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Sea Power
The Great Enabler

Colin S. Gray

WHAT IS THE STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP between sea power and land power, with air power adjunct to, and very occasionally all but independent of, both? Two propositions are considered here. First, it is suggested that command of the sea yields a more absolute and extensive superiority in that environment than does command on land in its environment. Second, this article considers the idea that command at sea yields possibilities for influence on land superior to the influence at sea that can flow from command on land. "Command" is employed to mean a working control and not an absolute, literally exclusive—let alone ubiquitous—control. An effectively absolute control can be achieved, however. For example, in 1810 the Royal Navy's close blockade of French, and major French-allied, ports was so rigorous that not a single French naval squadron put to sea.[1] For a further instance, U.S. and other coalition naval forces enjoyed so absolute a control of the waters of the Persian Gulf in 1991 that the Mahanian sense of the term "command" was not inappropriate.

Command of the sea, for all its suggestion of an improbable literal exclusivity, expresses an enduring truth about the conditions for success in maritime endeavor in wartime. Since the time of Oliver Cromwell's statecraft in the 1640s and 1650s, sea power and command of the sea have been appreciated in the terms explained and popularized (very much later) by Alfred Thayer Mahan. Maritime command at sea may be in dispute, will rarely deny the enemy use of the sea entirely, and might be enjoyed only by night or by day (the situation in the "slot" in the Southern Solomons off Guadalcanal from August to November 1942). But by definition, command cannot be shared. Command is exclusive in one place and at one time, and, because "the sea is one," with exceptions only in coastal or closed seas, it has the potential to be very extensive in domain. The ubiquity of command at sea was more true in the days of totally Eurocentric international struggles than has been the case since the 1920s. U.S. and Japanese

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naval power could not be contained by the same accident of physical geography that placed Britain in a barrier position *vis à vis* aspiring naval powers in continental Europe.

Prior to the early 1900s, Britain's command of Europe's narrow seas translated into control of global maritime communications. Indeed, after 1807 Britain explicitly sought to achieve a monopoly of Europe's seaborne commerce as a means both to survive in the face of Napoleon's continental blockade and to apply pressure upon his fragile continental empire. The complex European naval competition of the early 1900s, however, required Britain to concentrate her battle fleet in home waters at the very time when Japanese and U.S. naval power was on the rise. Britain no longer enjoyed global maritime command. The 5:5:3 Washington Treaty (1922) ratio in capital ship tonnage between Britain, the United States, and Japan made strategic sense for the Royal Navy only if there was no pressing need for the concentration of naval force in European waters. But by the mid-1930s, it was apparent that the security of the British Empire in Asia rested upon nothing more tangible than hopes that the Japanese Empire would confine its predatory activities to the East Asian mainland, that the United States would conveniently defend British interests in the region in addition to her own, or that dangers in Europe could somehow be avoided.

In the wars with France, the key to British maritime command had been a flexible concentration of naval force, with the principal center of gravity off Ushant in the Western Approaches to the Channel (weather and the fleet logistic train permitting) and complementary assembly areas off Cape Finisterre, Cape St. Vincent, or at Gibraltar. With variations, this central idea for fleet deployment was applicable as late as the Second World War. In that war the Royal Navy's Home Fleet (as in 1914–18) substituted Scapa Flow for Plymouth and Torbay as the principal base; the Orkneys provided flexibility in the provision of more or less distant cover by capital ships against the German surface raiders that menaced the North Atlantic and later northern Russian convoy routes. The Home Fleet's Force H at Gibraltar functioned in a manner reminiscent of the operational flexibility that basing a fleet on the Bosphorus had afforded the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires: it made a two-sea fleet from a single concentration of naval power. In 1941–42 Force H operated both in distant support of operations in the North Atlantic and on behalf of the convoys to and from the Middle and Far East via the Cape route, as well as in the Mediterranean, where it provided cover for the Malta convoys against Italy's fleet-in-being.

The strategic geography of the Cold War Soviet Union denied her foes even the possibility of adopting a single-theater focus in their maritime plans and deployments. The Trafalgar of a Soviet-American World War III would probably have been waged in the Norwegian Sea, but the largest concentration of Soviet naval force was in the Far East. Given adequate notice, maritime assets

could have been transferred from region to region. The degree of global maritime command that a Western alliance against the Soviet Union would have required, while it would have been facilitated by substantial eradication of the Soviet naval strength based on the Kola peninsula, could not have been secure unless the Soviet Pacific Fleet also were destroyed or otherwise reliably neutralized.

