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### Alfred Thayer Mahan, geopolitician

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# Alfred Thayer Mahan, Geopolitician

JON SUMIDA

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) of the US Navy wrote books and articles that established his reputation as the leading naval historian and strategist of his generation. Mahan owed his fame to the appeal of his major propositions about navies and international relations. The first was that maritime commerce was essential to the economic prosperity of a great power. The second was that the best means of protecting one's own trade while interdicting the enemy's was to deploy a fleet of battleships capable of maintaining naval supremacy, the corollary of which was that a commerce-raiding strategy executed by cruisers was incapable of inflicting decisive injury. The third was that a nation with naval supremacy could defeat a country that was militarily pre-eminent. Many interpreted these arguments as tantamount to the contention that naval supremacy was the prerequisite to ascendancy in the world political order.

Mahan's ideas about sea power, which among other things dealt with the inter-connectedness of force, economics, and geography, have prompted considerable discussion of the relationship of his work to geopolitics. These inquiries, however, have been based on the assumption that Mahan's views were simple and thus easy to understand. Consensus about Mahan's thought was embodied in substantial scholarly monographs, whose conclusions seemed to be consistent with impressions that could be derived from the reading of both small and large samples of his writing. Confidence in the validity of the standard view was virtually absolute. Recent comprehensive and systematic examination of Mahan's many books, however, has revealed that his ideas about navies and nations were far more complex and sophisticated than had been thought to be the case. Indeed, what Mahan

actually wrote about some important things was practically the opposite of what he was believed to have written.

The revisionist case was presented by the author of the present piece in *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered*, a monograph published in 1997.<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose of this essay is to examine the question of Mahan and geopolitics in light of certain findings of this book. It will thus survey previous studies of Mahan and geopolitics, provide a summary of the latest revisionist analysis of relevant portions of Mahan's work, and consider the implications of the new scholarship.

The main arguments are that Mahan's views on the importance of good political and naval leadership counter-balanced his remarks on the significance of geography, his unit of political analysis in so far as sea power in the twentieth century was concerned was a trans-national consortium rather than the single nation state, his economic ideal was free trade rather than autarchy, and his recognition of the influence of geography on strategy was tempered by a strong appreciation of the power of contingency to affect outcomes.

Prior to 1914, the popularity of Mahan's ideas about sea power and national greatness was in large part attributable to the widespread belief that the historical arguments that supported them were sound. During the First World War, however, encounters between groups of surface capital ships were few and indecisive, while submarine attacks on maritime communications brought Britain to the brink of defeat, which seemed to refute Mahan's argument that battlefleet action and not commerce raiding should be the basis of naval strategy. In addition, the enormous scale and intensity of land combat as compared with the relative inactivity of major naval forces, and the near victory of Germany as a result of military success on the continent, raised doubts about the validity of Mahan's contention that sea power was superior to land power. But although the persuasiveness of his particular analysis was diminished, the example of its grand strategic breadth, together with the work of Halford Mackinder, influenced Karl Haushofer.

In the concluding paragraphs of her essay on Mahan in the classic anthology *Makers of Modern Strategy* of 1941, Margaret Tuttle Sprout<sup>2</sup> maintained that 'no estimate of the influence of Mahan on military thought could be complete without mention of the part played by Mahan's theories in the development of German *Geopolitik*'. German geopoliticians, she noted, 'frequently expressed their admiration for Mahan, whose global philosophy was built on a scale more grandiose and more audacious than

any European expansionist theories of his day'.<sup>3</sup> Sprout furthermore observed that the 'new German approach to statecraft comprises a theory of state power and growth built on expanding land power, roughly analogous to Mahan's philosophy of growing sea power'.<sup>4</sup> She then quoted the US political scientist Robert Strausz-Hupé's contention that the teachings of Haushofer, the leading German geopolitical theorist, had been prompted as a reaction to Mahan, being 'the most extreme negation of Mahan's theories'.<sup>5</sup>

William E. Livezey, in his literary biography of Mahan published in 1947, devoted a great deal of attention to the connections between Mahan and geopolitics. 'As expositor of sea power', he observed,

Mahan was a geopolitical thinker long before that expression was coined; as espouser of sea power, Mahan was the precursor of Halford Mackinder, analyst exceptional of the forthcoming role of land power; as exponent of sea power, Mahan was the preceptor of Karl Haushofer, advocate extraordinary of depth in space, *lebensraum*, and land empire.

Livezey then provided a list of the specific aspects of Mahan's thought that were related to the central concerns of geopolitics. 'Mahan's sea-power doctrine', he maintained

polarized a set of historical data concerning the role of the sea in its relation to national well-being. As he viewed the constituent elements affecting power on the sea, he discussed geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, number of population, character of people, and character of government. In the creation of national greatness as connected with sea power, he saw industry, markets, [merchant] marine, navy, and bases closely related and theoretically, at least, in that sequence.<sup>6</sup>

For Livezey, the association of Mahan and the proponents of geopolitics was pejorative. The unprecedented misery inflicted by the Second World War and the prospects of even worse to follow, he believed, invalidated any body of work that advocated or even accepted the necessity of national expansion through resort to force of arms. 'The doctrines of power and empire as enunciated by Mahan and his school of thought', Livezey declared

have not proved sound as a basis for international action. The adherents of power politics have led the world to the brink of disaster;

the proponents of unrestricted national sovereignty have brought civilisation to near destruction; the exponents of empire, whether their concept be that of master race or white man's burden, have half the world seething in revolt.<sup>7</sup>

