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Asia Policy, Number 12, July 2011, pp. 161-168 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2011.0018>



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Authors' Response: Varieties of Mahanian Experience

James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara

We are grateful that some of the top scholars on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invested their time in reviewing our book *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*. We address three cross-cutting themes from their essays before turning to specifics.

Inexorable Logic, (Mostly) Outdated Grammar

Bernard Cole laments our employing "Mahanian grammar" as a prism through which to examine Chinese sea power. This, he says, is "neither clear nor helpful" and even "misguided." This would be damning—except that Cole has misconstrued our argument by inverting it.

To review, our approach originates with Carl von Clausewitz, who penetratingly analyzes the relationship between statecraft and war. In *On War*, Clausewitz proclaims that war proceeds under a unique "grammar" of violent political intercourse that distinguishes it from peacetime diplomacy. At sea, this grammar governs fleet operations. Contrary to Cole's interpretation, however, we consider and explicitly discard the possibility that China draws meaningful guidance from Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings on operational and tactical matters (see pp. 7–11, 77–78, 84). Given that Mahan exhorts tacticians to clear vital waters of the enemy's flag, thereby seizing "command of the sea," Beijing must look elsewhere for specifics.

Nevertheless, time spent consulting Mahan is not time wasted. Clausewitz vouchsafes that the same higher-order "logic" of political purpose impels both peacetime endeavors and war. Our basic premise is that the Mahanian logic of commercial, political, and military access to important regions endures. However perishable Mahan's commentary on operations and tactics proved, his logic of sea power remains at once universal and inescapable. The Clausewitzian structure of our analysis is neither arcane nor especially complex. In essence, we maintain that seafaring states can pursue timeless Mahanian ends through non-Mahanian ways and means. The logic and

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NOTE ~ The views voiced here are those of the authors alone.

grammar of sea power, then, are not indivisible. Chinese thinkers reared on Maoist active defense rediscovered Mahan, in effect retrofitting his overarching strategic guidance to preexisting operational and tactical preferences.

Michael McDevitt protests that “smart people” can devise maritime strategies without Mahan’s help. Although this is certainly true, recall the words of the late Michael Handel, who averred that strategists can be Clausewitzian without reading Clausewitz. *On War* codifies logic and common sense yet remains a keen instrument for analyzing strategic questions. According to Dean Cheng, we contend that the discovery of Mahan caused China to turn seaward, in a kind of “Eureka!” experience. Far from it. We maintain that Beijing cast its attention seaward during the Deng Xiaoping years. As Chinese wealth and material strength started to match the country’s maritime aspirations a decade ago, Chinese strategists did what good strategists do. They investigated great works of strategic theory—works whose logic transcends time and technology.

In sum, one need not consult Mahan to be Mahanian, but it does spare smart Chinese people from reinventing the wheel. They see little need to try, judging from how often they invoke Mahanian logic.

Sea Power Is More than Fleets

McDevitt and Cheng seem to imply that we divorce fleet operations from shore support, slighting the joint dimension of sea power. This, however, is not the case. Sea power is more than naval power. Maritime forces include not only ships underway but land-based antiship missiles and combat aircraft flying from air fields ashore. Indeed, such a merger is central to what we call “fleet tactics with Chinese characteristics” (pp. 73–100). As we see it, the PLA is creating a two-tiered architecture of sea power. Chinese commanders are forging shore- and sea-based platforms and weaponry into a joint sea-denial capability. Once they have erected an effective PLA anti-access shield, the PLA Navy (PLAN) surface fleet—a viable “fortress fleet,” in Mahanian parlance—can roam Asian waters with impunity, backed by shore-based fire support.

Such grand sea-denial would exempt the PLAN from building symmetrically against the U.S. Navy, its chief rival. If access-denial measures can hold the U.S. fleet at bay, why bother planning to slug it out? It would doubtless break Mahan’s heart to see humdrum systems such as truck-launched missiles take primary responsibility for maritime defense, supplanting “capital ships.” Still, we doubt he would object to our analysis. His standard for command of the sea was to rid crucial expanses of enemy

fleets. If a seagoing state can meet this standard with relatively inexpensive land-based hardware, why not do so? McDevitt and Cheng are thus right to caution against reducing Chinese sea power to the PLAN fleet—although we protest our innocence!

