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The Case for Mahan:

Sea Control as the Decisive Factor in U.S.-China Strategic Competition

The strategic foundation most relevant to countering China in the current environment of great power competition is Alfred Thayer Mahan's emphasis on decisive sea control through maritime power. Despite the nuance and judiciousness of Julian Corbett's theory of limited war and joint land-sea-diplomatic coordination, Mahanian certainty regarding naval superiority seems to dovetail with China's maritime goals more naturally than Corbett, especially as those maritime goals lie primarily in the Indo-Pacific. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s unprecedented shipbuilding, along with its ambitions to dominate vital sea lanes, confirms Mahan's central tenets about the time-honored utility of sea power as an arbiter of geopolitical outcomes in the modern strategic environment. Mahan's theory is more applicable than Corbett's in addressing China's maritime ambitions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, due to its focus on naval superiority and control of sea lanes.

Mahan asserted that a nation that controls the sea controls global influence. This is not an abstract assertion but a function of controlling lines of commerce, projecting national power, and deterring adversaries. Drawing on the importance of the geography of major trading nations, Mahan argues in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* that to wield sea power, fleets must be

concentrated and decisive naval battles must be fought in order for a nation to control important maritime corridors and to leverage coercion without engaging in protracted warfare (Mahan, *Influence*, 26). Grygiel explains in *The Limits of Sea Power* that the key challenge for maritime powers is “how to translate [their] control over the sea into political influence over the land,” underscoring that maritime dominance does not automatically equate to strategic success ashore (Grygiel, *Limits*, 101). This framework aligns with the strategic competition with China, characterized by competition for influence and access to the global maritime commons, particularly in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and, increasingly, the Indian Ocean.

Yoshihara and Holmes note that the U.S. Navy’s ideational embrace of Mahanian sea power has evolved out of a now decades-long post-Mahanian period, during which the Navy slowly drifted away from Mahanian biases and away from the sobering realities of strategic maritime competition with peer competitors such as China. “A Mahanian future awaits” they write, emphasizing that the present time is one calling for discussion of renewed emphasis on combat readiness and sea control (Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star*, 108). Chinese naval modernization and expansion suggest a purposeful shift toward Mahanian fundamentals of sea command.

“Asians dwelt in the ‘modern’ world of Mahanian battle while Westerners lived in a ‘postmodern,’ post-Mahanian world,” the authors write (Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star*, 109). That cultural split further substantiates Mahan’s thesis that sea control is a prerequisite for global power. The militarization of artificial islands, a new maritime militia, and the unilateral deployment of the Chinese navy to enforce its claim to jurisdiction over disputed waters are not simply gray-zone exercises. Instead, they are deliberate steps to establish maritime supremacy in the Indo-Pacific. It is as if they are preparing China for sea fights in a time-honored fashion

(Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star*, 109), using Mahanian strategy while the United States is failing to reorient its naval doctrine to meet the challenge.

Mahan himself cautioned that “those far distant, storm-beaten ships ... are the sentinels upon the outer walls of your safety” (Mahan, *Influence*, 54). His focus on forward presence and sea control is aligned with U.S. operational initiatives like Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) while also promoting maritime exercises with coalition partners across the Pacific. Grygiel reinforces this, stating that “control of the sea is a precondition for any far-reaching policy that a power such as the United States may want to pursue; without it, the United States is severed from the rest of the world, turning into an isolated, continental island, not only impotent but vulnerable to the seaborne attacks of adversaries” (Grygiel, *Limits*, 102).

Critics may say that Corbett is a more flexible and modern approach. He considered sea power an enabler to joint operations, where the naval action would be integrated with land campaigns and diplomacy. Corbett’s concept of limited war, articulated in Chapter 13 of McCranie’s *Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought*, conveys a pursuit of political objectives through constrained means, refraining from escalation into total war (McCranie, *Foundations*, 231). He introduced concepts like “disposal force,” strategic economy of force, and the subordination of military actions to political ends. Corbett’s framework echoes today’s risk-averse operational climate in response to nuclear deterrence, gray-zone conflict, and hybrid warfare.