The characterisation of Mahan and Mackinder as the major proponents of geopolitics was the theme of an entire chapter in Harold and Margaret Sprout's *Foundations of International Politics*, which was published in 1962. The couple conceded that Mahan never provided 'any neat exposition' of his geopolitical ideas and that to identify them required a reconstruction based upon 'bits and pieces, plucked from hastily written books and articles'.<sup>8</sup> 'Four geopolitical concepts underlie Mahan's thinking about international politics', they maintained, which were

- (1) a continuous and unbroken ocean and connecting seas;
- (2) a vast transcontinental, nearly landlocked state, the Russian Empire, extending without a break from the ice-bound Arctic to the rugged desert-mountain belt of inner Asia, and from eastern Europe to a point farther eastward than Japan;
- (3) the maritime states of continental Europe and maritime borderlands of southern and eastern Asia; and
- (4) the insular states, Great Britain and Japan, with which he also grouped the United States, all wholly disconnected from the mainland of Eurasia.<sup>9</sup>

The Sprouts believed that the forms of geopolitical analysis practiced by Mahan and Mackinder were 'built upon pretty much the same set of geographic features',<sup>10</sup> and that in particular, Mahan's arguments of 1900 about the dangers posed by an expansionist Russia 'clearly anticipated Mackinder's concept of the Eurasian "Heartland"'.<sup>11</sup> As did Livezey before them, the couple criticised both men and their followers for assuming that 'military wars determine, in the final reckoning, the ordering of influence and deference in the Society of Nations'.<sup>12</sup>

The condemnation of Mahan and Mackinder on essentially anti-militarist grounds was a reaction to the devastation of the Second World War and the belief that geopolitical modes of thought had been in part responsible for the aggressive policies of National Socialist Germany and Imperial Japan. Haushofer and his followers, whose ties to the Hitler regime were direct, were consigned to oblivion after 1945. The German school of geopolitics was the subject of an entire chapter in *Makers of Modern Strategy*,<sup>14</sup> but in the almost completely revised edition of this work of 1986,

it was not only omitted, but no mention is made anywhere in the volume of Haushofer or even Mackinder. Mahan was not directly tainted by the war and was too important a figure to be ignored, but the new chapter on his writing did not discuss the relationship of the American naval strategic theorist to geopolitics.<sup>15</sup>

Livezey and the Sprouts, while recognizing that there were major differences between Mahan and Mackinder, emphasized the importance of areas of agreement. For Mahan's work, the consequence of this approach was damage by way of association with a pariah field. An alternative treatment was to portray the ideas of Mahan and Mackinder as being diametrically opposed, a mode of discourse, however, that exposed Mahan's reputation to perils of another sort. In the Wiles Lectures of 1964, G. S. Graham characterised the views of the two men on the relative value of sea and land power as opposite, although only briefly and in passing.<sup>16</sup> A decade later, the contrast between Mahan and Mackinder was the main theme of a long essay by Paul Kennedy published by the German military history journal *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*.<sup>17</sup> Kennedy then expanded this provocative piece into his seminal book *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, which appeared in 1976.<sup>18</sup>

Kennedy did not put forward new interpretations of either Mahan or Mackinder. What he did do was compare what were generally believed to be the salient arguments of the two writers with respect to the relative value of sea and land power, and evaluate their applicability to the history of Britain in the twentieth century. For Kennedy, Mahan was a proponent of sea power as an independent variable, that is, naval supremacy was the source of economic preeminence, which meant that so long as Britain ruled the waves, wealth greater than that of any other nation would follow. The essence of Mackinder, according to Kennedy, was that sea power was a dependent variable of declining significance, which he expressed in the form of two propositions: 'Britain's naval power, rooted in her economic strength, would no longer remain supreme when other nations with greater resources and manpower overhauled her previous industrial lead' and 'sea power itself was waning in relation to land power'.<sup>19</sup> The naval and economic decline of Britain over the twentieth century in spite of her position of naval pre-eminence at the beginning enabled Kennedy to conclude that Mackinder's analysis, from the standpoint of prediction, had been proven correct, while that of Mahan discredited.

The force of Kennedy's reasoning was persuasive and its effect considerable and far-reaching. The classic status of Mahan's books had given simple-minded navalism a degree of intellectual respectability, an effect that

evaporated when exposed to the heat of Kennedy's clear and vigorous exposition. Kennedy's approach expanded the discussion of national policy and strategy by addressing questions related to the economic underpinnings of modern military and naval institutions, and the geographical context of strategy, as well as force structure and their deployment. In particular, industrial policy and state finance emerged as critical variables, and because relatively little was known about their particulars and larger effects, Kennedy's work prompted many to undertake the study of these subjects, the result of which is a large and still growing body of scholarship that has transformed the study of foreign policy and war.

But if the earlier repudiation of geopolitical discourse after the Second World War had damaged Mahan's standing, exacerbating injury inflicted already by the First World War, Kennedy's rehabilitation of geopolitics by way of championing Mackinder's assessment of the role of geography in international relations still left Mahan at the margins of serious discussion. Tainted by connections to a suspect body of thought before, he remained condemned even after geopolitics had been exonerated because unfavorable evaluation of what was believed to be his basic concept had been used as a means of securing the exculpation. Both forms of injury, that is, guilt by association with wrongheadedness or guilt by wrongheadedness alone of a different sort, were based upon the conventional view of Mahan as an essentially narrow and inflexible determinist whose main analytical focus had been upon the rise of British sea power. Consideration of how this mistaken set of ideas became accepted is a necessary preliminary to the examination of Mahan's actual thoughts on sea power and twentieth century international relations.

