

A “Fortress Fleet” for China

by James R. Holmes

China is attempting to merge old and new technology into what US Navy sea captain and noted sea-power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan termed a “fortress fleet,” a navy that operates almost solely under cover of shore-based fire support. Reared during the nineteenth century, when naval technology remained rudimentary, Mahan railed against this operational concept for severely limiting the fleet’s radius of action, cramping its freedom of maneuver, and stifling initiative among its commanders. His critique made eminent sense in an era when the effective range of gunfire extended less than ten miles offshore. A fleet tethered to the port would find itself confined to miniscule sea areas, unable to exercise sea power effectively.

This is less and less true today. Mahan could scarcely have foreseen advances in military technology like anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles. Such precision weaponry has magnified the reach, accuracy, and destructive potential of coastal defenses. Mobile anti-ship missile batteries stationed along the shorelines can now strike at targets scores, and potentially hundreds of miles, in the distance. Consequently, a coastal state like China can increasingly hope to deter even a superior fleet like the US Navy from attempting to force entry into Asian waters. Failing that, the Chinese Second Artillery Corps, the military’s missile force, can hold US expeditionary and strike groups at risk, raising the operational and strategic costs of entry for Washington and giving US leaders pause in times of strife. In the best case from Beijing’s standpoint, an American president might decline to incur these costs. If Washington stood aside during a Taiwan contingency or some other regional conflagration, China could win without fighting, attaining “the acme of skill” in Chinese statecraft.¹

By hoisting a protective shield over maritime Asia, Beijing can control China’s seaward periphery without risking a head-on confrontation with the US Navy. For example, Chinese naval leaders can delay constructing aircraft carriers comparable to the US Navy’s nuclear-powered flattops provided they are confident US commanders will keep their distance from Asian shores. In other words, if there is little chance the two navies will meet in battle, the Chinese Navy can afford to

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postpone a symmetrical, costly buildup of ships, aircraft, and weaponry. It can use the resulting strategic holiday to experiment with various naval technologies, devising a fleet best suited to Beijing's political aims in the region.

In short, a fortress fleet will grant Beijing the potential to weave anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, niche capabilities like diesel-electric submarines and fast patrol boats, and nonmilitary measures into an intricate coercive diplomacy that could transform maritime Asia into no-go territory for the US Navy, the force on which the US strategic position in Asia rests. Indeed, astute maritime strategy could give Beijing the dominant say in regional affairs.

THE MAHANIAN CRITIQUE

The development of Beijing's maritime strategy would go against the dominant trend of recent decades, when battle fleets sporting high-tech defenses—most famously the Aegis combat system installed on board US Ticonderoga- and Arleigh Burke-class vessels—traversed throughout the world's oceans with few worries about access to important maritime theaters, where coastal defenses remained immature and coastal defense fleets hugged the shorelines, posing few dangers to oceangoing fleets. As noted before, Mahan condemned this defensive mentality roughly a century ago. In particular, it gripped continental nations like *fin de siècle* Russia, which considered the navy a short-range extension of shore defenses and had little thought of decisive fleet actions.

It was natural for strategists reared on land warfare to think in terms of defending fixed fortifications, but this flouted the Mahanian vision of marine combat, a vision reliant on firepower and mobility.² For Mahan, moreover, naval strategy was about offense. It was about amassing “overbearing power” that drove an enemy's flag from important waters and allowed the victor to blockade the coasts of the vanquished afterward.³ To exercise “command of the sea,” or “sea control” in today's parlance, a navy had to roam the high seas far beyond the range of shore-based gunnery, taking its chances in encounters with hostile battle fleets.⁴

With his offensive outlook, Mahan scathingly reviewed the performance of the Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. During this conflict, Russian strategy was strongly defensive in character. Russian commanders went on the

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defensive from the outset and stayed there, remaining close to port and shunning a battle that might have advanced their strategic aims. Squadrons based at Port Arthur and Vladivostok seldom conducted sorties beyond range of shore-based fire support, which included heavy artillery installed at the

two coastal strongholds. Additionally, Japanese Admiral Heihachirō Tōgō's Combined Fleet exacted a heavy toll in lives and ships during the Russians' rare forays on the high seas. By war's end, the bottoms of the Yellow Sea and the

