China's Cruise Towards Sea Power

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More than two centuries have passed since Mahan gained reputation for his insightful strategic thinking of sea power. While some assume that sea power theory is outdated, in China, however, there emerges “Mahanian fever”. The historical glories of ancient Chinese seafaring records demonstrated China’s capacity to exert influences from and at sea upon other states. Meanwhile, the increasing importance of contemporary China’s maritime and security interests arouses Chinese strategists’ enthusiasm for sea power. Such a trend is under the prudent observation of a group of Westerner scholars. Some have noticed that Mahan has many avid Chinese readers and followers. In addition to the popularity of Mahan, Corbett is becoming more well-known in China than before. The differences between two theorists are clear-cut. While some elements of Mahanian sea power seem to be too aggressive to suit China’s situation, Corbett’s theory could be an option. Therefore, to seek a proper way for China, Mahan’s paradigm is by no means the only choice and there can be viable alternatives, albeit fierce domestic debate on whether or not China needs sea power.

To hold a stand in the debate, this paper argues that China, a regional big country with a long coast line, needs to build up its sea power for the sake of its economic growth, maritime interests and national security, etc. China would do well to learn from the fundamental merits of Western theories and apply them to Chinese context selectively. Afterwards, a thoughtful study will be conducted to explore the rationales and requisite qualifications of China. Taking into consideration its pacific strategic culture and the altering of time, China’s sea power in the 21st century will bear unique features. Nevertheless, as a traditional continental state, China would inevitably be confronted with obstacles and the road ahead would be by no means smooth. Before proceeding to the in-depth analysis, it is better to begin with the strategic thinking of two great theorists and their relevance to current circumstances.

Theoretical Foundation

It was not until 1890 that general sea power theories came into being, thanks to Alfred Thayer Mahan’s endeavors in studying history and the publishing of his book—*The Influence of Seapower upon History*. Mahan defined six principal elements that determined a sea power: geographical position; physical conformation; extent of territory; number of population; national character and character of government.[1] Mahan contended that seapower originated from maritime trade and commerce, from which a nation could derive resources to support the navy and for which a nation needed “command of the sea” to protect shipping and occupying colonies. His theoretical logic was: a strong naval force could control the sea routes, and therefore control world trade. From world trade, a nation could prosper and dominate the whole world. According to Mahan, “seapower seemed to be the formula for great power status and world influence”.[2] Under the influence of his theory, American policy-makers adjusted their strategy and successfully transformed America from an insular continental power to a sea power with global force projection capabilities.[3]

Despite his worldwide popularity at that time, however, Mahan’s views were challenged. Some argued that the economic foundation on which his assumptions relied had changed at the end of 19th century. John Gooch pointed out that Mahan’s analysis was rooted in the history of pre-industrial Europe and applied to an era of exploration and commercial exploitation in which maritime transport created trade and trade created wealth.[4] Besides, the technology advancement and subsequent arms race in early 20th century also challenged the “universal validity” of his theories on “command of the sea”. Weapons like mines and torpedoes could paralyze the power of capital ships

to exercise the "command of the sea". Therefore, "Mahan's dictum had lost its validity within two decades of its pronouncement."[5]

About two decades later, British strategist, Sir Julian Corbett, brought fresh ideas to sea power. In contrast to Mahan, Corbett saw maritime strategy only suiting limited national purposes and he identified some fundamental differences between land warfare and sea warfare, proposing a balanced amphibious strategy. He advocated relative rather than absolute command of the sea. Corbett believed that "the prime object of naval warfare…was to secure communication. This was achieved by 'sea control, not command of the sea'".[6] Corbett's less ambitious views would be more attractive to China today.

Despite differring views, the two theorists shared certain similarity in that "both sought to persuade their audience that there was a 'correct' way in which to make use of seapower."[7] Although neither of them foresaw the asymmetric warfare of submarines and airplanes in the 20th century and such new considerations as seaborne ordnance capacity to strike continental land masses in depth, naval air wing's contributory roles to land battles and the nuclear deterrence at sea would render their ideas irrelevant, Mahan and Corbett "identified a fundamental problem of sea warfare to which every age must find its own solutions".[8] Western scholars are wondering "whether Mahan's Chinese readers are taking from him lessons similar to those Theodore Roosevelt derived".[9] They might be right that Chinese scholars are learning from Mahan and proposing to construct China's sea power, but China would not necessarily copy what Roosevelt did. To study the viability of previous theories in China and explore a proper way, it is necessary to retrospect the history of China's influence at sea.