The geographical and political barriers that subdivide the land necessarily limit sharply the reach even of superior land power. Mountains, wide rivers, deserts, and inconveniently located neutral states can all hinder the momentum and grasp of armies. Even when such internal continental hurdles are not a grave problem, all-conquering armies can be frustrated by the water's edge. Even with the benefit of a powerful air-adjunct, superior land power, if not assisted by superior sea power, is essentially only of insular benefit (large though the "island" in question may be). First-rate land power, though supported ably by no less first-rate air power, is simply denied by geography the possibility of functioning as the basis for global strategy. However, this is far from the whole story, as the remainder of the article will show.

Theory and Practice

Although the military reach of superior sea (-air) power is greater than is that of land (-air) power, that judgment must not encourage any discounting of the strategically interdependent relationship that characterizes land, sea, air, and now space operations. It is true that maritime command effectively places the military frontier upon the enemy's coast. In principle this point needs to be modified to accommodate the threat posed by land and sea-based air power. But in practice since 1939, maritime command has been understood to subsume the necessity for achieving air superiority over the fleet. The sea cannot be commanded if control is lacking in the air. The British experience of defeat in Norway in April 1940, in Crete in May 1941, and most dramatically off Kuantan in Malaya in December 1941 with the sinking of the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*, provided early signals of an interdependence of air and sea that was to be the cornerstone of military operations in the conflicts in Europe and the Pacific. The specific historical strengths of particular combatants are what is most important, not some abstract relationship posited between air power and sea power (and now space power). Following Desert Storm, a strategic theorist could write plausibly, if incompletely, that "air power had finally done it."[2] "Done it" in this context implies air power as the dominant agent for success in war. The analysis in this article recognizes that there will be specific historical situations wherein land power and sea power will be largely adjunct to an air power that is itself about far more than the protection of the fleet or the acceleration of military progress on the ground.

In the Pacific in late 1943 and 1944, the U.S. Navy deployed so overwhelming a fast-carrier strength that the nominal measures of advantage between land and sea-based air power were simply overturned by the great and growing disproportion, against Japan, in material resources. Military "rules of thumb," like the favorable 3:1 ratio advisable for an attacker on land, are falsified so often that they should be accorded little respect. Brute force can never be despised, but success in war rarely reduces neatly and arithmetically to sheer quantities of military input.

The sea is a great highway or a barrier, depending upon military relations in and over that environment. There has always been a strategic asymmetry favoring superior and insular sea power over superior and continental land power.[3] The dominant sea power necessarily enjoys access to the territorial basis of the continental country's strength, while the dominant land power must either cross an uncommanded sea in order to enjoy reciprocal access, or somehow itself wrest maritime command in preparation for invasion.

Since command at sea and on land is never absolute (well, hardly ever, with acknowledgement to Gilbert and Sullivan), the sea power and the land power typically can raid each other's realm. Historians and strategic theorists impressed by the access to hostile territory enabled by maritime command need to recognize that raiding at sea by a land power is likely to be more significant strategically than is amphibious raiding by a sea power. Time after time in modern history, *guerre de course* has been the preferred strategy for a second-class naval power obliged to disperse its fighting strength at sea.

Strategic Utility

The traditional strategic advantages conferred by sea mobility have not been thoroughly negated by the technological and economic changes of this century. In their security application those changes include: new economies in rapid generation of forces for peripheral defense on land permitted by the railroad and the internal combustion engine; a vastly increased scale of military power that can be maintained by modern national economies; and the revolution in wide-area surveillance and in the reach of land-based firepower effected by aircraft (and spacecraft). Command at sea, however, still uniquely enables a country or coalition to implement a global strategy. Herbert Rosinski expressed a lasting truth in 1944 when he wrote that "in global war, merchant shipping is the ultimate key to strategy."[4]

There is no question about the feasibility of penetration either of the sea environment by the country superior on land, or of the land by the country in a commanding position at sea. The important question, rather, is what can be achieved by such penetration, by the landward reach of sea power and the

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seaward reach of land power. There can be no generally valid answer, because specific historical circumstances must determine what reciprocal land-sea access permits. Discussion of the relative value of sea and land power for securing access to the hostile environment is a debate about the ease with which maritime power can generate strength on land, or vice versa. This, truly, is the crux of the matter. Failure to understand that war cannot be waged to a successful conclusion by action in one environment alone is a persisting weakness shown up in the history of statecraft.