Tsushima Strait were littered with wreckage from Russian fleets.⁵ Russian sea power had come to grief. Aghast at this, Mahan branded the fortress fleet a “radically erroneous” concept of naval warfare, lamenting the defensive instincts and habits Russia’s land-warfare traditions had instilled in Russian mariners.⁶

Mahan reproached Russian commanders for inverting the relationship between the port and the fleet.⁷ In short, while the Port Arthur fleet was ostensibly there to protect the port, in fact it sheltered timidly under the port’s guns for defense. In so doing, the Russian Navy conserved warships St. Petersburg should have risked in combat with the Japanese Navy.

Broadly, Mahan’s brief against the fortress-fleet strategy amounts to the following:

Defensive-Mindedness. Mahan was the prophet of offensive sea power, urging seagoing nations to amass bases and ships to carry on commerce overseas. The fortress-fleet concept not only arose from longstanding Russian strategic preferences but reinforced them, enfeebling Russian sea power over the long term. He found Russian strategic culture repellent because it ceded the initiative to prospective foes.

Obsession with Coastal Defense. Continental nations tend to think in terms of land defense because predatory neighbors might invade and occupy the homeland, much as Napoleon pierced the Russian heartland in 1812. Accordingly, the Russians thought in terms of protecting geographic features and fixed sites from attack. Thoughts of ranging across the seas to protect trade and commerce or duel enemy men-of-war were foreign to many Russian strategists.

Fleet Dispersal. Because the Russians were obsessed with protecting coastal sites, their navy tended to scatter detachments about in an effort to defend important harbors and “narrow seas,” straits and the like. Each detachment was inferior to any opponent who could mass his entire fleet against it. Defeat was foreseeable under such circumstances, insisted Mahan. Piecemeal Japanese naval victories cost Russia its navy, and thus its standing as an Asian sea power.⁸

This indictment arguably applied not only to Russia but to China’s Qing Dynasty, whose navy had fallen prey to the Imperial Japanese Navy a decade before the Russo-Japanese War. The relevance of this critique to modern-day China, however, is questionable. Twenty-first-century China is not a decaying dynastic power forced into a defensive position at sea. Mahan’s critique, furthermore, is largely a function of technology. Radical scientific and technical progress coupled with Chinese strategic traditions may help Beijing dispel the objections he raised. The fortress fleet may become not only an option for China but its seagoing implement of choice.

A strategy predicated on managing events at sea from shore fits the strategic and operational proclivities of China, a determinedly land-centric power, just as it did for Imperial Russia. In contrast to Imperial Russia, however, China has the technology and resources to make such a strategy work. Andrew Erickson and David Yang observe that “the idea of striking a ship from land is not new and...the idea of ‘using the land to control the sea’ in this way is very appealing to China, given its

geostrategic situation.”⁹ This would be a fortress fleet “with Chinese characteristics,” to borrow the ubiquitous Chinese phrase.

A key feature of this strategy is that high technology promises to liberate the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) from coastal waters. In the age of Mahan, the fortress could provide covering fire for the fleet within an arc whose radius equaled the maximum effective range of gunfire. Thus, for example, the Russian fleet had to remain within a few miles of Port Arthur for protection against the Japanese Combined Fleet. No more. Today the reach of land-based naval weaponry could extend well beyond the “near seas” shoreward of the *first island chain* that roughly parallels the Chinese coastline, running from the Japanese archipelago through Taiwan and along the Philippine archipelago. The island chain lies about one hundred miles offshore, depending on the latitude. The breadth of this protective aegis will depend on how well China’s scientific and engineering communities master anti-ship technology. Some weapon systems under development boast the potential to deliver payloads of enormous destructive power against moving targets at sea hundreds of miles distant. The “fortress,” then, now holds the potential to create a defensive bastion encompassing the China seas if not beyond.