Ancient China's Power at Sea[10]

Throughout history, there are two classical events representing China's power at sea—Zheng He's voyages to the Indian Ocean in early Ming Dynasty and Beiyang Fleet's brief appearance in late Qing Dynasty. Although there was a time gap of nearly 500 years, the two fleets were the strongest in their respective era. It would be worthwhile to briefly review the rise and fall of China's powerful influence at sea.

Firstly, Zheng He's voyages to the Indian Ocean. From 1405 to 1433, Zheng He commanded his fleets in eight voyages to the Southeast Asian, Indian Ocean and even the East coast of Africa. His heroic undertaking was an important historic event and a unique episode in Chinese history. It was not until nearly a century later that the Western world entered their "Columbian epoch", to cite Sir Halford Mackinder's term.[11] Even so, there was no comparison between them in terms of fleet scale, range and duration. Putting aside all these historical records, it is necessary to consider why Zheng He conducted these grand voyages, what their influence was, and why the voyages stopped suddenly.

According to the records in *Mingshi* (*History of Ming Dynasty*), Emperor Yongle "wanted to display his soldiers in strange lands in order to make manifest the wealth and power" of Ming China.[12] Those voyages were regarded as effective means to enforce Chinese tributary system in the Western countries rather than to conquer foreign territory or promote trade,[13] because their ships were only suited for seafaring but not for combat. Onboard were Chinese goods for exchanges. Those exchanges were tributary in nature rather than for economic profits, and therefore differed essentially from the traditional notion of "maritime trade".[14] Although the voyages had no relevance to Mahan's "command of the sea", it was conducive to promoting human intercourses and trade via the channel of sea. For China, Zheng He's voyages also implied that the Ming China was not only a power on land but also at sea.

Unluckily, the emperors of Ming Dynasty did not have any foresight or ambition to turn China into a sea power. On the contrary, it suspended and finally banned the sea voyages. Why? The answer lies in "government attitude"—to cite Mahan's term. Politically, it all depended on the emperors' attitude whether Zheng He set sail or ceased to do so. Economically, the Ming Dynasty ran a closed feudal agrarian system. Self-sufficiency saw no need to exploit the sea and turn to foreign trade for national survival. Moreover, culturally speaking, traditional Confucian ideology rejected seafaring activities, let alone conquest or colonizing. The last, or possibly the direct cause could be the huge expense of these voyages. Without sufficient payoff from the voyages to compensate the cost, the Imperial Court could not afford more voyages and maintenance of the fleet. According to a Chinese scholar, should the successors to

Emperor Yongle have not banned the voyages, Ming Dynasty could have collapsed even sooner.[15]

Secondly, the Beiyang Fleet in late Qing Dynasty. More than 400 years later, the Beiyang Fleet was founded and regarded as the strongest in Far East, more powerful than the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), albeit short-lived and far less influential than prior dynasty. It is worthwhile, however, to examine its brief appearance.

Formally established in 1888, Beiyang Fleet became the first naval fleet in China. However, due to lack of sufficient budget support and the corruption of the Court, its strength began to decay in just a few years while the IJN was burgeoning. Consequently, the Beiyang Fleet was totally defeated in the First Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895). Some military historians attributed the failure to military inferiority, such as unqualified command capability, lack of sea warfare experience, insufficient ammunition and poor training and armament maintenance.[16] All these factors might contribute to China's failure to a certain degree, but the fundamental cause could be lack of sea power awareness. The purpose of the fleet was to protect land territory, safeguarding land security against threats from the sea. Lack of sea awareness not only hindered them from seeing their vulnerability to the attacks from sea, but also preventing them from building up a strong naval force to defend the land against maritime invaders, let alone to compete for the "command of the sea".

Throughout history, China never attempted to build itself into a sea power, apart from the impressive Zheng He's voyages and the modern-looking Beiyang Fleet. Moreover, ancient China as a continental hegemon in East Asia saw little need of sea power. In the eyes of Chinese emperors, China was a power on the Earth and they were "Sons of Heaven". However, from the outbreak of the Opium War, China experienced a century long humiliation, which mainly caused by foreign invasion from the sea. The founding of new China gave birth to the Chinese Navy, which has seized opportunities for rapid growth in past two decades. Learning from history, China has realized the importance of a strong navy, the significance of maritime security and interests and the implication of "command of the sea" or "sea control".[17] In other words, China has realized the importance of sea power, as proposed by Mahan or Corbett. Will China be a sea power in the 21st century? To what extent is China ready? Which way will China choose to take? Would it encounter any obstacles? The following parts attempt to answer these questions.

