns that may further clarify the arguments put forth and which are well constructed. Having made a successful case for China's concern with maritime affairs James and Toshi indulge in an exercise that is problematic. China's present maritime 'security construct' has been equated with United States similar 'construct' as described by Alfred Thayer Mahan. This equation has been then rationalised on following accounts.

The third chapter while debating the influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime strategy by focussing on a traditional breakup in Chinese maritime world view coinciding with Admiral Liu Huaqing who at the peak of his career commanded the PLA Navy for much of the 1980s and was later promoted to the Central Military Commission, the supreme governing body for all Chinese military affairs, as well as to the Politburo Standing Committee. For five years, he was not only the senior serving officer in the armed forces but also the sole military officer among China's top political leadership until 1997.

According to the fourth chapter geographical constraints that China faces in the maritime time domain have been argued to be similar to constraints identified by Mahan in his famous work, 'The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire' and 'The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future', it is held that the concern for the Caribbean and the Gulf in Mahanian theory is similar to Chinese concern for the South China Sea, Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

The error in methodology is visible with respect to the following questions. Where does Taiwan figure in Chinese maritime thinking? James and Toshi argue it is the construction of 'first island chain' and 'second island chain' as maritime cognitive map that governs China's concern for Taiwan. In other words, it is Taiwan's geographical location that matters to China the most. Chinese control of Taiwan would be the first step to reach if China wants to

project naval power towards second island chain. This is accurate if a framework of analysis is based on Mahanian theory of sea power. However, its application on China is problematic on at least two accounts.

It is an equally enforcing argument that Taiwan is a concern with regard to 'regime survival', 'objective of peaceful reunification', and a core component of the process of historical revolution as guarded by Communist Party of China (CPC). During the Sino-Japanese war of 1893-94, Mao had declared with his US counterparts that Taiwan could be independent after the war. Thereby, downplaying the importance of Taiwan as a strategic asset for future force projection. Taiwan's importance is arguably more due to its location within Chinese domestic politics. This is not to claim that the argument put forth by James and Toshi is untrue. While considering the narration of empirical events to describe the present maritime security environment, it is true that Taiwan within a Mahanian theory for China is a strategic asset. However, the error is not so much at empirical level but at a level of assumptions and concepts. China has been influenced by Soviet Union military doctrines too. Soviet Union stood misunderstood by western analyst during the Cold War period because these analyst applied similar yardstick and tools to access Soviet Union as they themselves would. Admiral Mahan himself has raised this issue by accepting the fact that Soviet Union's naval power will be inevitably influenced by its continental power. This more complicated view of Russia also informed Mahan's belief as to how the United States would have to confront Russia's enormous power potential. The Soviet navy became essential in projecting soviet influence to places like Angola, where it ferried Cuban troops to help the Soviet allied government there and the Caribbean. J. Michael Robertson in his article 'Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Geopolitics of Asia', published in *Comparative Strategy* (15:353-366, 1996) argues that Mahan is criticised for understanding geo-politics as a subset of historical studies of sea power. Revisionist historians have belittled Mahan and many of his contemporaries for appearing cravenly to seek only economic expansion and empire for the US. The post World War II geostrategic environment pitted the Soviet which launched the former Soviet Union and its allies against the US alliance structure. As Mahan had predicted, it took a coalition to contain the Soviet Union (Dennett in J. Michael Robertson: 1996). This article further enquired if Mahan suspected the fact that sea power had its limitations, a seemingly incongruous position for the propagandist of sea power to take. As western influence reduced after nationalism took over colonialism in many parts of the world and particularly in East Asia, Mahanian theory adjusted by construction of alliance system. This thinking brings into question a central assumption that governs this alliance driven naval strategy. A central assumption of Mahanian theory was that it applied 'sea power' to safeguard and expand national interest. The concept of 'sea power' was based on the fact that the country's naval capability is a direct reflection of its sheer economic power in all senses and that power inevitably reflects its control and exploitation of large landmasses. In this sense, Mahan understood Asia to have

the ability to reconstitute itself either singularly or in plural in an event of destruction. Therefore, influencing Asia was a tricky question. One of the objectives of connecting US eastern seaboard and western seaboard at Panama was a result of the constraint imposed by the sheer geographical size of Asia.