This technology-driven strategy is also a cost-effective strategy. Even the latest anti-ship wizardry is cheap by comparison with warships built to slug it out with enemy fleets on the high seas. Fire support can also ease the demands on the Chinese Navy to construct ships able to stand toe-to-toe with their American counterparts. Even a modest PLA Navy could accomplish Beijing’s goals so long as the fleet remained under cover from fortress China, since such cover would keep the US fleet at a safe distance. A fortress fleet, then, represents a relatively low-cost way to fulfill Beijing’s aims at sea while sparing China an expensive, escalatory, ship-for-ship arms race with the US Navy. Pursuing enabling technologies to build such a fleet only makes sense for China’s political leadership.

CHINESE DEFENDERS THINK OFFENSIVELY

China is not as defensive-minded as Imperial Russia. Mahan considered the fortress fleet “a dominant conception in Russian military and naval thought.”¹⁰ More than that, he discerned a “national prepossession in favor of a Fortress Fleet” that shaped Russian officers’ handling of operations and tactics during the struggle with Imperial Japan. The term had not yet been invented, but Mahan saw Russian “strategic culture” acting on multiple levels to stifle the offensive spirit in the Russian Navy. RAND analyst Jack Snyder coined the term in the 1970s, defining strategic culture as “the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought

on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate.”¹¹ It is a kind of national strategic personality.

Colin Gray expands on Snyder’s concept. For Gray, strategic culture works on three levels: “public culture,” strategic culture proper, and the organizational cultures of individual military institutions.¹² Public culture is high culture that pervades an entire society, molding habits of mind. Strategic culture is that subset of attitudes and beliefs that bears directly on the process of matching ways and means with political ends. That culture is a dual-edged sword becomes obvious on the organizational level. An institution blessed with a healthy, innovative culture can thrive under stressful conditions. Should bad habits become embedded in the organizational culture and incorporated into bureaucratic routine, on the other hand, they can be exceedingly difficult to break. An agile, adaptive institution modifies or sheds elements of its routine as needed to keep pace of changes to the strategic setting.

Fortunately for Beijing, contemporary China—unlike tsarist Russia—is heir to a strategic culture that equips the PLA to wield a modern fortress fleet to good effect. Admittedly, many China scholars portray Chinese public culture as innately defensive in outlook. China scholar John King Fairbank noted that war was historically a

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“disesteemed” element of China’s Confucian orthodoxy, “and the disesteem was given an ethical basis that has colored Chinese thinking ever since.”¹³ Chinese statesmen “consistently put less stress on the glory of fighting” than their counterparts in Islam and Christendom owing to the “pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition.”¹⁴

This is true, but it overlooks the radical changes in Chinese society since the dynastic era. On the strategic and operational levels, contemporary China departs from Fairbank’s account of a society predisposed to pacifism. The epic events of Communist China’s founding—the Long March, the Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s-1940s, the Chinese Civil War—all prime Chinese commanders to deploy offensive operations and tactics for strategically defensive purposes within geographically circumscribed areas. These are precisely the conditions they confront offshore today, where the US Navy rules China’s historic maritime periphery and the PLA Navy is only starting to assert itself.

Beijing draws its vocabulary of strategy and operations in large part from founding Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. From his experiences battling Japanese and Nationalist armies, Mao assumed Communist forces would start off fighting from a position of weakness, but they could reverse the

unfavorable military balance given time and smart, offensive-minded strategy. Mao insisted, for instance, that the Japanese invaders had “advantages only in one respect,” namely military hardware and efficiency.¹⁵ They suffered from shortcomings in all other respects; lacking sufficient resources, secure communications with the Japanese home islands, and clear war aims and strategy.

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These deficiencies would worsen over time, weakening the occupying force.

Mao’s Red Army could hasten this process, deliberately exacerbating Japanese shortcomings while correcting its own. China boasted such inherent advantages as vast strategic depth, complex terrain, and nearly limitless manpower reserves. The Red Army could overcome its relative military weakness by tapping such resources.

Even inferior CCP forces, furthermore, could concentrate against small or isolated Japanese formations, achieving local superiority for small battles. Such engagements would yield cumulative effects. By taking the offensive on the micro-level, and even within a macro-level strategic defensive, Chinese forces could wear down their enemies, level the balance of forces, and ultimately take the offensive. “Only a complete fool or a madman,” accordingly, “would cherish passive defense as a talisman.”¹⁶ Active measures constituted sound strategy even for the lesser army.