The conflation of separate arguments that to Mahan were related but still different in important ways was probably the original source of major misunderstanding of his work. Mahan's serious historical writing was concerned with, among other things, the development of British naval supremacy in the later years of the age of sail, while many of his occasional short pieces, as well as the serious histories, called for the construction of a large American battlefleet and overseas territorial expansion. Readers who combined these juxtaposed themes could easily conclude that Mahan believed the achievement of naval supremacy was the prerequisite to international preeminence in the twentieth century, and furthermore that this was his goal for the United States.

Mahan was not only concerned with grand strategy, but also the nature of command. His considerations of both subjects were interweaved in his texts, and thus discussions of 'principle conditions' of geography or

'immutable principles' of strategy, though in fact distinct lines of inquiry that were handled with nuance and care for exception, were taken as indicators of a generally absolutist and determinist approach to history.

Correcting misunderstandings generated by casual or incomplete engagement with Mahan's writing by comprehensive and careful study, however, posed a formidable challenge because of the volume, difficulty, diversity, and changeableness of his output. Between 1883 and 1913, Mahan wrote 19 books, three of which were two volume sets; to read them all, allowing for differences in page size and fonts, requires the negotiation of some 5,000 pages of fine print. Mahan's desire to achieve precision through close reasoning and careful qualification meant that his presentation of argument was often convoluted and hard to follow. Eight of Mahan's books were anthologies of periodical articles or lectures, which had covered a wide range of subjects in order to meet the demands of the reading and listening public. And not surprisingly, during a serious and prolific writing career of nearly a quarter of a century, he changed his mind or inadvertently contradicted himself.

The task of producing a satisfactory overview of Mahan's writing defied even the efforts of the author. His *Naval Strategy* (1911), an attempt in old age to write a coherent analytical summary of his ideas, exhausted his body and depressed his spirit. It was, in Mahan's own opinion, the worst book he ever wrote,<sup>20</sup> his infirmity compromising complete and profound knowledge of his own works. Subsequent writers wrote in their prime, but either approached their subject with less than complete reading of Mahan's publications, inadequate methodology, or strong agendas. The essays in both editions of *The Makers of Modern Strategy* are supported by citations from no more than half of Mahan's books, while the Sprout essay in the *Foundations of International Politics* drew from only a fifth of the total. Mahan's main biographers, W. D. Puleston,<sup>21</sup> Livezey, and Robert Seager,<sup>22</sup> appear to have read all the books, but split their attention, simultaneously addressing the questions of text, context, and their relationship, an approach that in all three cases worked to the disadvantage of rigorous engagement with the form and substance of the writing. Seager's account, in addition, while highly informative, is suffused with personal *animus* against Mahan, which affected his judgments of his subject's work.

In 1989, Colin Gray argued that 'a reconsideration of Mahan is overdue'.<sup>23</sup> During 1995 and 1996, the author of the present essay, under the auspices of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, was able to devote a full year to a systematic reconsideration of all of Mahan's books, prompted by his own misgivings

about the basic accuracy of the existing interpretation of Mahan's writing, and knowledge that these doubts were shared by others. The goal of the inquiry was to answer two fundamental questions: did Mahan's books at any level represent a coherent body of thought, and if so, what was its nature?

To accomplish this, the descriptive analysis of *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command* was limited to Mahan's consideration of the two large phenomenon mentioned in the title, excluding for the most part his commentary on secondary matters such as racism, imperialism, militarism, Social Darwinism, diplomacy, and international law. The examination of Mahan and geopolitics does not require discussion of command, making it possible to deal with grand strategy alone, which is of central importance to the matter at hand, without recourse to the formal analytical apparatus used in the book.

The core of Mahan's literary output consisted of the four-part history of naval warfare from 1660 to 1815, the 'Influence of Sea Power' series, after the title of the first installment, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, which was published in 1890. Mahan's lesser books consisted of shorter histories of particular conflicts (the American Revolution, part of the American Civil War, the Boer War); monographs on strategy, international relations, or theology; one biography; an autobiography; and eight collections of his articles and lectures. Two aspects of the 'Influence of Sea Power' series have been the main concern of previous examinations of Mahan and geopolitics: the discussion of the extent to which geography determined the sea power potential of a country in the first chapter of the first volume, and the focus of the entire series on the rise of British naval supremacy, which was connected to Britain's subsequent achievement of international economic and political primacy.

The first chapter of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, named 'Discussion of the Elements of Sea Power', was the longest in the book. It was a quickly composed, last moment addition to his manuscript that had been intended by the author to make the academic history of his main text more palatable to general readers. Inclusion of an extended discussion of American maritime interests and naval requirements was prompted by current vigorous public debate about these issues. Mahan's description of 'principal conditions affecting the sea power of nations' appears to have been derived in large part from a prize-essay by W. G. David published in 1882 by the United States Naval Institute.<sup>24</sup> Mahan's factors were geographical position, physical conformation (which included natural resources and climate), extent of territory, population size, national character, and political structure.

