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Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific

David C. Gompert

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*Cover photo: USS Connecticut (BB-18) running speed trials off the Maine coast, 1906.
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Summary

American power in the Western Pacific has been, is, and will remain largely defined by sea power. Yet China views nearby U.S. sea power as a menacing presence, a counterweight to its regional interests, and a potential barrier to its access to the world's oceans, resources, and markets. It is therefore deploying anti-ship missiles, submarines, and other capabilities that threaten the U.S. surface fleet. China is also expanding its own naval forces in East Asian waters to back its territorial claims, secure its trade approaches, and extend its influence. Because this vital region could become unstable or fall under China's sway if U.S. sea power recedes or is allowed to become vulnerable, the United States can be expected to react to this challenge. Thus, a classic case of an established sea power resisting a rising one is shaping up in the Western Pacific.

Such rivalries have a way of ending up in confrontation and war. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), widely recognized as the father of sea-power theory, held that a world power needs overseas access to raw materials and markets to expand its production beyond its consumption and thus grow stronger. Observing how Great Britain's "outsized" Royal Navy enabled its industrial, commercial, and imperial success, he concluded that sea power is key to world power. In turn, sea power demands national—not just naval—consciousness, consensus, commitment, and stamina. As Mahan saw it, rivalry between sea powers is inherent in Darwinian world power-politics. Any sea power worth its salt must be able both to safeguard its maritime access (sea control) and, if need be, to disrupt the access of its rivals (sea denial). The core of

sea power, Mahan argued, is the offensive strength of the concentrated battle fleet.

Mahan's ideas shaped the great sea-power rivalries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* was compulsory reading for German and Japanese officers, and proponents of American imperialism, notably Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and William Randolph Hearst, appropriated his theories to make their case. Having established continental control and developed an industrial economy, the United States turned to sea power in order to obtain possessions, achieve world power, and rid its hemisphere of foreign presence.

Great Britain, the dominant sea power of the time, chose not to oppose U.S. sea power because it faced more severe dangers elsewhere and competing demands for resources and social reform at home. Imperial Germany directly challenged British sea supremacy, which was seen as a threat to its overseas access and an impediment to becoming a world power. London regarded the combination of Germany's hegemonic potential in Europe and its challenge to British sea power as a strategic threat and responded by further strengthening the Royal Navy and aligning with its old enemy and Europe's weaker power, France. Anglo-German animosity, stoked by the race to build dreadnoughts, contributed to conditions that led to World War I.

Although sea power did not decide that war's outcome, the pattern Mahan posited of rising powers challenging established ones resumed, now in the Pacific. Japan's sinking of the Russian fleet in the Strait of Tsushima in 1905 had already signaled its arrival as a great, if regional, sea power. With Britain fatigued and America isolationist in the 1920s, Japan sought control of East Asian waters to acquire possessions, markets, and resources needed to sustain its own industrialization. Japan relentlessly expanded its navy, built a formidable force of aircraft carriers, and honed the skills of its skippers and sailors. Belatedly, the United States responded by increasing and deploying its fleet forward in the 1930s, threatening the lifelines on which Japan depended to pursue conquests and expand its war-making capacity. Japan felt compelled to attack Pearl Harbor. America's industrial might and superior

aircraft carriers prevailed, annihilating Japan's sea power and, ironically, making it dependent thereafter on that of its victor.

Of these three cases, the most encouraging, obviously, is the Anglo-American one, which ended not in war but in maritime coexistence, cooperation, and eventual alliance. However, the United States is not about to defer to China in East Asia as Britain deferred to America in the Western Hemisphere. At the other extreme, the violent climax of Japanese-American sea-power rivalry does not ordain a similar result for China and the United States; after all, China is not engaged in aggression and the United States has not threatened to sever its sea links, as in the Japanese-American case.

The Anglo-German case, which also ended badly, seems more analogous to the Sino-American case. This raises the question of how Britain and Germany might have resolved their rivalry peacefully and even cooperatively. In fact, British and German statesmen lacked the vision and political clout to resist the drive of their naval strategists, build on common interests in maritime security, and thus avert a costly arms race and, perhaps, war. More fundamentally, neither Britain's strategy of wielding the threat to deny sea access to any adversary nor Germany's determination to negate that British threat permitted compromise. For China and the United States today, the Anglo-German dreadnought race is a cautionary tale.