There Is No Single Meaning of “Mahanian”

Our reviewers seemingly assume there is a single meaning of the word “Mahanian” and that we are hyping the Chinese nautical challenge by describing China as a Mahanian sea power. For them a Mahanian power apparently must boast a world-straddling fleet comparable to today’s U.S. Navy or, before U.S. maritime ascendancy, Great Britain’s Royal Navy. On the contrary, rising and established maritime powers—notably imperial Japan and imperial Germany, as well as Britain and the United States—have interpreted and applied Mahanian theory in many different ways. It could be argued that none of these powers, including the United States of Mahan’s own time, put his ideas into practice strictly as he intended.

During the 1890s, Mahan beseeched the United States to cast off its history of commerce raiding and coastal defense and construct a fleet able to defend the approaches to the isthmus against all likely comers. In short, he envisioned a locally dominant U.S. Navy, not the “navy second to none” built to prosecute World War I or the “two-ocean navy” bolted together for World War II. Still less did he counsel the U.S. leadership to outbuild the Royal Navy, wresting away global mastery for itself. Yet all these approaches to U.S. sea power went by the name Mahanian, as did the radically different strategies drawn up in London, Berlin, and Tokyo.

We liken China today to the United States in the 1890s. To our eyes, it is a rising sea power with grand ambitions in its home region and, increasingly, capabilities to match. In any case, we urge China watchers to strive for precision. Important terms such as Mahanian lose all meaning when deployed too cavalierly.

Odds and Ends

We now turn to specific comments from our interlocutors. In the remaining space available to us, we focus most of our attention on Bernard Cole’s review. Having mischaracterized our basic approach, he spends the balance of his review nitpicking away at the book. This warrants a detailed response lest readers assume we concede his points.

To begin with, he denies our claim that Chinese warships are “bristling” with offensive weaponry. This would come as news to U.S. or Japanese mariners who find themselves targets of the saturation antiship missile attacks on which Beijing has founded its anti-access strategy and around which it has designed its men-of-war. Offense is the heart of Maoist active defense (see p. 73ff.).

Cole questions our claim that Chinese leaders long dissembled about wanting aircraft carriers for the PLAN fleet. He opines that the purchase of the retired Australian flattop *Melbourne* during the “1970s” (1985, to be precise) constitutes evidence of the long-standing Chinese desire for carriers. We suppose that’s true in a vague sense, but studying old hulks is different from fielding operational carriers. Only in 2010 did Beijing officially confirm that it intends to put a working carrier fleet to sea, making the hypothetical real. That was our point, and it stands.

Turning to the Indian Ocean, Cole disputes our claim that Beijing has negotiated basing rights throughout the region. Yet “basing rights” can mean vastly different things. During the Cold War, U.S. agreements with host nations authorized everything from anchoring a submarine tender off Scotland to erecting massive installations at Yokosuka and Sasebo. China is not constructing its own Yokosuka at Gwadar or Hambantota. Indeed, we were among the first to question assumptions about a full-blown Chinese “string of pearls.”¹ Still, it is naïve to think that Beijing would bankroll port infrastructure at such sites without arranging some form of access for PLAN warships. In addition, Cole wrongly claims that we contend that India has never been conquered except from the sea. To the contrary, what we argue—alongside scholars such as K.M. Panikkar—is that mountain passes channeled, slowed, and moderated overland invasions, allowing Indian civilization to assimilate the invaders. British rule represented the sole exception to this pattern. This point is neither new nor especially controversial.