As a marketing device, the combination of topicality and already audience-tested material was a success. It was the first chapter, in the words of Mahan's latest biographer, that 'generated the greatest comment and speculation among American and British readers',<sup>25</sup> not the main body of the book. Many of Mahan's reviewers, indeed, 'seem not to have read past the controversial "Elements of Sea Power" or to have done much more than scan the chapter headings of the remainder of the volume'.<sup>26</sup> Five of the six elements, in combination with Mahan's contention that transport over water had been and would continue to be cheaper than carriage over land, constituted a set of physical and human geographical propositions whose use in connection to explanations of major international political outcomes made it easy for many readers to believe that Mahan argued that geography determined the course of history. Careful consideration of Mahan's text and more importantly the context, however, reveals that such a characterisation is faulty and seriously misleading.

Mahan's views on geographical position may be summarized as follows. First, an insular state was more likely to concentrate its resources on maritime development and overseas territorial extension than a continental one. Second, geographical factors could either 'promote a concentration, or to necessitate a dispersion, of naval forces' with large effects on a country's naval strategic circumstances.<sup>27</sup> Third, geographical position *vis-à-vis* other powers could confer 'the further strategic advantage of a central position and a good base for hostile operations against probable enemies' in terms not only of attack on territory but also on important trade routes.<sup>28</sup> And fourth, Mahan noted that control of certain bodies of water were particularly important for economic and military reasons.

For Mahan, physical conformation had several characteristics. Contour of the coast, by which he meant *not only the length of seaboard but the number and quality of harbors*, determined ease of access to oceanic trade, which was the fundamental issue. An important modifying factor was the physical attributes that affected economic activity on land, which if favorable discouraged maritime enterprise, while if unfavorable served as an incentive to such. A second important modifying factor was insularity or near insularity (as in the case of a peninsula), or the division of a polity by bodies of water as in the case of a country spread over an archipelago, which encouraged the development of sea forces as the most effective means of defence against seaborne invasion and protection of essential communications between important centers of politics and commerce.<sup>30</sup>

Extent of territory and number of population were related and somewhat misleading categories. For Mahan, the former was concerned not simply

with the physical size of a country, but also population density. A small population situated in a large territory with a significant seaboard was more vulnerable to the effects of naval blockade than a much larger population in similar circumstances, the latter being more capable of generating effective military and naval forces. In so far as number of population was concerned, what mattered to Mahan was not the overall total, but the number who followed 'callings related to the sea' who could be counted as the potential effective personnel of a navy.<sup>31</sup> And by national character, Mahan referred primarily to 'aptitude for commercial pursuits'.<sup>32</sup>

Mahan's views on the relative costs of land and water transport were based upon several assumptions. He was not unaware that the invention of railroads had greatly improved the efficiency of land transport. But besides the fact that ships were still essential for transoceanic commerce, Mahan knew that overseas trade was large and highly productive of wealth, and he had good reason to believe that it would grow and become even more important as an economic activity for all maritime countries in the foreseeable future. In addition, he almost certainly realized that the efficiency gains that accompanied the advent of railroads were to some degree counterbalanced by the comparable application of industrial technology to the design and construction of ships, which reduced the costs of marine carriage significantly.<sup>33</sup>

Mahan's confidence in the continued critical importance of long-haul shipping was reasoned and not merely a projection of the economic conditions of the pre-industrial past into the industrial present and future, while his descriptions of the geographical factors that made up the 'Elements of Sea Power' were derivative and unexceptionable, a collection of platitudes rather than a breakthrough geopolitical manifesto. More important, Mahan stated explicitly that there was another major nongeographical influence on national maritime and naval policy. Before doing so he did note that 'the history of seaboard nations has been less determined by the shrewdness and foresight of governments than by conditions of position, extent, configuration, number and character of their people, – by what are called, in a word, natural conditions'.<sup>34</sup> But there was little meat on this geographical determinist bone, for in the next sentence Mahan observed that

It must be admitted, and will be seen, that the wise or unwise action of individual men has at certain periods had a great modifying influence upon the growth of sea power in the broad sense, which included not only the military strength afloat, that rules the sea or any

part of it by force of arms, but also the peaceful commerce and shipping from which alone a military fleet naturally and healthfully springs, and on which it securely rests.<sup>35</sup>

This passage prefaced Mahan's discussion of the six principal conditions, and it was on the non-geographical sixth condition, 'Character of the government,' that he devoted the most attention, in fact as many pages of text as that given to the five previous conditions combined. The first general lesson was given as

The government by its policy can favor the natural growth of a people's industries and its tendencies to seek adventure and gain by way of the sea; or it can try to develop such industries and such sea-going bent, when they do not naturally exist; or, on the other hand, the government may by mistaken action check and fetter the progress which the people left to themselves would make.<sup>36</sup>

The second was the 'influence of the government will be felt in its most legitimate manner in maintaining an armed navy, of a size commensurate with the growth of its shipping and the importance of the interests connected with it', with the added observation that this included adequate provision for the 'healthful spirit and activity' of the navy as an institution and rapid shipbuilding and trained reserves.<sup>37</sup>

Mahan emphasised the governmental factor because he was convinced that historically the distribution of geographical favor had been such that more than one country possessed the potential to achieve naval supremacy, which meant that the final outcome had not been geographically determined but decided by human action. British naval policy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Mahan believed, had been practically preordained by geographical circumstances, but its ultimate triumph over France was not. While Mahan recognized that the continental position of France required her to maintain substantial military forces that were superfluous to insular Britain, he thought that her economic strength and geographical advantages were sufficient to have provided for a fleet capable of winning naval supremacy had the government chosen to do so. Instead, France forfeited the opportunity to crush Britain while it was relatively weak through excessive concentration on land campaigns during the late seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth. This same continental strategy prevented France from developing the commercial empire that could have been the basis of much greater economic and military power than she actually achieved.