China's Road towards Sea Power

The study of China's sea power has attracted interests from both foreign scholars and Chinese counterparts. James Holmes argues that China's booming economy and increasing reliance on maritime trade make it more appealing for China to develop a powerful navy.[18] Should China follow the way of Mahan, Chinese maritime strategy would give more prominence to a military hue. Some radical Chinese scholars also favor Mahan's blue-water fleet. Zhang Wenmu and Ni Lexiong are probably the most prominent proponents of China's Mahanian school of thought. They argue that without sea power, big countries would not have a future. As China is becoming more and more open to the world, its appeal for sea power has never been so strong as today. To achieve this objective, China should build up a powerful navy.[19] While Holmes and Yoshihara contend that Mahan's influence on past great powers would provide useful lessons for contemporary China, they also remind readers that "China will not replicate exactly their experiences or suffer their fates", and "Beijing will likely follow a trajectory that conforms to its own local geostrategic conditions".[20]

Sea power vs. land power debate

When Zhang advocates his ideas, he cites Mahan's dictum that economic prosperity hinges on the deployment of naval forces at strategic locations.[21] He cautions that "it is extremely risky for a major power such as China to become overly dependent on foreign import without adequate protection," and China needs to "build up our navy as quickly as possible" because "sea battle" was the "ultimate way for major powers" to resolve economic disputes.[22] His radical arguments earn him the reputation of a Mahanian navalist in China. However, he is not alone. Ni Lexiong advocates that once an "outward-leaning economy" of a nation that relies on maritime trade comes into being, it must call for sea power. He contends that "we need our global military presence since we have commercial interests all over the world."[23]

Different from them, other Chinese scholars believe that current world situation is different from Mahan's era; economic globalization has made the world interdependent; and countries should seek "cooperation" rather than the traditional "solo fight" in order to preserve their maritime life line.[24] Therefore, they argue that it is unnecessary for China to apply the outdated sea power theory and pursue a powerful navy.[25] In addition to the "globalization" advocates, some strategists upholding land power theory also argue that the existing tensions in the West Pacific make it less desirable arena for China to assert its influence and China needs to work out alternative ways to give certain "benign neglect" of the Pacific region and to "avoid strategic entanglements".[26]

Viability of China's sea power

The above perspectives represent two extremes of the spectrum. Either Mahanian proponents or land power advocates have provided insightful perspectives on current discussion. The central argument of this paper is prone to China's sea power. To test its viability, it is necessary to analyze its requisite qualifications before studying the sea power paradigms.

Probably, one of the most important contributions of Mahan's theory is the six critical elements of sea power, which, "providing it is not treated as holy writ, remains incomparable and of enduring relevance".[27] In case of China, each element has a role to play. The first is "geographic position". Admittedly, China might be regarded as handicapped comparing to Mahan's ideal model since he believed that continental states had to defend their large land borders and therefore allocate necessary resources for it. France and Germany and even Russia belong to this category. However, although the history proved that France and Germany failed to become sea powers, the failure of insular Japan also demonstrated that there was no geographic determinism. Currently, China's large land borders are relatively stable and face few threats than the East coast. The history of Zheng He's voyages indicated that even in ancient time, a continental China had the capability to exert powerful influence both on land and at sea. The less favorable geostrategic position should not become a major drawback.

The elements of "physical conformation" and "extent of territory" are also in conformity with Chinese situation. Its long coastline dotted with numerous good natural harbors provides favorable conditions. The fourth element—"number of population" –is even more straightforward. With a huge population, China would not lack necessary manpower to engage in seafaring activities.

The fifth and last element involving national attitude and government willingness are often regarded as the most decisive. For China, it is no longer a closed agrarian economy that relied on self-sufficiency. China has opened to the world and the maritime commerce and trade play an important role in China's prosperity. Such a trend would proceed. As to government's emphasis on commerce and its willingness to develop a strong navy, the answer to the former would be absolutely positive while the latter needs further observation. Anyway, in recent years, the increase of military budget and inclination toward naval buildup has already sent out positive signals.

Unique features of China's sea power

The above analysis indicates that China is fundamentally qualified to be a sea power. However, it would not follow Mahanian paradigm as it was too aggressive and bellicose for China. Besides, China would not wish to replicate the same fate of past naval powers, such as Imperial Germany and Imperial Japan, who "appreciated Mahan's works only superficially," and "read Mahan in warlike fashion" in order to achieve their own ambitious and aggressive purposes.[28] It is possible for China to adopt a less bellicose theory and Corbett could be an ideal choice, albeit less influential vis-à-vis Mahan. He "endorsed many of the same concepts and views that animated Mahan without arriving at such belligerent policy and strategic prescriptions".[29] Amongst Chinese strategists, this seems to be an appealing choice of theoretical principle.[30]

