

China's current Naval Strategy in the East Sea through Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power

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Abstract: *The article provides a perspective of the East Sea in China's naval strategy through Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power - naval historian of United States. In addition, some new viewpoints have been offered from the current international conditions, which mainly focus on scientific and technical factors, the international context as well as new tactics. On that basis, it points out new geostrategic points to better clarify China's intentions in the East Sea.*

Keywords: East Sea, China, Naval Strategy, Theory of Sea Power, Alfred T. Mahan

1. The importance of studying Mahan in the East Sea

Studying the theory of sea power by Alfred Thayer Mahan is necessary to better understand the actions of the Chinese navy in the East Sea for the three following reasons:

First, Mahan studies the rise of the leading maritime powers in history, typically the Netherlands, Spain, France, and Great Britain. In his famous work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (1660-1783),

Mahan explains why Portugal and Spain declined and were replaced by England and the Netherlands. Mahan points out the geographical, national, or governmental features that made Britain and the Netherlands powerful and influential maritime powers. This is one of the great

lessons for China when it wants to become a maritime power.

Second, China - a continental power with the growing economic and military power in the Western Hemisphere, through its policies, aspires to become the leading maritime power. In recent years, China has become very dependent on the sea, especially for trade and energy (Manhas, 2021: 8-9). In 2013, during a meeting with the Central Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: "seas and oceans play an increasingly important role in the economic development of the country and the advancement of the nation" and "China needs to intensify the development of advanced maritime technology with the aim of turning the country into a maritime power" (Xinhuanet, 2013).

Third, Mahan's view was relatively influential in China, dating back to the 1980s. The Vice-Commander of the PLA Navy, Liu Huaqing, then was one of the pioneers who applied Mahan's thinking to build China's naval strategy. According to Chan (2021: 41, 43), "Mahanism" is not only a strategy to help a country navigate the sea, but also a set of policies that encourage Beijing to command the sea by controlling the important sea lanes. Mahan's influence is particularly strong and enjoys great support from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), and has grown and mutated over the past 40 years, becoming one of the most influential thinkers. Moreover, as mentioned, Mahan's thought is compatible with Xi Jinping's views on the policies of building a strong military force with the ability to fight and win.

2. Sea power in Mahan's theory

Mahan's theory of sea power was applied to explain the rise of marine powers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. He divided economic, social and geographical characteristics into six main components¹, which are considered as factors that help determine whether a country is a maritime power or not.

However, Mahan's theoretical system not only deals with the elements of sea power,

but also discusses ways to help maintain and deploy power at sea, including: (the command of the sea), refers to military elements and "the use of the sea", directs attention to economic factors. Both of these ways complement and support each other, giving a country full tools to assert its maritime power. However, the focus is still on the "command of the sea", as Mahan (2013: 37) asserts: "flashes may change for different reasons, but it is ultimately command of the sea". Sea control is the duty of the navy, "not that the capture of a few individual ships or cargo ones of large numbers can shake the national power, but the overwhelming superiority over adversaries on the surface of the sea be able to drive away the enemy fleet or just allow them to appear as fleeing" (Mahan, 2013: 18).

The first factor to have the "command the sea" is that a country must build a *strong navy*. Throughout his writings, Mahan emphasizes the role of naval forces and naval strategy. In other words, Mahan's system of theories revolved around the use of the navy to protect the commercial and economic interests of the nation: "The aim of naval strategy is to establish, support and augment the maritime power of a country, both in peacetime and in war," (Mahan, 2013: 61). In summary, a country with maritime power will become a powerful nation, and a country's maritime power is mainly focused on manifesting through naval power, that is, the military aspect of the right of full command of the sea.