Today, while the United States and China have convergent global interests, they are at loggerheads in East Asia, from Korea to Taiwan to Southeast Asia. Given the importance of U.S. sea power to regional security and American influence, conditions seem set for the sort of rivalry that ended in violence in the Anglo-German and U.S.-Japanese cases. China's vast claims in the resource-rich South China and East China Seas are causing U.S. allies and others to look to the United States for backing. Despite common Chinese and U.S. interests in maritime security—95 percent of China's trade and 90 percent of U.S. trade is sea-borne—a clash between the rising and established sea powers is brewing in East Asian waters.

While the Chinese have not embraced global sea power, in Mahan's sense of the term, they are moving from coastal defense to extending their naval reach into disputed water to protection of trade routes. They

are also collaborating with U.S. and other navies to combat piracy off Africa's east coast; but such modest endeavors, far from the Western Pacific, in no way imply Chinese acceptance of U.S. naval strike forces near China. Of greatest concern, the Chinese are exploiting information technology—for sensing, networking, and guiding platforms and weapons—to improve and extend their targeting of surface ships with missiles, submarines, and cyber weapons. (In contrast, Chinese aircraft carriers will present a negligible threat to the U.S. fleet and be quite vulnerable.) While the Chinese are presently concentrating on such anti-naval—essentially sea-denial—capabilities, these constitute sea power no less than traditional surface naval forces do. Sea power, after all, is not power *upon* the sea but power *of* the sea—a distinction Mahan did not make in his world of battleships and gunnery.

Defending surface fleets against extended-range missiles and quiet submarines is difficult, expensive, and of diminishing utility in the face of China's accelerating anti-naval build-up. With technologies at hand, neither ballistic missile defense nor anti-submarine warfare can keep up with the offensive enhancements of a large, capable, and resolute rival. Because of their strike capabilities and importance in U.S. military intervention in East Asia, U.S. aircraft carriers are in the crosshairs of Chinese strategy and Chinese weapons. Both Mahan's 19th-century dictum that the key to sea power is concentrated naval force and the 20th century's application of that dictum—the carrier—are being overtaken by 21st-century targeting and networking technology. As the battleship became vulnerable to and marginalized by the aircraft carrier by World War II, missiles and submarines will endanger the aircraft carrier and its primacy in the Western Pacific in the years to come.

The U.S. Navy, in cooperation with the U.S. Air Force, is responding to this adverse trend with preparations to counter China's anti-naval and other anti-access capabilities, under the heading "Air-Sea Battle." While this is an option worth having, using it would be escalatory, in that most targets are on Chinese territory. It could also be destabilizing, given that it would be most effective if employed at the very outset of a conflict, thus increasing China's incentive to strike first and early, or even preemptively. Moreover, because Air-Sea Battle

relies on computer networks for command, control, and targeting, it is exposed to Chinese cyber-attacks. It is a potentially risky military strategy on which the United States ought not to depend, and it will not solve the vulnerability problem.

If there is a technological remedy, it lies in outflanking Chinese targeting, figuratively speaking. Taking full advantage of networking, the United States can and should shift toward more distributed, numerous, diverse, elusive, small, long-range, and hard-to-find naval strike forces, while also exploiting two promising offensive technologies: drones and cyber-war. A more survivable U.S. strike posture along these lines would be neither escalatory nor destabilizing. Rather, by facing China with a far more complex targeting challenge, it would discourage Chinese preemptive attack, obviate the need for U.S. preemptive attack, and allow time for a crisis to be defused. Carriers will remain invaluable for the United States in other regions and will surely remain in its global fleet; but their vulnerability is becoming an operational liability in the Western Pacific. As this reality becomes apparent, the carrier's potency in East Asian politics will also recede. Conversely, more survivable, if less conspicuous, U.S. sea power would sustain U.S. influence and interests in the region.