Cole waves aside chapter three without really addressing our comparison between China and imperial Germany. However, such comparisons are well-founded in international relations theory and commonplace among Western commentators like Henry Kissinger, not to mention among the Chinese themselves. There assuredly is value in comparing two rising economic and military powers whose emergence disrupted the international system around them, and who sought to make themselves into great sea powers. China is not

¹ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “China’s Naval Ambitions in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (June 2008): 367–94.

imperial Germany. We point that out ourselves (p. 72). We cannot, however, accept the view that history holds no lessons whatsoever.

Cole reports that chapter four starts with “another encomium to Mahan,” implying that this paean is ours. It is not. It comes from Chinese scholar Ni Lexiong and is clearly marked as such. Cole next argues strenuously against Ni, whose “encomium” maintains that “whoever could control the sea would win the war” (p. 77). Cole proffers the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) and the Battle of Midway (1942) as counterexamples to this principle. From the trivial observation that no single, discrete event decided the Napoleonic Wars or World War II, he concludes that “no major war has been decided by sea power alone.” He evidently believes this settles matters. This was a misguided choice of historical evidence, however, because Ni’s remark holds true for both conflicts. One battle decided neither war, but “whoever could control the sea” went on to win both wars. This round goes to Ni.

With regard to China’s burgeoning undersea nuclear deterrent, Cole observes that nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines (SSBN) based on Hainan Island would be unable to strike “most of the United States” from the South China Sea. Their missile range remains too short. But Beijing can deter the United States just as easily by menacing Honolulu and Guam as by menacing Washington. We point out, moreover, that Sanya offers Chinese boats ready egress into the Western Pacific. That would be doubly true should the mainland recover Taiwan, emplacing forces on the island to safeguard the passage of SSBNs into waters closer to the United States. In passing, furthermore, Cole faults us for overlooking the fact that China’s decrepit Xia-class SSBN never conducted a deterrent patrol. That fact, however, is noted on p. 144.

Cole’s review further takes us to task for neglecting to mention that a small PLAN task force circumnavigated the globe in 2003. This, he says, renders “problematic” our claim that the Chinese counterpiracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden “after December 2007” (this actually took place after December 2008) demonstrated capabilities that eluded the PLAN until recent years. But surely a veteran seaman like Cole knows that a single voyage—even a world cruise—is far different from mounting sustained operations that involve multiple flotillas’ performing convoy duty across a vast sea area, interacting with commercial shippers and other multinational forces, and honing tactics, techniques, and procedures seldom used before the mission. Oddly, after insisting that the 2003 cruise sped the PLAN along the learning curve, Cole reverses himself to dispute our guardedly upbeat view of Chinese mariners’ performance off Somalia. He takes refuge behind unnamed “senior

U.S. naval officers” who supposedly disagree. He should provide specifics. We know senior U.S. naval officers who tell a different tale.

Last, Cole notes that we praised Beijing for deft “soft-power” diplomacy. He then counters that Beijing vitiated its narrative in 2010 through rash words and deeds. However, we spotlighted the dangers that soft-power diplomacy entails for China, recounting how it fell on deaf ears among some audiences while setting a nearly unreachable standard for future Chinese conduct (pp. 172–78).

We agree wholeheartedly with McDevitt that China’s quest for sea power transcends the Taiwan imbroglio. This constitutes one of our central points. As we maintain, “China’s march to the seas will not end with Taiwan. Far larger forces are at work” (p. 11). A Taiwan contingency nevertheless remains a reasonable yardstick for both China’s anti-access strategy and the United States’ standing in Asia. If the U.S. Navy cannot enter an important combat theater, or if Washington is deterred from even making the attempt, then in what meaningful sense can we say (as does Robert Ross, to whose work McDevitt seems to allude) that the U.S. Navy remains dominant? The capacity to set the terms for U.S. entry is the true measure of Chinese anti-access strategy.