The second factor mentioned by Mahan is that the navy must always keep *an*

¹ including: (i) favorable geographical position across the sea to the world; (ii) favorable terrain with many ports and rivers flowing into the sea; (iii) inhabited territory distributed along the coast; (iv) relatively large population and suitable for ocean-oriented thinking; (v) the entire population must have aspirations and needs for maritime trade; (vi) the government must have the determination and appropriate policy to develop the maritime power for its country (Mahan, 2013: 75).

offensive tendency. It is also because of this trend that many later blue-water navies in the world, including the US, have ignored the defensive tendency, such as protecting commercial fleets or anti-torpedo defense systems. According to Mahan, coastal defense is a defensive element, while naval forces must be used offensively (Crowl, 1986: 458-59). For Mahan (1911:153), being stationed only in the port for defensive duties caused the power of an entire fleet to be wasted, and at the same time affected the morale and skills of sailors. The navy then gave up its strengths: "A navy that is only for defense is completely unprincipled, the very characteristic feature of a navy is mobility, while passive defense is to stand still" (Mahan, 1911: 132).

The third element of the means of increasing the sea control is *the capture of colonies abroad*. Colonies both play an important role in helping the country "exploit the sea", and can also help the navy strengthen "command of the sea". Colonies created shelters and resupply points for flotillas of merchant ships or warships operating long time at sea. In addition, according to Mahan (2013: 68), "rest stops" sometimes carry "defense and warfare purposes", acting as "strategic vital positions". It can be said that when a country's naval and commercial power spreads throughout the seas of the world, the establishment of a colony is obvious. Colonies and strategic nodes make it easier for navies to control important sea lanes, thereby fully controlling the sea surface.

China interprets Mahan's above argument in its own way. The artificial islands

that China has reclaimed in Vietnam's Spratly archipelago demonstrate that: through the "de facto" occupation of strategic nodes, with gray zone tools, it can have complete command of the sea. In addition, the current concept of "debt-trap diplomacy"¹ can also help China own overseas territories and ports in the form of long-term leases. This is highly dual-use, serving both oceangoing economic purposes and military purposes.

3. The East Sea in China's new naval strategy

Throughout history from 1978 to the present, China's naval strategy has undergone two changes. The first was the change from the strategy of "near-coast defense" to "near-seas active defense" in the mid-1980s and then in the mid-2000s came to "far-seas operations" where "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD) was the transition period between the old and new strategies. (See: Rice & Robb, 2021: 3-4). The concept of "near seas" includes important sea areas such as the Yellow Sea, the East Sea (South China Sea) and East China Sea.

The PLA Navy has developed two different but closely related terms: the first is *haiquan* (海权 - maritime rights and interests) and the second is *haifang* (海防 - maritime defense) (Fravel and Lieberman, 2011: 42). While the first term emphasizes legal and

¹ See more about "debt-trap diplomacy" at: Brahmah Challeney (2017), "China's Debt Trap Diplomacy", *Project Syndicate*, January 23, 2017; Vietnamese translation: "Chiến lược ngoại giao 'bẫy nợ' của Trung Quốc", translated by Trinh Ngoc Thao, <http://nghiencuuquocte.org/2017/03/09/chien-luoc-ngoi-giao-bay-no-cua-trung-quoc/>, accessed 11 October 2021.

economic interests, the second one focuses on military and defense. Today, these elements have been expanded to include international shipping routes and the ones in international waters. The *haifang* element was also conceptually expanded in the mid-1990s. According to Chinese scholars, the country should no longer consider the surrounding seas as a mere “moat” being used to protect Mainland China, but should extend its influence in further seas, may be beyond the first island chain (Zhao & Zhang, 2019: 240-244). Therefore, the role of the navy in safeguarding the Chinese economy is extended not only in coastal areas, but also in larger maritime areas such as disputed island groups, exclusive economic zones, and important sea lanes for the Chinese economy. Mahan (2013: 68) argues that: “...the necessity of a navy, in the narrow sense of the word, derives from the existence of a freighter civilian craft tier and will disappear if people do not use sea transport any longer”.