Napoleon's continental imperium was unable to effect a sufficient concentration of naval force of adequate fighting quality to cover an invasion of Britain or to wage a *guerre de course* sufficiently damaging to remove British ability to organize and finance sea-land coalitions. Imperial Germany was so burdened with military commitments on land that she was unable to build her "risk fleet" into a force that could challenge Great Britain's Grand Fleet for command via a general fleet action.[5] Germany's conduct of an unrestricted *guerre de course* in 1915, 1916, and again in 1917–18 lacked the numbers, the operational intelligence, and the technical-tactical proficiency to drive allied-serving merchant shipping from the high seas, formidable though that threat was in 1917. Nazi Germany, like Imperial Germany before it, entered into war with a naval doctrine ill suited to the scale of its naval assets.[6] However, Halford Mackinder's grim analysis of what a continental scale of political and military organization could imply for the seaward reach of the land might have applied in the 1940s.[7] Hitler would have had to have been willing to delay his timetable of military aggression so as to permit the development of a large and balanced navy, the Luftwaffe would have needed to make sensible technical choices about aircraft, and war against the Soviet Union and the United States would have had to have been postponed for many years.

The wars of the French Revolution and Empire and the world wars of the twentieth century demonstrate clearly the strategic and operational utility of sea power. But maritime command is more a facilitator than a concluding executor; vital though sea power has been, alone it can rarely serve to bring a conflict to a satisfactory conclusion. One could argue that British sea power eventually wrought the destruction of the continental imperia of Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Adolf Hitler, but such an expansive claim would be only a partial truth. It would be more true to claim that superior sea power created the strategic conditions wherein the continental enemy would be likely to be defeated. British and later American sea power were literally vital for the defeat of Hitler's Germany. But that sea power and the land and air power which it both thrust ashore and (including the Soviet case) helped equip and feed were expressions of a fundamental economic strength for the conduct of war that dwarfed the defense economies of the Axis powers.

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Sea Power and Land Power: Cooperation and Antagonism

That sea power and land power are complementary is as obvious as that political rivalry between the leading sea power and the principal land power is seemingly perennial. In the essays published as *The Problem of Asia*, his most extensive commentary on the strategic relationship between the sea and the land, Mahan wrote that "the struggle [for the future of Asia] as arrayed will be between land power and sea power. The recognition that these two are the primary contestants does not ignore the fact that neither is a pure factor, but that each side will need and will avail itself, in degree, of the services of the other element; that is, the land power will try to reach the sea and to utilize it for its own ends, while the sea power must obtain support on land, through the motives it can bring to bear upon the inhabitants."[8]

The leading sea power and the principal land power have long sought both an effective monopoly of power in the environment most important to it, as well as some distractive power in the environment most natural to the other. The leading sea power is obliged to treat the greatest land power or coalition of land powers as a potentially deadly threat. The creation of what would amount to a single security community in continental Europe threatens the insular power with an enemy unfavorably disproportionate in resources. That continental empire could apply those resources to the creation of power at sea. In addition, great naval strength based on Eurasia would be suitably configured geostrategically for the global exercise of sea power. As Wolfgang Wegener, among other frustrated German navalists, came to recognize, sea power was a function of strategic geography, or position, as well as possession of a fleet.[9]

Following the theoretical path laid out by Mahan, Mackinder, and Nicholas Spykman,[10] not to mention four centuries of British, and later American, statecraft, George Liska has suggested persuasively that "The specific configuration of the Euro-Asian spectrum of types and sizes of territorial powers has given particular shape to a recurring pattern of rivalry of which the U.S.-Soviet conflict is but the latest manifestation. Each pitted insular against continental powers and each outcome contained the seeds of new conflict."[11]

Liska pointed to an ever-Eastward shift in the location of the "rear-continental" state, whose mission in (perhaps serendipitous) support of the sea power is both to provide distraction on land and, occasionally, the weight of land power necessary for victory against an aspiring land-power hegemon. In Anglo-American perspective, the principal rear-continental distractor-ally has been, successively, Burgundy (against France), Austria (against France), Prussia (against France), Russia (against Germany), and, in the 1970s and 1980s, China (against Russia). In the future, the distractor-ally may be Russia (against Europe) or

China (against a Greater Europe that includes Russia). The possibilities are not in short supply.