In the closing pages of his first chapter, Mahan addressed his main practical concern. His great fear at this time was that the isolationist sentiments of the electorate would prevent the American state from encouraging the expansion of the merchant marine and the building of a strong navy that he believed was essential to protect vital territorial and economic interests in a world in which competition between powerful nations was beginning to increase. His goal was to stimulate decisive government action that would produce a fleet 'which, if not capable of reaching distant countries, shall at least be able to keep clear the chief approaches to its own'.<sup>38</sup> For Mahan, the history of French naval policy in the eighteenth century was particularly relevant to the American situation in the late nineteenth century. 'The profound humiliation of France', he observed

which reached its depths between 1760 and 1763, at which latter date she made peace, has an instructive lesson for the United States in this our period of commercial and naval decadence. We have been spared her humiliation; let us hope to profit by her subsequent example.<sup>39</sup>

The illustrative case to which Mahan referred was French naval success during the American Revolution. Mahan's account of this subject, which was the climax of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, consumed no less than six of his fourteen chapters. Put another way, some 40 per cent of the text was allocated to cover four per cent of the chronology. In this conflict, according to Mahan, a France undistracted by having to field armies against a continental European great power, and animated by an offensive naval strategy, used her battlefleet from 1778 to compromise Britain's position in North America. The aggressive campaigns of 1781–83 conducted by the brilliant French naval commander-in-chief in the Indian Ocean, Vice Admiral de Suffren, while ultimately checked, nonetheless demonstrated what the French Navy might have accomplished if led properly. And Mahan blamed France's failure to obtain even 'more substantial results' than it did on its unwillingness to press relentlessly for decisive action at sea, which could have destroyed British naval power when conditions were propitious.<sup>40</sup>

In the two-volume sequel *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812*, which was published in 1892, Mahan could not work the period in terms of faulty or correct French grand strategy as he had done previously, because the disruption of French naval leadership and administration by political upheaval precluded operational success regardless of deployment. Instead, Mahan replaced the

consideration of optimal policy choices for states with major maritime assets with an examination of whether a country supreme at sea was capable of defeating its opposite, a country supreme on land. The focus of Mahan's analysis was thus switched to Britain, and specifically to her grand strategy of economic attrition. Even so, Mahan maintained that because the balance of forces was so even, the final outcome was not predetermined, but hinged upon the actions of individual statesmen, and commanders at sea and in the field. Britain's victory in the end, according to Mahan, was in large part attributable to Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson's unrelenting pursuit of decisive naval engagement, an attitude that led to striking naval victories that had important larger consequences.

The theme of the critical importance of admiralty at sea was elaborated in the third installment of the 'Influence of Sea Power' series, a two-volume biography of Nelson entitled *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*, which was published in 1897.<sup>41</sup> The concluding fourth work, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, yet another two-volume effort that appeared in 1905, examined the disastrous consequences to the United States of naval unpreparedness, in effect dealing with the inverse form of his earlier main argument about the benefits of naval strength. American naval weakness, Mahan maintained, was the cause of an unnecessary war and exposed maritime commerce to British attacks that did serious harm to the economy and government finance. For Mahan, the lesson for the United States was not the need to build the world's largest navy, but rather the sufficiency of a modest fleet that could, when geographical and other circumstances were taken into account, deter even the world's leading sea power from settling outstanding differences through recourse to war.<sup>42</sup>

To sum up, the 'Influence of Sea Power' quartet was not unified around the theme of the rise of British naval supremacy. The principal concern of the first volume in the series was the French failure to fulfill her potential as a sea power. In the second book of the series, the main argument was that a grand strategy of economic attrition and protracted war based on naval supremacy enabled Britain to survive a Napoleonic onslaught that she might otherwise have lost. In the third book, Mahan focused on the necessity of having extraordinary operational leadership in order to convert naval superiority into naval supremacy. And finally, the leading contention of the concluding work was that a relatively small investment by the American state in a larger navy would have averted disaster, which was to say that British naval supremacy could have been neutralized in the Western Hemisphere, under the prevailing circumstances of a major war in Europe

that had reached the point of crisis, by a more potent but still small US Navy.

It is true that Mahan, in an article published in 1902 in the *National Review*, in effect repudiated the central argument of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* by asserting that 'history has conclusively demonstrated the inability of a state with even a single continental frontier to compete in naval development with one that is insular, although of smaller population and resources'.<sup>43</sup> Mahan's change of mind was probably the result of his writing about the wars of the French Revolution and Empire, which unlike the first volume of the 'Influence upon Sea Power' series chronicled a succession of major British naval victories that climaxed in the virtual annihilation of the combined French and Spanish battlefleets at Trafalgar. This tilt towards geographical determinism, however, was tempered by two major Mahanian propositions about the nature of sea power that disassociated it from the historical fortunes of Britain alone.