“*Far sea warfare*” inherits and expands some contents of “*active defense in the near seas*”, typically two geographical concepts “*the first island chain*” extending from Japan (the islands in the south such as Okinawa, Senkaku) through Taiwan, the Philippines and completely covering the East Sea and the “*the second island chain*” extending from the Japanese archipelago, passing through the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the island nation of Micronesia, Palau and south down to the Indonesian island of Borneo. These two concepts were first introduced in the mid-1980s in the writings of Deng Xiaoping and Liu Huaqing (According to: Li, 2011:

116). So far, the strategic value of these two island chains remains unchanged. “*Far sea warfare*” requires building a powerful Chinese navy capable of operating in the sea areas beyond “the first island chain” and approach close to the outer edge of “the second island chain”, even further: a vast expanse of sea extending from the northwestern of the Pacific Ocean to the eastern of the Indian Ocean (Rice & Robb, 2021: 3).

The element of mastering of the sea by Mahan is better understood through the analysis of the development of China’s naval strategy, especially the strategy of “active defense in the near seas”. Naval investment in China is growing rapidly. Since 1988-2015, China’s defense budget has increased by more than double digits every year. In 2021, the defense budget growth slowed down but still reached over 209 billion USD, ranking second in the world after the US (Reuters, 2021). The modernization of the Chinese navy has made this force mature in both quality and quantity. By the end of 2020, the Chinese navy owns about 360 warships of all kinds, and this number is forecast to surpass the US, not in the far future. China is improving the quality of its weapons, focusing on anti-surface warfare with destroyers, cruisers and missile submarines that can strike beyond the horizon (US Congressional Research Service, 2022). In addition, the anti-aircraft and anti-submarine capabilities, which are a weak point of the Chinese navy, are also being gradually improved. Currently, China has the ability to conduct intelligence, reconnaissance and information warfare operations at a four-dimensional scale

(space, air, sea and underwater) thanks to the A2/AD and underwater network system that are installed around island points in the East Sea (Dahm, 2020). Not to mention that China also uses unmanned equipment. As for small countries with medium military potential, China has adopted drastic and powerful aggression measures, and Vietnam is one of them. Accordingly, Beijing forcibly occupied the whole Paracel Islands (1974), as well as a number of shoals in the Spratly archipelago (1988) of Vietnam with the aim of controlling a very important part of in “the first island chain”. This is the first step in a sequence of actions aimed at capturing strategic nodes, or in other words, occupying strategic positions within the “first island chain” area. Besides, a tactic that China has applied frequently in recent times is the “cabbage strategy”. This strategy uses many different classes of ships with the goal of “strawberry-eating silkworms” strategy towards the sovereignty of other countries in dispute: the first class is the fishing boats, the second is the paramilitary ships of the maritime law enforcement forces of civilian agencies and finally professional naval forces. The “cabbage strategy” together with A2/AD have helped China more effectively control its sovereignty as well as strategic knots such as Vietnam’s Paracel or Spratly archipelagoes in the southern region of “the first island chain”.

The launching of the first aircraft carrier also partly accomplishes that goal, when Liaoning itself was assigned to the South China Sea Fleet in charge of the East Sea. However, only the Liaoning aircraft carrier (or later on the Shandong aircraft carrier)

is not enough, “*active defense in the near seas*” requires the PLA Navy to establish naval bases or “naval cities” to maintain logistics as well as to ensure operations for small-scale combat groups. This is ensured by building onshore or offshore naval bases capable of command-and-control, active defense, stationing and anchoring, providing technical support or even entertaining the soldiers (Li, 2011: 130). These bases play a significant role in ensuring the maintenance of a long and extensive control capacity throughout the waters of “the first island chain” and serve as the basis for the PLA Navy to expand into “the second island chain”.

“The second island chain”, which basically extends from Japan to the south through Guam and towards the island of New Guinea, is seen as the “threshold point” within which the PLA Navy protects important economic and political centers on the continent, as well as to monitor and restrain the activities of hostile navies. Thus, the waters between the first island chain and the second one are crucial for shaping the depth of maritime strategic defense, as well as forming a long-range operating space for the PLA Navy (You, 2016) : 13). The recent emergence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean region shows that China is viewing the sea as increasingly strategically important, where the PLA Navy appears to be establishing forward bases, as well as the ability to deploy long-range forces. For China, the Indian Ocean lies in the “far seas” region, where the PLA Navy plays a role in protecting trade routes and energy transportation vital to the Chinese economy (You, 2016: 13).

