

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914): The Birth of American Imperialism and The Naval Power System

US Is Moving Away from Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, While China Is Getting Closer. National Wealth, Trade and Naval Power Are Key to Becoming a Global Power

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Who Is Alfred Thayer Mahan?

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Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) was a famous American naval officer and historian who wrote the theory of American naval power at the beginning of the 20th century. He is

the mentor of President Theodore Roosevelt. With his work titled "The Influence of Sea Power Upon History", he predicted that the USA would turn to the seas for world domination and this geopolitical theory became the unchanging doctrine of the US state policy.

The summary of his ideas is as follows:

"States must become rich in order to develop. This is achieved through the country's exports. The transportation of excess goods produced and sold abroad to the world's ports is provided by merchant fleets. Naval forces are needed to protect this transportation and to own overseas colonies. To support the Naval Forces, naval bases must be established in the country and overseas. States that establish and operate such a Naval Power system will gain power and hegemony around the world."

His other approach was:

"Navies must achieve decisive and overwhelming victories over existing enemy fleets, and nations must build huge, powerful navies to achieve such victories."

The Birth of American Imperialism

The transition of Mahan's teachings from theory to practice made him the leading guide of US naval build-up and expansionism. His greatest fortune was to persuade the then Secretary of the Navy **Theodore Roosevelt**, a very powerful politician, in the field of navalism. In 1882, when Roosevelt was not even a secretary, he said the following about the future of the US Navy:

"It is an urgent need to have an effective navy... Only our incredible political shortsightedness can prevent us from achieving this goal..."

Later, when he became President, Roosevelt expressed his ideas. He put it into practice and transformed the USA into an imperialist state through naval power by organizing state institutions within the Protestant capitalist doctrine. The USA, which discovered oil in 1858, went to sea as a requirement of its new geopolitics and never returned to land. This transformation played an important role in the arms race that led to World War I.

35 years after Mahan's death, Stimson, Secretary of War during the reign of President Franklin Roosevelt, glorified Mahan so much that he was able to say,

"Neptune, the God of the Oceans, Alfred Mahan is his prophet, and the only real church on earth is the American Navy."

Mahan and Corbett Schools

During World War II, the United States could only apply Mahan's decisive naval warfare principles in the Pacific theater. The decisive naval war in which large navies faced each other in the open sea areas envisaged by Mahan was only experienced in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, and this war went down as the last great naval war in world naval history. The United States and other navies applied the principles of British strategist **Sir Julian Corbett** (1854-1922) in the years leading up to the Second World War on the Atlantic front and the subsequent Cold War. Corbett was against decisive and large-scale naval battles at sea.

According to the theses stated in his book "Some Principles of Maritime Strategy", the

struggle at sea should support the struggle on land. In this context, it was very important to prevent maritime trade of the enemy or to protect friendly maritime trade. This situation was in full compliance with the strategy implemented by the USA in the Atlantic during the Second World War. In summary, while Mahan's sea power theory created high-level geopolitical and geo-economic results, Corbett's ideas created results at the operative level.

Mahan's Trio[1]

According to Mahan, trade produces wealth that enhances maritime power.

Just as the famous Prussian strategist Clausewitz (1780-1831) emphasizes the indispensability of the "triad" of people, government, and military power in order to become a strong state in his work "On the War", Mahan also emphasizes national wealth, trade and military power. In this respect, sea power supports not only geopolitics but also geo-economy. Today, cultural and technological ecosystems can be added to Mahan's trio.

Mahan, both as a historian and a geopolitician, analyzed very well the processes of France, the Netherlands and England becoming maritime and ocean powers.

He charted a course for the US state mechanism by making cause and effect analyses of France's maritime mistakes as a continental power or England's dominance of the seas as a small island state.

According to him, the main reason why France could not surpass England at sea, despite having a minister like Colbert at the time of Louis XIV, was that its military power and commercial power were worn down by unnecessary wars on land, focusing on excessive geopolitical objectives.

Although France was more advanced in technology than England in some areas at that time, it preferred expansion by land to expansion by sea, and as a result, it lost its colonies in the American continent and India to English Crown. However, Colbert had supported the increase in trade and naval power to enrich France and made important reforms in this field.

The Netherlands fell into similar traps. She focused only on trade and economic wealth. Netherlands neglected that a strong navy was necessary for the continuity of the ecosystem of trade and economic wealth. England created a trading system that was backed and maintained by military force.