In the first place, Mahan was convinced that naval supremacy in the industrial age would have to be the product of co-operation between two or more powers. 'The circumstances of naval war', he maintained in the first chapter of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 'have changed so much within the last hundred years, that it may be doubted whether such disastrous effects on the one hand, or such brilliant prosperity on the other, as were seen in the wars between England and France, could now recur'.<sup>44</sup> Mahan repeated this view and advanced related arguments in many of his lesser works, which henceforward will be identified in the text by date of original publication, with full citation reserved for the notes. In 1894, Mahan observed that it was 'improbable that control [over the seas] ever again will be exercised, as once it was, by a single nation'.<sup>45</sup> In 1907, he noted it was 'not likely, indeed, that we shall again see so predominant a naval power as Great Britain' during the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>46</sup>

As for the Britain of his own day, Mahan believed that it lacked the strength to maintain naval supremacy, the term meaning not just possession of the world's largest navy, but a degree of preponderance sufficient to control all major waters vital to her military and economic security. As early as in 1894, Mahan argued that 'Great Britain's sea power, though still superior, has declined relatively to that of other states, and is no longer supreme'.<sup>47</sup> In 1910, in response to the decisions that Britain's Liberal administration had made the year before to extend social welfare programs and in the face of a rapidly expanding German navy, Mahan warned that 'the British navy is declining, relatively, owing to the debility of a government which in the way of expenditure has assumed obligations in

seeming excess of its power to meet by sound financial methods'.<sup>48</sup>

For Mahan, the fundamental problem for Britain, and also the United States, was the propensity of representative governments to economize when it came to expenditure on armed forces. 'Popular governments', he observed in the first chapter of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, 'are not generally favorable to military expenditure, however necessary'.<sup>49</sup> In 1897, Mahan argued that the governments of Britain and the United States lacked the capacity to make adequate financial provision for 'a complete scheme of national military policy, whether for offense or defense',<sup>50</sup> and that the 'instincts' of an insular state (a term which he believed described the United States as well as Britain<sup>51</sup>), with its 'extensive commercial relations', were 'naturally for peace, because it has so much at stake outside its shores'.<sup>52</sup> 'To prepare for war in time of peace', Mahan maintained in 1911, 'is impracticable to commercial representative nations, because the people in general will not give sufficient heed to military necessities, or to international problems, to feel the pressure which induces readiness.'<sup>53</sup>

Mahan preferred democratic to monarchical rule, and his solution, therefore, to the problem just described was transnational co-operation. 'Each man and each state', he wrote in 1900, 'is independent just so far as there is strength to go alone, and no farther. When this limit is reached, if farther steps must be made, co-operation must be accepted.'<sup>54</sup> Political and cultural affinity combined with the absence of major conflicting interests and the existence of strong common ones convinced Mahan that Britain and the United States had good reason to act in concert. Mahan was not an advocate of a conventional alliance, but rather an informal but nonetheless conscious coordination of efforts that produced a preponderance of force sufficient to achieve the benefits of naval supremacy realized by Britain alone a century before. 'To Great Britain and the United States', he wrote in 1894, '... is intrusted a maritime interest ... which demands, as one of the conditions of its exercise and its safety, the organized force adequate to control the general course of events at sea'.<sup>55</sup>

Mahan's Anglo-American naval consortium was not to be a relationship of naval equals. America, Mahan wrote in 1912, could 'properly cede superiority, because to the British Islands naval power is vital in a sense in which it is not to the United States'.<sup>56</sup> But this view was contingent upon Britain maintaining her preeminent naval position. Mahan believed that the surpassing of Britain by Germany as the world's leading sea power was a real possibility, was distressed by reductions in American naval building that accompanied the anti-big ship Democratic take-over of the House of

Representatives in 1910, and troubled by the prospect that Japanese immigration to the West Coast would ultimately lead to a clash with Japan over the ownership of continental American territory.

These fears prompted Mahan in late 1912 to call for America to maintain a 'preponderant navy',<sup>57</sup> which, however, was in his mind still inferior to one that conferred 'paramountcy'.<sup>58</sup> The purposes of such a force, moreover, were regional and defensive, protection of American interests in the Caribbean and preservation of American sovereignty on the Pacific coast of the continental United States, not global and offensive as in the securing of worldwide naval supremacy.

The second major proposition that worked against the drawing of geographical determinist conclusions with respect to particular nation states and naval supremacy was Mahan's contention that sea power itself was a transnational phenomenon. It is true that in the introduction to *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan defined sea power largely in terms of national commercial and naval rivalry directed by governments.<sup>59</sup> But in *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, sea power was separated from the nation state. Mahan noted that during the great wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Great Britain wielded sea power 'as absolute mistress' because of the 'circumstances of the time'.<sup>60</sup> But he then observed that naval and commercial activity combined constituted 'a wonderful and mysterious Power' that could be 'seen to be a complex organism, endued [*sic*] with a life of its own, receiving and imparting countless impulses, moving in a thousand currents which twine in and around one another in infinite flexibility ... throughout all it lives and it grows'.<sup>61</sup>

Even in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, which covered an era in which the commercial policies of great states were based upon mercantilist theory, Mahan found opportunities to praise the virtues of peace and free trade. The French East India Company's monopoly of commerce between major home and Indian ports was compared to 'the traffic throughout the Indian seas', which was 'open to private enterprise and grew more rapidly'.<sup>62</sup> The tripling in the size of the French merchant marine within 20 years of the end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), Mahan argued, was attributable to 'peace and the removal of restrictions, and not due in any sense to government protection'.<sup>63</sup> Mahan expressed his opposition to protective tariffs and favor of free trade for the US in his own time in an article published in 1890. He likened protection to 'the activities of a modern ironclad that has heavy armor, but inferior engines and guns; mighty for defence, weak for offence', and then observed that

the temperament of the American people is essentially alien to such a sluggish attitude. Independently of all bias for or against protection, it is safe to predict that, when the opportunities for gain abroad are understood, the course of American enterprise will cleave a channel by which to reach them.<sup>64</sup>