Theoretical principle, however, could only serve as guidelines. It should be noted that the epoch of Mahan and Corbett has gone and the limitation of their theories cannot be obviated for the following reasons. First, today's world is different from two centuries ago. Highly economic interdependence draws countries closer than ever and the time when national maritime security relied on war and hegemony has gone. Secondly, technology advancement has

turned our world into five dimensions—land, sea, air, space and electromagnetic. Integrated warfare dominates the military strategy of big powers, and naval primacy has lost its traditional significance. Thirdly, in the context of China, Chinese strategic culture emphasizes peace, harmony and defense. Even a critic to sea power, Ye admits that China's sea power should not aim to achieve absolute "command of the sea", or exclusive control of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs); not to plunder maritime resources by force and enforce Chinese will upon others by maritime force.[31] His remarks imply a defensive rather than aggressive nature of China's sea power. Ironically, given his background of a land power advocate, would his recommendation be valuable? The answer could be yes.

In a word, sea power should become an important strategic choice for China since the maritime resources and SLOCs have turned to be indispensable strategic issues for China's sustainable development. Some even argue that China's sea power would pose historic influence upon the "great national revival" of China.[32] Besides, the extension of China's maritime interests conforms to the rise of China, which in turn requires a modernized navy to safeguard its national interests and exercise necessary but limited "sea control". Persuasive as they are, however, China's road toward this aspiration would not be smooth and it would encounter unavoidable barriers and obstacles.

Obstacles in the way

The obstacles that China faces are as significant as those favorable conditions. First of all, the geographic or geostrategic obstacle as implied by the two "island chains" would hinder China from free access to the sea. Although this is not a natural barrier, the military presence of the United States in East Asia and the reemergence of Japanese maritime power, more or less, restrain China from exerting its influence at sea. Another geographic concern would be the possible threats from the land borders because few threats do not mean the absence of threat.

Secondly, those rationales held by land power proponents shall not be deserted indiscriminatingly. Some of their arguments are worth pondering. For instance, Ye argues that the greatest security challenges China is confronted with are internal threats rather than external ones. Therefore, he suggests that China should direct bulk of national resources towards addressing domestic development dilemmas.[33] Such a perspective could not be baseless. In this sense, naval development could only be part of China's grand strategy. As to the vital importance of SLOCs to China's survival, someone argues that China has been "courting Central Asian governments" and "stretches far into Eurasia" for natural resources.[34]

Thirdly, government's willingness to build up sea power is not completely clear yet. This seems to turn back to the prior sixth element. So far, the discussion and debate on China's sea power spread mainly in academic spectrum, albeit the possible participation of some military strategists, and the extent of their influence upon policy-makers remains unknown. What is clear is that the Chinese government has increased investment to the services other than the Army and regarded Chinese Navy a "strategic service".[35] However, China's national priority is still given to economic growth and national stability. It would balance the cost and benefit before allocating more resources to develop the navy for the purpose of building an oriental sea power.

The last obstacle closely relates to the above point, that is, the Chinese Navy is by no means a powerful one. This, to some extent, explains the reluctance of Chinese government in making decisions. Besides, naval buildup per se is very expensive and it requires relatively more resources than other services. Despite its rapid growth, the Chinese navy is far from powerful to fulfill its missions and responsibilities. It has come a long way yet still has a long way to go to become a regional power, and the day to be a global Navy is still beyond our sight.[36]

The above four obstacles would be important impediments that restrain China from developing sea power in the near future. Nevertheless, as Paul Kennedy points out, "very few nations, then, could achieve true sea power; many more had sought that goal, and failed." The key to success mainly lies in the "six principal elements" as mentioned above from Mahan.[37] Based on previous analysis, since China could meet the fundamental qualifications, it is highly possible for China to push the way further ahead.

Conclusion

The overall analysis of this paper conveys a clear idea that China should build up sea power in the 21st century. Its historical strength at sea demonstrates its potential to be a sea power. But, for various reasons discussed in this essay, it failed to take the way of sea power. The successful story of western powers and lessons of their failure would be of great value for China. "History is not bunk."[38] Even though Mahan and Corbett's theories of sea power are outdated today, they are valuable sources where modern strategists could refer to and upon which to construct their own paradigms. Based on Mahan's "six elements" criteria and Corbett's less ambitious idea of "sea control", China is more qualified than ever to become a sea power, which in turn, would be conducive to securing its economic growth, maritime interests and national security. It is worth noting that, given specific Chinese context, China's way toward sea power would be different from previous powers like Germany and Japan. It must be a way that favors China's current momentum of development and could drive China marching on smoothly. Obstacles would be inevitable, sooner or later, however, they could be removed should Chinese government have the willingness to make decisions.