Mao’s concept of “active defense”—a concept the PLA Navy has transposed to the sea under the guise of “offshore active defense”¹⁷—referred to the art of creating conditions for a strategic counteroffensive that yields a decisive victory.¹⁸ Along these lines, from its inception the PLA Navy employed a force of small combatants—fast patrol boats, coastal submarines, and small frigates—to defend Chinese coastlines. With few vital interests at stake offshore, Maoist China contented itself with a “sea-denial” strategy. A navy prosecuting a sea-denial strategy sees little need to control the seas itself; it merely wants to bar a superior foe from critical expanses for a finite interval. Putting a Maoist spin on the concept, Admiral Stansfield Turner notes that sea denial is essentially “guerrilla warfare at sea.” A lesser navy, says Turner, “hits and runs” at a time of its own choosing. If successful, this ratchets up the costs of forcing entry into vital waters to unbearable levels, even for a stronger adversary.¹⁹

Maoist China, then, considered the PLA Navy a force for waging “people’s war at sea.” This remained the standard wisdom about naval strategy until Deng Xiaoping commenced opening China to the world in the late 1970s. Then, because economic reform demanded overseas trade, it became necessary to construct a more robust, oceangoing navy to protect that trade. As a result, bigger, more capable, longer-range platforms started appearing by the 1990s, supplemented by purchases from post-Soviet Russia. Yet strikingly, the PLA Navy continued investing heavily in

near-seas platforms like fast patrol boats even as it began assembling the rudiments of a sea-control fleet.²⁰ Old technology and strategy remained useful in Beijing's eyes.

Operating in conjunction with the submarine fleet, land-based anti-ship missiles, and minelayers, small craft seek to convert offshore waters into a Chinese preserve. If they display the capacity to mete out punishment, they can hope to dissuade opponents like the US Pacific Fleet or the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) from operating there in wartime despite those fleets' overall superiority to the PLA Navy. People's war at sea, then, involves fusing sea- and land-based armaments into a highly offensive strategy designed to punish enemy forces along Chinese coasts. If executed adeptly, such a strategy will dissuade hostile forces from ever attempting hostile entry into Asian seas.

Despite its continental outlook and the lingering influence of Russian naval traditions—a bequest dating from China's Cold War alliance with the Soviet Union—China will likely prove a more determined, more formidable sea power than tsarist Russia ever was. Offensive sea denial represents the modern-day equivalent to gunfire from Port Arthur or Vladivostok during the Russo-Japanese War. As land-based fire expands its reach, China's sea-control fleet will see its freedom of action expand commensurately.

COASTAL DEFENSE MOVES OFFSHORE

Coastal defense is being recognized as capable as technology progresses. Mahan castigated proponents of the fortress-fleet philosophy for placing “all stress on the fortress, making the fleet so far subsidiary as to have no reason for existence save to help the fortress.”²¹ This was faulty thinking because the Russian fleet “was kept tied to the fortress, a vague possible shadow of help to it...apparently without a thought of offensive action” against the Imperial Japanese Navy.²² Disgraceful defeat ensued. Today, however, Chinese naval development promises to liberate the fleet from close-in defense, letting PLA Navy surface action groups and, ultimately, aircraft-carrier task forces prowl the China seas at will. (In 2009, after years of dissembling, Beijing more or less confirmed plans to build a carrier fleet, although it specified no particular timetable.²³) No longer must the sea-control navy shelter close to Chinese coastlines for protection.

The ideas of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz also illuminate the dynamics at work along the Asian seaboard. Clausewitz's concept of the “culminating point of the attack” is acutely relevant to maritime Asia. A veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, he thought in land-warfare terms. Clausewitz postulated that if an army invades a neighboring state, it starts off at a sizable military advantage. (If not, its commander is foolish to undertake the offensive.) As an army pushes deeper into enemy territory, however, its margin of superiority begins to narrow. In a sense, the invaders then become the victim of their own success. Their advance stretches their lines of communication, making resupply and reinforcement a challenge. Because they

operate within easy reach of their own bases, by contrast, the defenders accumulate reciprocal advantages like nearby manpower and bases and familiarity with the physical and cultural terrain. Familiar surroundings, in short, bestow a home-turf advantage on defending forces.