The threats posed by the leading sea power to the leading land power have typically been nowhere nearly as severe as vice versa. By its maritime mastery, Britain (and later the United States) threatened the financial and economic feasibility of schemes for continental-based imperium. Maritime blockade for financial effect was practicable and frequently effective from the late sixteenth century until Napoleon demonstrated in the early 1800s how to make war on land pay for itself. The continental powers of preindustrial Europe, however, could not be menaced at the core of their security by British sea power. This was not crippling, given that British policy in the eighteenth century did not seek the definitive ruin of continental foes. England's centuries-long bid for continental empire died with the close of the Hundred Years' War with France (1337–1457). Britain's great-power status in the classical age of sail rested initially upon the financial strength that accrued from overseas commerce and advanced institutions of public finance, and later upon her long lead in domestic manufacturing excellence and scientific agriculture. At the peak, or perhaps peaks, of her international standing—which is to say in the late 1700s and the 1810s—Britain aspired to be the decisive arbiter of European quarrels, the critical weight in the balance of power. Britain did not herself seek to be both dominant sea power and major land power; British resources in manpower would not allow pre-eminence at sea to be complemented by land forces on the continental scale triggered by the new nationalism of the era of the French Revolution. Moreover, British political culture was not tolerant of such an ambition, and the ruling class in the Britain of the Napoleonic Wars did not trust the masses sufficiently to be willing to risk the political consequences of a "nation in arms."

The present century has witnessed a good measure of that growth in the relative power of large continental states forecast by J.R. Seeley and Halford Mackinder.[12] From being the more or less agile "balancer" of the balance-of-power system, the leading Western sea power—Britain early in this century, the United States thereafter—has been compelled to become committed fixedly to one side of the balance as a permanent, indeed even principal, player.

A navy or an army can sustain the reality behind a tradition of excellence over several generations, but long periods of peace typically see the demise of expertise in land-sea (air and space) combined-arms planning—both in the small, at the level of conjunct amphibious raiding operations, and in the large, at the level of operational art and strategy. The problem can stem from far more than just the effect of a long peace. More to the point can be the harmful influence of past victory. As Arthur Marder notes, "armies and navies rarely learn from success."[13] The long-run reactions to the defeat of policy and grand strategy in Vietnam contributed massively to the operational, and hence strategic, effectiveness of

the U.S. armed forces in the 1990s. Every war is different in its details; but war, *qua* war, is an activity apart which has a unity across time, technology, and opponents.

An Enabling Agent

Because of strategic geography, the U.S. Army can engage in Eurasian continental campaigns only in the logistically expensive and inconvenient form of expeditionary warfare *overseas* (more or less eased by the prior presence of some, now rapidly diminishing, garrison forces and prepositioned equipment and supplies). The contribution that offensive action by naval power could make to a very large ground war can be difficult for the soldier to grasp. As a supremely strategic instrument, sea power provides benefit that may seem unduly remote to soldiers in immediate need of eminently tactical assistance. Action at sea, from Salamis, to Syracuse, to the Solomons, to the blockade of the Axis maritime supply route between Tunis and Sicily, can have immediate consequences for land warfare in so isolating enemy forces as to compel them to withdraw (if they are able), or even to cease resistance. But more often, naval action far out of sight of friendly land forces provides only indirect, *enabling* benefits to soldiers. Enemy initiatives by sea on a large scale are thereby precluded; friendly expeditions by sea become feasible; and enemy land and air deployments are dispersed to cover threats from the sea. But the final decision generally has to be enforced by the soldier on the ground.

A "law of the instrument" applies in warfare as in other human activities. A country whose long suit in defense is either land or sea power (with suitable air complements) is likely to seek such success as it can with that preferred instrument, even to the detriment of its overall performance in war. With the notable partial exception of her performance in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1713), Britain traditionally misused her army abominably. (That exception was attributable in good part to the genius and authority of John Churchill, later Duke of Marlborough, who doubled as commander in the field as well as de facto foreign minister.) Similarly, in her second hundred-year struggle with Britain, France repeatedly misused her often formidable naval power.

Statesmen frustrated in a search for political solutions to pressing problems can be unduly credulous over the prospective efficacy of military solutions. Also, statesmen whose military instrument of excellence is either maritime, continental, or aerial have been known to exaggerate the power of decision of that particular instrument. At the level of grand strategy, the pervasiveness of a continental or maritime cast in national strategic culture can promote serious misassessments of the quality of menace that the one kind of power ultimately poses to the other. The misassessment can take the form, for example, of

exaggeration of the power of decision in war of national or coalition land power over hostile land power; witness German optimism in 1914 and 1941. Also, the danger posed by unfinished military business on land together with an undefeated enemy across the sea tends to be underappreciated. Parallel misassessment can bedevil a dominant sea power. The fact that victory at sea is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for victory in war as a whole, can evade notice.