[1] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Fontana Press,1991), p.5.

[2] John Gooch, "Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett", in *Seapower and Strategy*, ed. Colin S. Gray & Roger W. Barnett (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press,1989) , p.36.

[3] George F. Will, "The 'blue national soil' of China's navy", *The Washington Post* (March 18, 2011), available at

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-blue-national-soil-of-chinas-navy/2011/03/18/AB5AxAs_story.html

[4] John Gooch, "Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett", p.36.

[5] Ibid., p.37.

[6] Ibid., p.40.

[7] Ibid., p.37.

[8] Ibid., pp.44-45.

[9] George F. Will, "The 'blue national soil' of China's navy".

[10] Here the term "power at sea" is used to indicate ancient China's strength at sea as a distinction from Mahan's term of "sea power".

[11] The term refers to the period approximately from 1500 to 1900. Cited from Christopher J. Fettweis, "Eurasia, the 'World Island': Geopolitics, and Policymaking in the 21st Century", *Global Research*, March 2004, available at http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=2095.

[12] Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*(New York: Pearson Education, 2007), p.3.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p.35.

[15] Ye Zicheng & Mu Xinhai, "Perspectives on China's Sea Power Strategy," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu [Studies of International Politics]*97, no.3 (August 2005): p.7.

[16] Ibid., p.8.

[17] Ni Lexiong, "Historical Necessity for the Transition from Land Power to Sea Power", *World Economics and Politics*, No.11 (2007): pp.22-32.

[18] James Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (London & Ne w York: Routledge, 2008), p.xii.

[19] Zhang Wenmu, "Economic Globalization and China's Sea Power", *Strategy and Administration [Zhanlue yu Guanli]*, no.1(2003): pp.86-94.

[20] Ibid., p.5.

[21] Ibid., p.40.

[22] Zhang Wenmu, "China's Energy Security and Policy Choices", *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi* 5(14 May 2003): pp.11-16. See also Zhang Wenmu, "Sea Power and China's Strategic Choices," *China Security* (summer 2006): pp.17-31.

[23] Ni Lexiong, *Wenming De Zhuanxing Yu Zhongguo Haiquan[Civilization Transformation and China's Sea Power]* (Beijing: Xinhua Press, 2010), p.72.

[24] This school of thought is mainly upheld by Xu Qiyu, see his article "Misunderstandings and Reflections upon Sea Power", *Strategy and Administration [Zhanlue yu Guanli],*no.5 (2003): pp.15-23; see also Ni Lexiong, "Sea Power and China's Development," *Liberation Daily* (17 April 2005), available at www.uscc.gov/researchpapers/translated_articles/2005/05_07_18_Sea_Power_and_Chinas_Development.pdf

[25] Ibid.

[26] Lanxin Xiang, "China's Eurasian Experiment", *Survival* 46, no.2 (Summer 2004): p.118.

[27] Colin S. Gray, *The Navy in the Post-Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p.6.

[28] James Holmes, *Chinese Naval Strategy,* p.5; p.47.

[29] Ibid., p.47.

[30] Shi Xiaoqin, "An Alternative Way to Understand Sea Power: Brief on Sir Julian Corbett's Seapower Theory and Its Implications", *Peace and Development*, vol.113, no.1 (2010): pp.56-63; see also Shi Chunlin, "Review of Studies on China's Sea Power over Past Decade", *Contemporary International Relations*, no.4 (2008): pp.57-8.

[31] Ye Zicheng, "Perspectives".

[32] Shi Zhihong, "*Zhongguo Jueqi Huhuan Qiangda Haiquan:Ping Guojia Haishang Anquan* [A Rising China Calls for Sea Power: Review of *China's National Maritime Security*]", *Shijie Zhengzhi Yu Jingji Luntan*, no.3(2009): p.124.

[33] Ye Zicheng, *Luquan Fazhan Yu Daguo Xingshuai—Diyuan Zhengzhi Huanjing Yu Zhongguo Heping Fazhan de Diyuan Zhanlue Xuanze [Land Power Development and the Rise and Decline of Great Powers: Geopolitical Environment and China's Peaceful Development Geo-strategic Choice*] (Beijing: NewStar Press, 2007), quoted in Michael Crisp, "The Great Chinese Sea Power Debate: a review essay," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no.63 (2010): p.208.

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[37] Paul Kennedy, "The Influence and Limitations of Sea Power," *The International History Review*10, no.1 (Feb, 1988): p.4.

[38] James Holmes, *Chinese Naval Strategy,* p.125.

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