The recent implementation of China's "islandization" campaign in Vietnam's Spratly archipelago, if placed in the above context, will become strategically clearer. The construction of inhabited bases, which can allow aircraft to take off and land on long runways like on land, brings a huge control advantage to the PLA Navy in the southern part of the East Sea. China has completed the expansion and upgrading of all seven geographical features it occupies in Vietnam's Spratly archipelago (including: Ga Ven, Tu Nghia, Gac Ma, Chau Vien, Chu Thap, Vanh Khan and Su Bi). The most significant goal of the "islandization" strategy is to help China control most of the strategic points and turn them into logistics hubs and bases for effective power placement.

China's naval strategy, especially the "active defense in the near seas" one, bears some fundamental elements of the Mahan doctrine. *First*, the Chinese navy's mission has been expanded, from coastal protection to the near seas protection, towards the protection safeguarding of sea trade routes. In other words, there is a close relationship between maritime trade and naval forces as mentioned by Mahan. *Second*, in order to ensure the implementation of its strategic goals, the Chinese navy, especially the South China Sea fleet, has been modernized in terms of tactics and weapons. *Third*, China's current near seas strategy in the East Sea, as analyzed above, is to gain complete command in practice, especially in the Spratly area of Vietnam and the southern part of the East Sea. However, it is obvious that Mahan's theory has not been able to fully explain what China is doing today.

Conclusion

It is clearly noticed the influence of Mahan's theory of sea power at the strategic level on China through the moves and policies that the country is deploying, not only in the East Sea but also throughout the waters of the Indo-Pacific region. With the ambition to become a maritime power, China has adopted Mahan's view as the foundation to help the Chinese navy set the mindset for its entire naval strategy in the Western Pacific, including the East Sea. Mahan's views on the importance of the navy; on the relationship between geography, navy and commerce; the concept of the "command of the sea" or "use of the sea" has been concretized by China through the process of naval modernization, through the control of the near seas as well as through the actual actions of Beijing in recent years.

China inherits and adjusts Mahan's strategic thinking to achieve its set goals. Through various tactics, the country can both ensure that it maintains its position in the existing international order system without being too constrained, and it can also expand its influence and control of the sea within the "first island chain". Unlike Mahan's 'offensive tendency' which was also the dominant thinking in the naval strategy of the empires of the twentieth century, the 'cabbage strategy' pursued by China focuses on the elements of "gray area". Moving forward, targeting points that have not been resolved by international law as well as by regional institutions, China has succeeded in ensuring that it holds strategic nodes in the East Sea without waging a "decisive battle" as Mahan always insisted.

The second distinction that China is promoting is also a feature of the current international system: economic and institutional power. The present great power competition is no longer simply a competition of hard power, typically naval power, as in the twentieth century. Globalization and the process of economic integration create new attractive forces in the international system, turning the economy and institutions into new tools to help great powers achieve their goals. The Great Belt and Road (BRI) project, in which the maritime Silk Road sub-component, builds on China's economic and financial might, creates a new way for the country to control the geographical elements. In other words, the BRI helps China reach strategic nodes, not through "gunboat diplomacy" but through "debt-trap diplomacy."

The last factor to be considered is science and technology, an ever-changing one. For example, the arrival of submarines and aircraft radically changed the way naval forces waged war at sea. The submarine force and naval air force will make encirclement or attack more flexible and diverse, of course, it will not change the important role of surface warships. The development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) or robotic technology made the US study a separate theory for this issue. China's maturity in establishing surveillance, control, communication, command and control equipment in the East Sea helps it prevail on the information and maritime awareness front (Dahm, 2020). The importance of the strategic tenets addressed by Mahan remains unchanged.

But the individual tactics for achieving strategic goals will change, with the pace of campaign deployment much faster than in Mahan's time. In the East Sea, this is a crucial factor to be considered when planning any naval strategy. This makes technology an integral element in shaping the appropriate naval strategy □

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