The idea that sea power was not merely a desirable policy option for a particular state, but a self-sustaining supra-national system whose existence and development depended upon the actions of corporate institutions both public and private, and individuals, around the world, was the subject of further discussion in Mahan's other lesser works in later years. 'The unmolested course of commerce, reacting upon itself', Mahan observed in 1902,

has contributed also to its own rapid development, a result furthered by the prevalence of a purely economical conception of national greatness during the larger part of the century. This, with the vast increase in rapidity of communication, has multiplied and strengthened the bonds knitting the interests of nations to one another, till the whole now forms an articulated system, not only of prodigious size and activity, but of an excessive sensitiveness, unequaled in former ages.<sup>65</sup>

'War has ceased to be the natural, or even normal condition of nations', Mahan argued in a separate piece written a month later, 'and military considerations are simply accessory and subordinate to the other greater interests, economical and commercial, which they assure and so subserve'.<sup>66</sup> Mahan then declared that 'as for economical rivalry, let it be confined to its own methods, eschewing force'.<sup>67</sup>

Although Mahan believed that the maritime commercial component of sea power on the whole favored peace rather than war, he was equally convinced that there were other factors that made major armed conflict a serious possibility. For Mahan, the three general threats to amicability were competition between European great powers for control over Asian and Africa territories that were coveted for their potential economic value; the susceptibility of governments to public opinion, which when inflamed could bring about war even if it were ill-advised; and the emergence of an Asia armed with industrial weaponry that would challenge Western Civilization for world dominion. In particular, Mahan feared the expansionist designs of militarist monarchical powers, which included Russia, the German empire, and Japan.

His concept of an Anglo-American naval consortium was thus intended to deter aggression and impose international order to facilitate the political and economic development of backward regions in peace, and to provide security to the bulk of the world's overseas trading activity and a bulwark against invasion to allow time for Britain and the United States to mobilize their economies for a protracted war of attrition in the event of hostilities.<sup>68</sup>

In 1900, Mahan declared that he believed in the existence of 'determinative conditions' whose effect was to 'shape and govern the whole range of incidents, often in themselves apparently chaotic in combination, and devoid of guidance by any adequate controlling forces'. He considered the tasks of identifying those forces and comprehending their dynamics, however, to be difficult ones when dealing with the past, and even more so when contemplating the future. 'In history entirely past', Mahan went on to observe,

where an issue has been reached sufficiently definite to show that one period has ended and another begun, it is possible for a careful observer to detect, and with some precision to formulate, the leading causes, and to trace the interaction which has produced the result. It is obviously much less easy to discover the character and to fix the interrelation of the elements acting in the present; and still more to indicate the direction of their individual movement, from which conjecture may form some conception as to what shall issue as the resultant of forces. There is here all the difference between history and prophecy.<sup>69</sup>

For Mahan, in other words, even sound history could not serve as the guarantor of accurate prognostication because human affairs were complicated and outcomes dependent upon complex interactions and contingent forces. An intellect informed by history, on the other hand, might usefully consider a range of possibilities, including contradictory or even mutually exclusive ones. For example, in a collection of articles published in 1900, Mahan described the containment of Russia, whose power he recognized was derived from central position and control of extensive continental territory, by means of an informal coalition of Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States, and also contemplated not only a collision of Europe and Asia in cataclysmic war because of cultural differences but the development of a World culture that reconciled east and west. Exposure of Russian weakness in the Russo-Japanese War and the rapid growth of the German and Japanese navies later prompted Mahan to issue warnings about the immediate dangers posed to the United States by a militant Germany or Japan, which were issued in spite of his continued anxiety about Russia in the long run.<sup>70</sup>

In light of the foregoing, it should be clear that Mahan viewed the naval component of sea power as a major influence in several possible widely varying sets of circumstances that might or might not involve war, not as the controlling force in the inevitable struggle by a single state for world mastery. Put another way, Mahan's writing about future international relations was contemplative rather than prescriptive, an engagement with multiple separate premises, each one explored with vigor but always with an awareness of other equally valid points of departure with a potentially conflicting or even opposite ultimate outcome. For Mahan, to take such an approach was not a confession of intellectual weakness or moral cowardice, but an appreciation of the limits of the intellect when confronted by the unpredictable nature of mankind's affairs. The 'philosophy of life', he wrote in 1900, 'is best expressed in paradox. It is by frank acceptance of contrary truths, embracing both without effort to blend them, that we can best direct our course, as individuals or as nations, to successful issues.'<sup>71</sup>

In the preface to his first collection of articles, Mahan wrote 'if such unity perchance be found in these it will not be due to antecedent purpose, but to the fact that they embody the thought of an individual mind, consecutive in the line of its main conceptions, but adjusting itself continually to changing conditions, which the progress of events entails'.<sup>72</sup> These words may be applied to all of his writing that concerned the events of his own day and the future. Mahan did not construct a system of thought that was used to process mechanistically current and prospective problems of twentieth century statecraft, but combined and re-combined principles and history in differing proportion depending upon circumstances to serve as the basis of judgment of particular cases. The geopolitical identity of Mahan is thus not to be found in samples drawn indiscriminately from a protean body of observations and conclusions, but through engagement with the coherent sensibility that produced them. Once this task is accomplished, effective criticism may begin.