Eventually, even more distributed and less visible U.S. forces may be targetable, especially with the advent of cyber-war. By that time, U.S. sea power and thus U.S. influence and war-fighting ability in the Western Pacific may be eclipsed by Chinese anti-naval and naval forces. In any case, the United States is unlikely to shift rapidly to more survivable sea power, given the long lead-times required, fiscal constraints, and institutional-industrial inertia.

Given technological trends, an unfavorable time-line, and the fact that the United States cannot retreat from the waters of this vital region, it should also pursue a political alternative to head-to-head sea-power rivalry—one that engages its regional partners and, ideally, China itself. With the rapid expansion of sea-borne commerce and sea-based resource extraction that has accompanied globalization, the idea of collective maritime security, first championed by Admiral Mike Mullen (in 2005, when he was Chief of Naval Operations), has gained momentum in a number of regions other than East Asia. If the

targeting and networking revolutions invalidate Mahan's prescription for concentrated naval power, U.S. leadership in organizing cooperative maritime security in East Asia may invalidate his premise that sea power is necessarily adversarial. Even as the dominant sea power, the United States cannot provide sea control in every ocean, littoral, and choke-point where it is needed in today's world. Just as the United States is capitalizing on its strength at sea to mobilize and lead others toward cooperative maritime security elsewhere, it should try to do so in the Western Pacific, where the stakes are greatest.

More specifically, the United States should propose and pursue an East Asian maritime partnership, inviting to join all states that share its interest in assured access and passage. Such cooperation could be predicated on the norms that disputes should be settled nonviolently and that civilian shipping engaged in peaceful, peacetime trade should not be threatened. These norms could be buttressed by enhanced maritime information-sharing, crisis consultations, joint exercises and operations (e.g., against non-state threats), and measures to avoid incidents. Realistically, resolving the region's complex maritime legal disputes should not be a precondition for creating or joining the partnership; but a pledge to refrain from force in the meantime should be. Neither the United States nor China would be expected to reduce its sea-power capabilities or relinquish any of its options in the event of war. While such undertakings would not preclude naval/anti-naval competition or conflict outright, they could reduce mistrust and mistakes of the sort that are more likely than rational forethought to trigger Sino-U.S. hostilities.

The goal of East Asian maritime cooperation would not be to exclude China but instead to convince it to join. The participation of the region's increasingly capable navies would encourage China to join and bolster a multilateral approach to security or else to oppose and divorce itself from a formidable naval grouping. Apart from China, a number of East Asian states are developing some of the world's most advanced naval and anti-naval forces; while the United States and China's oceanic neighbors should not seek to align against China, China should take care not to give them cause to do so by rejecting a cooperative arrangement. Indications that some Chinese are getting

worried about regional isolation—owing to China’s growing power and assertiveness—could enable its political leaders to overrule the almost certain opposition of its military.

Thus, the United States can at least open the door to the sort of maritime cooperation that eluded British and German statesmen before rivalry at sea became too intense to halt. It might well be that Chinese nationalism, weak civilian control of the military, and suspicion of American motives would make China’s accession unlikely, at least for now. Chinese ambivalence toward Sino-American military-to-military contacts over the years suggests a need for American patience and persistence. A cooperative approach to maritime security in East Asia may be a long shot and might get watered down (forgive the pun). But the advantages of an arrangement that could build familiarity and confidence while reducing dangers at sea are substantial. Moreover, as noted, the United States would not limit its capabilities or its freedom of action in the event of war. It is a high-return, low-risk idea worth trying. In parallel, technology permits the United States to transform its sea-power posture in the Western Pacific to one more survivable, operationally and politically, whether maritime cooperation ensues or not.

In sum, the United States should move beyond dependence on concentrated surface forces while also pursuing a cooperative alternative to history’s classic reaction to a rising sea power. China and the United States have powerful reasons to avoid confrontation and the risk of war in East Asia. Because growing capabilities for sea denial may deprive both of assured sea control, the pursuit of strategic advantage at sea may leave both with diminished security at sea. The United States has technological and political options that, in tandem, can add crisis stability, lessen the intensity of sea-power rivalry, and reduce the danger of conflict, even as it shifts toward a posture that would enable it to prevail were conflict with China to occur.