Unless the commanders of the invading army can summon up the resources, the will, and the creativity to push through to victory, the attack will reach a crossover point beyond which the defender holds the upper hand.²⁴ Once the attack culminates, the ability to attain strategic goals ranges from difficult to impossible, leaving the would-be conqueror demanding terms from a position of weakness.

The same holds true for naval strategy. Sir Julian Corbett, Mahan's contemporary and intellectual rival, applied Clausewitz's logic to the sea. For Corbett, the disadvantages of the offensive were as follows:

*...It grows weaker as it advances, by prolonging its communications, and that it tends to operations on unfamiliar ground. The advantages of the Defensive are chiefly: Proximity to the base of supply and repair stations, familiar ground, facility for arranging surprise by counter attack, and power of organizing in advance.*²⁵

Following this logic, the defender can blunt attacks by a superior adversary along multiple axes provided it holds an "interior" position. The stronger force normally converges on the weaker along "exterior lines." The interior position, however, provides the defender the luxury of nimbly shifting forces from place to place. This helps offset the advantages that go to the superior belligerent. In maritime East Asia, China occupies the interior position against a US Navy steaming westward across the Pacific on exterior lines. War, however, is an intensely interactive process that Clausewitz likened to a "collision of two living forces."²⁶ As the PLA extends the range of land-based weaponry, upgrades its sea-denial fleet, and continues building a blue-water fleet, Beijing will push the culminating point of the attack outward from Chinese coasts. By doing so, it may well realize its aim of sea denial, deterring the US fleet from attempting forcible entry into Asian waterways. More broadly, the PLA Navy may ultimately contend for sea control should Beijing choose to do so.

Scientific and technological progress will play its part. Over the past few years, reports that the PLA is poised to field an "anti-ship ballistic missile" (ASBM) capable of striking ships underway in the Pacific have excited anxiety in the West. Admiral Robert Willard, commander of the US Pacific Command, recently informed the US House and Senate that China is "developing and testing a conventional anti-ship ballistic missile based on the DF-21/CSS-5 MRBM designed specifically to target aircraft carriers," the core of the US Navy fleet.²⁷ Even the American arsenal features no such capability. Mastering such a technology would represent an impressive feat of weapons engineering, not only because the payload must maneuver to strike a moving target but because finding, tracking, and targeting ships in the vast emptiness of the Pacific Ocean poses a daunting challenge.

If the PLA can strike at high-value units like aircraft carriers or amphibious landing ships at long range—reportedly up to 2,500 km for the PLA's Dong Feng-

21C missiles, which are fired from mobile launchers—it can start whittling down advancing US forces around the time they pass through the second island chain, which runs roughly from northern Japan through the US island stronghold at Guam before terminating at New Guinea.

A China able to strike effectively within the second island chain with sufficient numbers of rounds could hope to replicate Imperial Japanese strategy for World War II. Interwar strategists in Tokyo envisioned depleting the US Pacific Fleet through

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“interceptive operations,” namely air and submarine attacks from Japanese-held islands. Such attacks would attenuate US strength as a precursor to a decisive fleet engagement.²⁸ Against the Chinese, similarly, US naval forces would near the culminating point once they entered the ASBM threat envelope, the missile’s maximum effective firing range.²⁹

Once coupled with stealthy submarines, mine warfare, and the panoply of capabilities already in place for sea denial, this would represent coastal defense on a truly grand scale. Second Artillery missile forces would confer impressive strategic depth on mainland coasts, largely freeing the PLA Navy to pursue other political aims like recovering Taiwan or upholding Beijing’s maritime-territorial claims in the South and East China seas. In an era of mobile missile batteries—short-range ballistic missiles positioned opposite Taiwan have attracted the most attention—a “fortress” has become a more fungible concept than it was during the age of Mahan. Shore-based fire support could be positioned virtually anywhere along the seacoast to support the fleet, depending on the contingency. Coastal defense need no longer rely on fixed, passive defenses stationed at a few sites; the lengthy Chinese coastline is the fortress.