The pattern of rivalry in modern times between sea power and land power to which Mahan, Mackinder, and Liska have referred has been a pattern of antagonism linking the leading sea power and the leading land power. Understood more broadly, however, the natural relationship between sea and land power is more one of cooperation than of antagonism. Sea-power and land-power rivals need to be effective in the environment in which the principal rival is, or has been, supreme. In her struggles with Spain, France, and Germany, Britain and her contemporary rival sought in their distinctive ways to evade the necessity of facing the principal fighting strength of the enemy on its preferred terms, while still waging war to military advantage.

In modern times there has been a clearly discernible pattern of rivalry between the leading land power and the leading sea power—and this, repeatedly, in the face of the political and strategic reality that continental and maritime (and now air and space) strengths have an essentially complementary relationship. The series of sea power–land power rivalries has produced a pattern of maritime success. Command at sea, or at least a sufficiency of control, has enabled maritime powers to wage war as a whole more effectively than has command on land for continental states. Time and again, with only the details altering, superior strength at sea allowed first Britain, then the United States, so to structure a conflict, by way of continental allies acquired and subsidized and hostilities protracted, that systemic cumulative advantages were realized and exploited. As a general rule, the leading sea power understood clearly enough that maritime excellence worked as an enabling, not a war-concluding, agent.

Notes

1. See William James, *The Naval History of Great Britain* (London: Richard Bentley, 1847; first pub. 1822), v. 5, p. 215. Even this close a blockade did not preclude the sailing of individual ships.

2. Edward N. Luttwak, "Air Power in U.S. Military Strategy," Richard H. Shultz, Jr., and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., eds., *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, July 1992), p. 19. Also see Richard P. Hallion, *Storm over Iraq: Air Power in the Gulf War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); and John F. Jones, "Giulio Douhet Vindicated: Desert Storm 1991," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1992, pp. 97–101.

3. Insularity may be a literal geographical reality, as with Britain after her Scottish "back-door" problem ended in the 1740s, or with Venice. Also, insularity may be a strategic rather than a literal truth, as with the United States in this century. Finally, insularity may be contrived by engineering artifice, as was true for Athens and for the Dutch Republic.

4. Herbert Rosinski, *The Development of Naval Thought* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1977), p. 45.

5. See Holger H. Herwig, *"Luxury Fleet": The Imperial German Navy, 1888–1918* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980); Ivo Nocolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

6. In 1914 the German Navy shared with Britain's Royal Navy doctrinal fidelity to a notion of battle-fleet command of the sea. In 1939, pending the availability of a balanced fleet capable of challenging the Royal Navy for command of the sea, the German Navy was committed to the waging of a "tonnage war" against merchant shipping, to be conducted both by very powerful surface raiders and by submarines.

7. Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Norton, 1962). "What if the Great Continent, the whole World-Island [Europe, Asia, and Africa] or a large part of it, were at some future time to become a single and united base of sea-power? Would not the other insular bases be outbuilt as regards ships and outmanned as regards seamen?" (p. 70). This quotation, taken from the title essay, was first published in 1919.

8. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905; first pub. 1900), pp. 62–63.

9. Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989; first pub. 1929).

10. Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1970; first pub. 1942), and *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944).

11. George Liska, "From Containment to Concert," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1986, p. 9.

12. Mackinder, pp. 259–62. Writing in 1883, J.R. Seeley was fearful for maritime Britain's ability to compete with the rising power of the United States and Imperial Russia. He wrote that: "Between them [the United States and Russia], equally vast but not continuous, with the ocean flowing through it in every direction, lies like a world-Venice, with the sea for streets, Greater Britain." *The Expansion of England* (Illinois: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971; first pub. 1883), p. 227 (and see his concluding chapter, pp. 231–43).

13. Arthur J. Marder, "The Influence of History on Sea Power: The Royal Navy and the Lessons of 1914–1918," Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies in the Royal Navy in War and Peace* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), p. 57.

Ψ

This Issue's Cover

Two USS *Kitty Hawk* F-14 Tomcats fly sunset "touch-and-goes" in this dramatic painting by William S. Phillips entitled "Those Last Critical Moments." The aircraft approaching from the right, tailhook lowered, is lining up on the vertical red "drop lights" on the transom and also on the green "meatball" (visible between and slightly higher than the horizontal green "datums" forward on the flight deck, to the left). A-7 Corsairs and SH-3 Sea King helicopters are parked on deck. (Copyright, The Greenwich Workshop, Inc., Trumbull, Conn., (800) 243-4246; by permission.)