The Mahan Trio and China

The famous trio of national wealth, commercial power and naval power, which Mahan sees as the key to becoming a global power, when transformed into today's global conjuncture, highlights economic size, scope of supply chains and military power, especially the navy.

Technological superiority, which is an integral part of this trio, is also related to economic size, commercial power and naval power.

Today, China implements Mahan's trio, which focuses not only on geopolitical but also on geoeconomic consequences, much more effectively than the United States.

In other words, what China has achieved in the last 20 years is similar to the transformation

processes of the USA into a global power at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1890, the USA surpassed England in production and trade for the first time and became the world's largest economy.

China surpassed the USA in foreign trade for the first time in 2010.

As the USA began to grow, it first secured the south (Mexico) and north (Alaska-Canada) and then took control of the Pacific (Hawaii-Philippines) and South-Central America (Caribbean) region to ensure its geopolitical integrity.

While China first tried to prevent Taiwan from becoming an American forward base, it tried to expand its maritime jurisdiction. It expanded its sovereignty in the South China Sea with the 9-point line. Because he knew very well that the bottom of the seas was much more valuable than the land. While China expanded its navy, she also expanded its area of interest and influence with interregional and intercontinental trade and supply chains. Today, there is Chinese investment or financing in 105 ports of 50 countries covering all oceans.

China Growing at the Sea

Despite Mahan's prediction, the United States abandoned expanding its merchant fleet, the most important leg of its maritime power after the navy, in the second half of the 20th century.

After the Cold War, it rapidly reduced the size of its navy. The US-flagged merchant fleet is extremely inadequate today with 200 ships.

If a world war broke out tomorrow, the United States would have difficulty finding merchant fleets to support its overseas bases.

There are still almost no warships to escort these fleets.

Although the American navy is seen as the gendarmerie of the oceans today, the number of ships is very insufficient.

The USA has 291 combat-ready ships.

Only 232 of these ships are major combatant ships. The remaining 59 ships are auxiliary ships such as tankers.

Only 72 combat ships out of the 232 combatant ships, on deployment in the world's oceans and seas today.

On the other hand, the Chinese Navy (PLAN) has over 750 warships, of which 239 are the major combatants.



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They operate the world's largest merchant marine fleet with a total national flag tonnage of 294 million GT.

1600 containers (box cargo) are moving every minute in the world, and nearly half of them are either loaded or unloaded at Chinese ports.

Nearly 50% of all ships built in the world are produced in China.

The USA protects its own shipyards thanks to the Jones Act of 1920, but the number of shipyards to be protected is rapidly decreasing.

In the words of the American Secretary of the Navy,

“China can produce a ship in one year that it takes the USA in 7 years.”

In the beginning of Cold War USA had 11 military shipyards. Today, there are no military shipyards, building warships left. Only around 7 civil shipyards build warships. This number is several dozen in China. The 154 existing civilian shipyards in the USA today can turn to warship production in case of war. In China, this number is 1200 shipyards.

Another problem area for the USA is the problem of finding qualified sailors to man the warships.

In addition, they have a serious shortage of personnel to work in shipyards. It will take 30 years for American shipyards to catch up with China.

Supply Chains

The most serious developments that make China stand out as both a trade and naval power have occurred in the last 25 years.

While the BRI-Belt and Road initiative has been improving the supply chain both in Eurasia and in the world oceans since 2013; By making huge investments in the navy, for superiority over the USA, they took measures to protect trade and provide freedom of movement in sensitive sea areas, especially Taiwan and the Malacca Straits.

From 2013, when it was announced, to 2022, the total imports and exports between China and BRI countries reached 19.1 trillion US dollars, with a growth of 6.4% every year.

On the other hand, the total bilateral investments between China and BRI partner countries reached 380 billion US dollars.

In short, today China strictly implements what Mahan said roughly 120 years ago, both within the geopolitical and geoeconomic frameworks.

On the contrary, the USA is moving away.

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Note

[1] Mahan as Geoeconomic Strategist, By Colonel Walter M. Hudson, U.S. Army (Retired), January 2024, USNI Proceedings, Vol. 150/1/1,451

Featured image: An MH-60S Seahawk helicopter flies past the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer Sterett. (MC1 Daniel Barker/U.S. Navy)

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