NUMBERS MATTER LESS

Finally, Mahan faulted Russian commanders for their defensive mentality and fixation on protecting critical nodes, an outlook that he insisted had goaded them into ill-conceived fleet dispositions. Mahan upbraided fortress-fleet strategists for dividing the fleet into detachments “characteristically defensive in numbers” in hopes of “supporting thus a cherished fortress.”³⁰ By dividing the Russian Navy into Baltic Sea, Black Sea, and Pacific fleets, and further subdividing the Pacific Fleet into Vladivostok and Port Arthur squadrons, St. Petersburg exposed each contingent to defeat in detail at the hands of an enemy like Japan, which could concentrate the bulk of its navy against a detachment. Much like Mao’s outmanned, outgunned Red Army, the Japanese fleet could hurl itself against part of an enemy force, attaining local preponderance in combat. It could achieve victory in stepwise fashion.

Beijing has less to fear in this regard. If successful, a Chinese sea-denial strategy would shut the US Navy out of Asian waters west of Guam, some 1,500 miles from

the mainland coast. Behind this protective screen, PLA Navy flotillas could execute their missions without hazarding pitched sea battles against superior enemy forces. The corollary is that Beijing need not construct a navy that matches the US Navy in numbers or even in capability. To date China has taken a leisurely approach to naval development, building small ship classes and evaluating their performance in order to improve on their design in subsequent classes. No surface combatant has yet gone into serial production. This unhurried approach to fleet experimentation betokens growing confidence on political leaders' part in the capacity of the PLA Navy for sea denial. If China's strategic frontier now lies between the first and second island chains, Chinese fleet experimentation will likely continue in this manner.

The upshot could be a PLA Navy configured far differently from the US Navy. For instance, Beijing may not need aircraft carriers comparable to the US Navy's Nimitz- or Ford-class nuclear-powered flattops to accomplish its goals at sea. Regional navies like the JMSDF constitute a better benchmark for the PLA Navy's sea-control fleet, including its carriers. Outbuilding the JMSDF, which has put to sea a light aircraft carrier known as a "helicopter destroyer" or DDH, constitutes a more manageable task for the immediate future. A modest carrier would offer a technological springboard to vessels comparable to the Nimitz over the longer term, should Beijing choose to invest in such behemoths.

IMPLICATIONS

It appears, then, that technology is helping China answer the objections Alfred Thayer Mahan raised about fortress fleets a century ago. Chinese strategic culture is predicated on offensive defense, and the Chinese Navy increasingly possesses the implements to make a fortress-fleet strategy—the embodiment of this outlook—

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work. In an epoch of anti-ship weaponry delivered from land and sea, a coastal state like China that merely covets a measure of control over its offshore environs may be able to mount a stout defense without risking a major fleet engagement.

It can also enlist guidance from Corbett. Whereas titanic fleet-on-fleet battles were the sine qua non

of offensive Mahanian strategy, Corbett maintained that a lesser fleet—a "fleet in being"—could assume the defensive temporarily until the opportunity arose to retake the offensive. Chinese commanders could regain the upper hand through reinforcement, or they could let land-based systems pummel an enemy fleet before accepting battle with its battered remnants on favorable terms. In short, Beijing can

now harness a hybrid fortress-fleet/fleet-in-being strategy for strategically defensive aims.³¹ Here's why:

Defense Dominance. By the 1970s, advances in Warsaw Pact shore-fired weapons threw the US Navy onto the defensive at sea. Starting in the 1980s, the navy restored maneuverability to its maritime strategy. Technological means like the Aegis combat system—a composite phased-array radar, computer, and fire-control system that lets cruisers and destroyers safeguard high-value units—allowed the fleet to defend itself against land-based weaponry like anti-ship missiles and manned bombers. But as detailed here, the ensuing cycle of interaction and innovation has produced lethal, low-cost anti-ship weaponry that could negate US forces' access to the Asian maritime commons. Washington can no longer take access to these waters for granted. Whether future technical and operational developments can again return the offensive element to strategy remains to be seen.