Zheng Wang is right to exhort analysts to uphold rigor when surveying Chinese open-source literature. Analysts should never ask more of the sources than they can actually deliver. His critique of our research methodology misfires, however. We sample the literature far more widely than Wang seems prepared to admit. Beyond what he dubs “popular Chinese magazines” (more on this below), we assess official sources, military outlets, reputable academic journals, and authoritative technical periodicals. We liberally cite *China’s National Defense*, *Science of Military Strategy*, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, *China Military Science*, *Liberation Army Daily*, *People’s Navy*, *Peace and Development*, *Contemporary International Relations*, and *Winged Missiles*. Curiously enough, Wang overlooks the fact that the sources of which he approves lavish as much praise on Mahan as the outlets he denigrates.

We do not, as Wang implies, claim that the military journals reflect policy. Indeed, we explicitly acknowledge that these sources do not enjoy official sanction (p. xi). Furthermore, Wang, like Cole, mischaracterizes how we use specialized military periodicals. We did not consult these sources for what Wang delicately calls “inside information”—the anonymous, supposedly authoritative personal contacts that are common currency among China specialists. Instead, we carefully vetted hundreds of Chinese articles to discern how analysts perceive foreign navies and the PLAN. We rigorously tested these

works to determine whether they manifest independence and originality. The works we cited passed these tests with flying colors. We also took pains to identify Chinese misperceptions (p. 110). Investigating a wider swathe of the literature, moreover, helps capture China's national strategic mood toward sea power, whereas official sources reveal little about the zeitgeist. Constricting our inquiry would amount to self-induced myopia.

In our extensive survey of the literature, we were continually impressed with the savvy demonstrated by Chinese writers. These are no amateur enthusiasts. They supply a wealth of accurate data and informed speculation comparable, if not superior, to commentary in the West. In this context, we are puzzled by Wang's objections to our comparison with the U.S. Naval Institute's journal *Proceedings*, which is no front of the U.S. Navy. Quality of thought, not government affiliation, is the yardstick for gauging rigor. Accordingly, such a parallel is entirely fitting. More importantly, if Wang is so unhappy with the purported failings of these writings, he should specify how they err. He offers not one example of how the sources we cited were factually incorrect or analytically unsound.

We concur with Wang that "military doctrine should be placed within the wider context of China's grand strategy." Focusing tightly on grand strategy, however, yields limited insight into the intersection of PLA strategy and operations, which is the focus of our study. Wang's research standard would require foreign scholars to deduce U.S. military doctrine and tactics from National Security Strategy documents—documents couched in platitudes and banalities. The findings from such a project would elicit giggles. Finally, we disagree with Wang that economic development and military build-ups are mutually exclusive. This is a narrow, if not wrongheaded, conception of grand strategy.

If Wang and like-minded China watchers had their way about research on Chinese sources, policymakers would heed advice only from people who appear graced with "the ability to interpret Communist Party literature as a basic skill." This smacks of intellectual gatekeeping. As new sources—and those able to exploit them—proliferate, China watchers' monopoly on interpretation of Chinese thinking will erode further. Specialists ought to welcome alternative voices, if indeed they believe that policymakers benefit from more—and increasingly varied—perspectives to inform decisions. Wang's closed-shop mentality is unpromising.

Finally, Rory Medcalf wishes we had given our book a more "Indo-Pacific" flair. Point taken. His review reminds us that Asian states afford the rise of China far closer scrutiny than audiences in the United States and the

West have given it. Asians can hardly do otherwise, since geography has situated them—like the weaker states bordering imperial Germany—near a rising power whose future direction remains unclear. They cannot neglect a potential challenge of this magnitude. As Medcalf concedes, moreover, we have hardly remained silent about Indian Ocean affairs.² He is quite right that we are starting to grapple with the mechanics of Chinese maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean. Some of this work is now seeing print, and we look forward to heeding his and McDevitt's advice to expand our research now that we have ventured some analysis of the challenge cited in the subtitle of our book.³ *Red Star over the Pacific* is a way station, not the final stop. ◆

² James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2009).

³ See for instance James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "U.S. Navy's Indian Ocean Folly?" *Diplomat*, January 4, 2011; and James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Mao's 'Active Defense' Is Turning Offensive," *Proceedings*, 137, no. 4 (April 2011): 24–29.