Four revisionist propositions are especially relevant to the consideration of Mahan and geopolitics. First, Mahan's main concern in the 'Influence of Sea Power' series was the critical importance of decision making by statesmen and admirals, not the power of geographical factors to determine the course of history. Second, Mahan was convinced that naval supremacy in his own day and in the near future would most likely be exercised by a transnational consortium made up of Great Britain and the United States because neither power possessed the resources to maintain a large enough navy to do the job on its own, while both had large and growing seaborne commercial interests that needed strong protection in the event of war.

Third, Mahan's economic ideal was global free trade, a system that was an integral part of his concept of sea power and which, he was convinced, favored peace rather than war. And fourth, Mahan, did not have a single vision of the future, and while he was certain that sea power was bound by the nature of things to play an important role in international affairs, he did not hold that it would necessarily define its terms or dictate its outcomes.

The question of Mahan's influence on later practitioners of geopolitics is an inherently difficult one. Besides varying degrees of borrowing ranging from grand theft to pilfering, there are alternative possibilities including unconscious usurpation, faulty assimilation, or even independent invention. Mahan's concept of the threat posed by the enormous territorial mass of Russia anticipated Mackinder's 'heartland' theory in many ways, but whether or to what extent the latter author was affected has not yet been determined.<sup>73</sup> As for the German school of geopolitics, it is probable that the impression made by Mahan was created by incomplete reading, and therefore the product of distorted understanding, but in any case was a matter of general approach rather than particular argument. In so far as the intellectual indebtedness of Mackinder and Haushofer to Mahan is concerned, the new scholarship on the work of the American has little to offer. On the other hand, it does provide the basis for a useful reconsideration of Mahan's ideas in comparison to those of Mackinder.

Mahan believed that good strategy and effective operational command mattered a very great deal. Mackinder, whose own country was less populous and less well-endowed with resources, was more concerned with the efficient utilisation of national and imperial assets in the long term, and perhaps, after the experience of the First World War, much more conscious of the dangers and likelihood of unsatisfactory civilian and military leadership.<sup>74</sup> Mahan, aware of his own country's reluctance to spend on defence and cognizant of Britain's relative economic and naval decline, was a consistent proponent of Anglo-American naval cooperation as the basis of naval supremacy in the twentieth century. Mackinder flirted with the idea in 1905, 1909, and after the First World War,<sup>75</sup> but his main interest was the maintenance of an efficiently-integrated British Empire.<sup>76</sup> Mahan, confident of his own country's economic prowess and capacity to compete in a global market, embraced free trade and the vision of a world commonwealth.<sup>77</sup> Mackinder, fearful of British commercial vulnerability to more efficient foreign competitors, was a proponent of protection and in essence the division of the world (or even countries) into autarchic zones.<sup>78</sup>

From the standpoint of predicting the future, Mahan and Mackinder engaged a similar range of options, which may serve as a testament to

essential agreement of outlook on the general terms that defined the relationship between geography and politics. Mahan thought of a transnational naval consortium as the executor of naval supremacy and the possible basis for the containment of an expansionist Russia by a coalition of peripheral maritime powers, a formulation that Mackinder also explored, though with less enthusiasm and confidence in an outcome favorable to the latter. Mahan's vision of the opposition of European civilisation against that of Asia was also entertained by Mackinder.<sup>79</sup> And both men feared the military threat posed by Germany in the shorter run.<sup>80</sup> Where Mahan and Mackinder differed most was not in their subject matter or conclusions but the format of inquiry. Mahan was an historian and essentially a humanist. Mackinder was a political geographer and at bottom a social scientist. In this important sense, they are not opposed but complementary.

Paul Kennedy's presentation of the approaches of Mahan and Mackinder to the question of sea power versus land power as opposites served a useful and important purpose by redirecting and restructuring the historical study of international relations. And at the level of the fortunes of a particular nation-state, Kennedy's assessment of the course of British history in the twentieth century is, if not beyond challenge,<sup>81</sup> still a very strong contender. Kennedy's presumption, however, that Mahan's view of the twentieth century was no more than an extension of the story of the rise of British sea power in the age of sail is not correct. The application of Mahan's actual concept of a transnational naval consortium as the basis for naval supremacy, moreover, transforms the story of British relative decline globally into one of her subsumption into a politically and economically preeminent conglomerate of associated states. Britain's status within this combination was ultimately reduced from a senior to a junior partnership with the United States, but its economic condition has remained generally prosperous and political influence significant.

Mahan has often been caricatured as little more than a prophet of national aggrandizement through command of the sea, remembered for the influence rather than the substance of his thought, and relegated to a side corridor in the pantheon of discredited thinkers.<sup>82</sup> But Mahan's recognition of the fundamental importance of patterns of sea transport and trade, examination of the relationship of continental and insular land structures, and the connection of these subjects to national policy set within a transnational perspective unshackled by commitment to a single future, were the manifestations of a penetrating and flexible intelligence. His concerns have remained central issues for current students of geopolitics, and his later exercises in prediction seem in hindsight remarkably sound:

containment of the Germans, then the Russians, with the question of conflict between Asian and Western civilisation explored if left undecided; and the emergence of a global free-trade economy based on shipping. Mahan's intellectual heirs may with good reason decline to read his large and difficult work in its entirety, but acquaintance with the quality of the mind and appreciation of the substance of its accomplishment are worthy projects, and for serious students of geopolitics, perhaps obligatory ones.

## NOTES

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