A Different Kind of Navy. A latter-day fortress-fleet strategy would not only reflect but reinforce Chinese land-power preferences, letting Beijing pacify its maritime flank while it tends to economic development and other pressing interests ashore. It will also grant the navy leadership greater latitude to design a fleet around Asian rivals like Japan or Australia rather than the capabilities of the dominant sea power, the United States. While the PLA Navy and US Navy force structures may converge over the long term, simply because the United States represents the gold standard for seafaring excellence, Beijing can probably get by with a more modest, less costly force for some time to come. A strategy that permits China to control the sea from the land looks like an economical way to uphold Chinese interests on the high seas.³²

Conventional Deterrence. Technology will bolster conventional deterrence vis-à-vis Washington if the ASBM and other sea-denial capabilities pan out. No longer will US presidents blithely order expeditionary forces into the Asian littoral, as the Clinton administration did when it dispatched two carrier battle groups to the vicinity of Taiwan in 1995-1996, after the mainland conducted "missile tests" to influence the island's presidential election. The ensuing debacle has propelled Beijing's strategy and force development ever since. The PLA was unable to detect the US flattops, much less threaten them. If China can mount a deterrent to similar deployments, the credibility of US security guarantees in the region will suffer. In particular, forward bases in Japan anchor the US presence in Asia. Should Tokyo come to doubt that Washington can keep its commitments, it may resign itself to conciliating Beijing. If denied access to Okinawa and other facilities, the United States would find itself falling back to Guam, its remote base in the second island chain.

A Risk-Taking Fleet. Mahan reproached Russian commanders for neglecting to concentrate the Pacific Fleet and risk a decisive engagement with Japan at the outset of the war. As a result, the outcome of the conflict depended on what happened in a ground theater, Manchuria. Interdicting the sea lanes connecting Japanese expeditionary forces in Manchuria with the Japanese home islands—their chief

source of supplies and reinforcements—represented the best use of Russian naval might. As a land power, Russia had little to lose by hazarding combat that might cost it the fleet. Accustomed to thinking about defending fortifications and reluctant to risk pricey warships, however, St. Petersburg balked at such a daring course of action. For China, however, mobile “fortresses,” or missile batteries able to strike faraway targets, will relax such misgivings on Beijing’s part. Fire support from land sites will reduce the risk to the Chinese fleet. Battle will become thinkable.

Politics is acting in Beijing’s favor as well. During the Russo-Japanese War, Tokyo could bombard Port Arthur, a Russian seaport wrested from a foreign country, without fear of rousing the Russian populace for a fight to the finish and resuscitating the tsar’s tottering rule. The prospect of losing Port Arthur meant little to ordinary Russians. By contrast, carrying the war onto Russian soil would have enraged them. US leaders have no such freedom to strike at PLA bases. Hitting these sites—sites within the Chinese homeland—would inflame an already nationalist Chinese populace. Recognizing this, Beijing can in effect dare Washington to strike China and risk escalating the war into an all-out conflict whose costs and perils would outweigh the presumably modest political objectives at stake for the United States. And even if the PLA Navy did suffer a fiasco of Tsushima Strait dimensions, China would retain considerable control over the China seas by virtue of ASBMs and the array of sea-denial weaponry that would remain to it after a defeat. Beijing, in short, enjoys options and fallbacks tsarist Russia never did, both from a material and a diplomatic standpoint.

In closing, it is worth pointing out that a fortress-fleet strategy cannot work in remote theaters. Revolutionary shore-fired weaponry used in concert with sea-denial assets may ease let Beijing manage events along the Chinese maritime perimeter—that is, close to home—with great confidence. But at the same time, urgent interests are beckoning Chinese leaders’ attention southward toward the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. Indeed, the Chinese Communist regime has bet its survival on economic development, which in turn depends on ready supplies of seaborne oil, natural gas, and other raw materials that transit the Indian Ocean.

The PLA Navy must venture into South Asia to protect the shipping lanes and other Chinese geopolitical interests there. As the Chinese fleet establishes a presence in the Indian Ocean, however, it will find itself far from Chinese shores, in waters that lie mostly beyond the range of ASBMs, diesel submarines, and fast patrol craft. Fortress-fleet logic avails Beijing little there. It only extends as far as anti-ship technology can take it.