But Corbett’s limited war theory contemplates secure sea control. Without it, limited goals become unachievable. As Yoshihara and Holmes note, “a post-Mahanian fleet in Mahanian surroundings must realign assumptions ... to conform to a bare-knuckles world of power politics” (Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star*, 109). In short, if China achieves regional sea control, it may be difficult for U.S. forces to come to the aid of Taiwan, disrupt allied logistics, and deter

coalitions in the region. Therefore, Mahan does not recommend a decisive battle in the abstract but rather in service of a long-term strategic advantage at sea that supports all other instruments of national power. Corbett's insistence on restraint and coordination presupposes the sea control that Mahan contended must be achieved through naval strength.

Moreover, China is not exercising Corbettian restraint. Instead, Beijing employs its coast guard, maritime militia, and navy in concert to build facts on the water, advancing strategic goals without provoking direct conflict. These are steps of an attritional strategy to recast U.S. influence. Corbett would surely respect the political savviness here, yet this is happening at the behest of a state that is actively tailoring classic lessons from Mahan himself to alter the maritime balance of power. In this respect, Corbett miscalculates the thrust of competing adversaries who seek regional authority through maritime dominance.

Critics also argue that Mahan's emphasis on decisive fleet engagement is antiquated in an age of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) and missile-centric war plans. Grygiel does so by maintaining that sea control is still necessary but a much greater challenge. It involves mitigation and adaption, not abandonment of the doctrine (Grygiel, *Limits*, 102). Be it the U.S. Navy's Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO), forward-deployed presence, or strategic alliances, all are efforts to maintain Mahanian sea control in a contemporary world. Together, Corbett's desire for subordinate naval roles risks giving the initiative to opponents in a conflict where dominance of the oceans will likely steer the geopolitical balance for decades.

This position is supported by student peer responses from session four's Discussion Board Forum (DBF). For his part, Nathan Pearson noted that "Mahan, with the mentality of a fledgling world power, is focused on the stable foundation of economic growth and military might ... His overall goal is to protect commerce at sea and therefore his sea power is completely decisive to

that end.” Numerous students spoke this very sentiment, explaining that Mahan’s lens provides clarity on strategy. Susan Niemier noted that Mahan’s theory is apt for a rising power like the United States that needs to prevent conflict through a strong maritime presence. By contrast, other peers, such as Candice Wade and Patrick Schmidt, recognized that Corbett’s model relies on previous sea control and is optimized for smaller defensive thinking states like Britain in Corbett’s time.

Other commenters noted that Corbett’s theory is still relevant in hybrid conflicts and underlined the integration of both diplomacy and limited force, but the foremost challenge China poses is its expansive maritime determination. As Jacob Miller noted, “Mahan argued that a sea power was the decisive strength of a war strategy and the other elements worked to support the maritime effort to win a war,” while Corbett’s strategy is broader but stands the risk of a delay and dilution of effort against a focused maritime adversary.

Additional observations from McCranie’s Chapter 12 capture Mahan’s focus on concentration and decisive action, including a direct quote that wars were not decided “by rambling operations, or naval duels, ... but by force massed, and handled in skilful combination” (McCranie, Foundations, 214). This concept is still a pillar of U.S. maritime doctrine in countering China’s distributed maritime forces. Corbett, in contrast, recognized in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* that “command of the sea, therefore, means nothing but the control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes” (Corbett, *Some Principles*, 94). This, in turn, helps to sustain the argument that Corbett’s theory is fundamentally dependent upon a degree of sea control that can only be guaranteed through the Mahanian model.

In conclusion, the strategic competition with China is primarily a maritime competition. It is about the control of chokepoints, commerce, and influence in littoral spaces. Corbett provides

valuable insight on integration and restraint, but his theories rest upon a maritime freedom that must first be created. It is thus Mahan's emphasis on sea power as the bedrock of national strength, deterrence, and global reach that provides the more appropriate theoretical underpinning. As the United States works to balance China's naval expansion and a free and open Indo-Pacific, its best reference point for the current strategic environment is Mahan's tradition of decisive maritime strategy.