Construction of naval strategy based on Mahanian tradition for US is fine until it is not superimposed on another country. Jack Snyder (1977) who is claimed to be the first to coin the approach 'strategic culture' cautioned US policy makers from mirror imaging. This was mentioned in the context of Cold War rivalry between Soviet Union and the US. US' concerns which stemmed from Mahanian school insisted on forward presence to contain the US national interests in Europe and Asia. He further argued that Soviet Union in many matters of National security did not think like US. The concept mutually assured destruction (MAD) was arguably a US way of thinking about nuclear weapons. In that sense, US policy was not driven by proper insight to Soviet strategic thinking. This point is further strengthened by the declassification on US Presidential memoirs during the cold war period. It is clear from the documents that in spite of having a low opinion on Soviet capabilities in constraining US national interest, the US adopted an offensive strategy to contain Soviet Union. As this wisdom was transferred to policy makers' initiatives like START I and START II arms reduction treaties became successful. It is an irony that Soviet Union while faced with live containment policy managed to have all its armed conflicts with its allies during the cold war.

Mahanian worldview may not necessarily have the answers to some the realities of twenty first century for example 'inter-dependence'. Application of Mahanian concepts in a highly interdependent world could trigger trade wars which may become real time conflicts. According to Mahan, the Open Door policy was but another way of expressing balance of power.

For while conspicuously just and making for peace as the balance of power means simply equal opportunity, just as balance of power means equal independence (Seager Robert II: Mahan: The Man and His Letters, pp.516)

What Mahan school failed to understand is the fact that structural division between the two poles of Cold War stands altered today. In March, 2009 at Davos while leaders from across the world got together to discuss the financial meltdown and its impact on global economy, Prime Minister Putin of Russia applauded the Open Door policy by mentioning how it benefited Russia. Ironically, the next day while speaking to an interview Bill Clinton constructed some good methods to save US nationalised banks and bring back the economy on track. While socio-political-economic model as articulated by Soviet Union broke down in 1980's the wide popularity of US led capitalist model too seems to be shaking since the financial meltdown. It was this particularity in insisting a model that then converts into 'sea power' and its objectives. China today is not representing any such model for export. It has been in Chinese rhetoric

construction that it is not concerned with the domestic conditions of any country. It does not believe that its security is dependent on the successful transplanting of its socio-politico-economic model on to other nations. This policy of non-intervention is central to Chinese foreign policy making since early 1990's and has yielded spectacular results at least with its neighbours in South East Asia.

One of the conclusions of the study prescribes active US naval engagement in Asia. Chinese methodology of managing its littoral region varies with Mahanian traditions. Firstly, China has opted for cooperative solutions with respect to its maritime dispute with littoral countries. It has also approved joint exploration of natural resources and mentioned shelving disputes for mutual beneficial relation. This is in difference to Mahanian tradition which somehow assumed an inevitable contest at sea due to concerns with trade and there by settling for a zero sum game. China has involved itself with use of force in recent past but in principle wanted a peaceful resolution to its disputes at sea. Secondly, China's maritime concern presently seems to be economic in nature rather than strategic (Raja Menon: 2009). The 'string of pearls' theory as coined by a US defence report describes the infrastructural projects undertaken by China at countries around India, in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar to be offensive. Analytical flaw lies in the fact that Mahanian theory does not explain the Chinese initiative of building Gwadar deep water port. Gwadar has strategic implications of India if viewed within a Mahanian tradition. However, John W. Graver argues in his article, 'The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations' *India Review* (Vol.1, no.4. October 2002, pp. 1-38) explains Gwadar as a strategic concern for Pakistan and an economic boost for China. Application of Mahan framework may make this explanation blurring.

Having started on the course of bringing back history in constructing and understanding the present James and Toshi conclude with classical realist tone. There is a difference in the manner in which the Chinese growth in present times is different to US growth then. The recent financial meltdown did not affect China in substantial way though the impact was clear and present. Huge indigenous markets in countries like India and China is a possible explanation in this regard. Highlighting the complexity attached with Asia as described by Mahan. Assuming that China will follow a self-styled version of Mahanian sea power theory could be a mistake that US made vis-à-vis Soviet Union. Recommending United States to shape Chinese thinking and behaviour about the seas is worthy and in US interest in East Asia. As the authors rightly mention in the opening sentences of this book under review, "History is bunk," proclaimed the industrialist Henry Ford. This confident pronouncement typifies the peculiarity American outlook on the past. Observers Princeton University scholar Bernard Lewis, "In current American usage, the phrase 'that's history' is commonly used to dismiss something unimportant, of no relevance to current concerns."

Chinese too base their analysis on history however present is not equal to the past. There is a difference in the Mahanian construction of worldview and Chinese worldview in the twenty first century. Chinese political rhetoric is constructed around the notion of 'peaceful rise'. It is to intend non-displacement of other powers but mere 'co-existence'. Surprisingly, Chinese have considered US presence in East Asia as a stabilising factor. Away from such conceptual details which can be very complex, James and Toshi carefully construct a framework rigorous linking Mahanian theory to explain future trajectory of Chinese navy. A well argued book to get your mind rolling in understanding the relevance of sea power in the twenty first century. 