Complicating matters further, the PLA Navy will find itself on Indian home turf, where New Delhi openly avows its ambitions for naval primacy.³³ What if the Indian Ocean strategic environment turns competitive? If it does, the PLA Navy will be forced to match an ambitious Indian Navy, ship for ship and plane for plane. And this leaves aside the US Navy, which has vowed to preserve its own supremacy in the Indian Ocean.³⁴ However impressive new technologies may be, consequently, they cannot exempt Beijing from high-end naval development altogether. As Alfred

Thayer Mahan might counsel: the ASBM represents a potent capability for China, but it is no panacea.

Notes

- ¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans., intro. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 77.
- ² Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, intro. Eric J. Grove (1911; repr. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 211.
- ³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1890; repr., New York: Dover, 1987), 138.
- ⁴ Geoffrey Till, *Seapower*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 145-156.
- ⁵ Denis Warner and Peggy Warner, *The Tide at Sunrise: A History of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905* (1974; repr., London: Frank Cass, 2002), 324-338, 494-520.
- ⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Retrospect upon the War between Japan and Russia," *Naval Administration and Warfare* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1918), 155.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ The Russian Black Sea Fleet remained intact following the conflict, but it was a wasting asset. Turkey, perennially at odds with Russia, refused to permit the fleet to exit the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.
- ⁹ Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Anti-ship Ballistic Missile," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 4 (autumn 2009): 53-86.
- ¹⁰ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), 391.
- ¹¹ Jack Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1977), 9. As it happens, Snyder was also analyzing Russia. In his case, the challenge was to determine whether the Soviet leadership accepted the Western logic of nuclear deterrence.
- ¹² Colin S. Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 7-9.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-9.
- ¹⁵ Mao Zedong, "On Protracted War," *Selected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung* 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 134.
- ¹⁶ Mao Zedong, "Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," *Selected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 207 and 224.
- ¹⁷ Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, "The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 47, no. 3 (summer 1994): 9-18; Jun Zhan, "China Goes to the Blue Waters: The Navy, Sea Power Mentality, and the South China Sea," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 180-208.
- ¹⁸ Mao, "Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," 207 and 224.
- ¹⁹ Stansfield Turner, in Till, *Seapower*, 153.
- ²⁰ Nan Li, "All at Sea: China's Navy Develops Fast Attack Craft," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, September 2009: 2-3.
- ²¹ Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, 385.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 404.
- ²³ Greg Torode, "At Arm's Length," *South China Morning Post*, April 2, 2010.
- ²⁴ Contends Clausewitz, "The attacker is purchasing advantages that may become valuable at the peace table, but he must pay for them on the spot with his fighting forces. If the superior strength of the attack—which diminishes day by day—leads to peace, the object will have been attained. There are strategic attacks that lead up to the point where their remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace. Beyond that point the scale turns and the reaction follows with a force that is much stronger than that of the original attack. This is what we mean by the culminating point of the attack." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed., trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 528.
- ²⁵ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 329. Unlike Mahan, Corbett explicitly looked to Clausewitz to inspire his sea-power theories.
- ²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.
- ²⁷ "Statement of Admiral Robert F. Willard, U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, before the House Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture," March 23, 2010, http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/FC032510/Willard_Testimony032510.pdf.
- ²⁸ Wendell Minnick, "Chinese Anti-Ship Missile Could Alter U.S. Power," *Defense News*, April 5, 2010, p. 6.; Wendell Minnick, "China Developing Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles," *Defense News*, January 14, 2008,

<http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3307277>.

²⁹ Whether the ASBM will prove viable, and how manageable a threat it will pose, are matters of often-vehement debate in US naval circles. For example, the US Naval Institute Proceedings, the navy's professional journal, has published several articles arguing the point. See Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "On the Verge of a Game-Changer," *Proceedings* 135, no. 5 (May 2009): pp. 26-32; Sam J. Tangredi, "No Game Changer for China," *Proceedings* 136, no. 2 (February 2010): 24-29; Craig Hooper and Christopher Albon, "Get Off the Fainting Couch," *Proceedings* 136, no. 4 (April 2010): 42-47.

³⁰ Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, 396.

³¹ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 209-216.

³² Erickson and Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea?" 77.

³³ For one among many statements of Indian maritime ambitions, see Rajat Pandit, "Blue-water Navy Is the Aim," *Times of India*, November 1, 2006, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/263611.cms>.

³⁴ US Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, 2007, <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/Maritimestrategy.pdf>.