

2004

The Geopolitics of East Asia: The Search for Equilibrium, by Robyn LimChinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power

Bruce Elleman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Elleman, Bruce (2004) "The Geopolitics of East Asia: The Search for Equilibrium, by Robyn LimChinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 57 : No. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol57/iss1/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

and use precision-guided munitions, such as Tomahawk cruise missiles, to destroy them. Not surprisingly, the combination of space-based systems has significantly improved U.S. maritime as well as military capabilities.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Friedman's work is the sheer volume of data that it contains. The reader is led through discussions of the development of space launchers, including detailed reviews of the U.S. and Soviet programs. Friedman is quite comfortable discussing the development of these technologies and thus easily examines how the United States has integrated space technologies into everyday military operations. This descriptive material is quite useful for those not familiar with many of the technologies and capabilities that exist under the rubric of space systems. The central value of *Seapower and Space* is to help the reader understand the technological and operational forces that have changed how the U.S. defense establishment, most notably its naval component, goes about its business.

All told, Friedman's work is useful because of its breadth and depth. Yet in many chapters the analytic foundations of the work are obscured by the exceptionally detailed discussions of the evolution of, for example, rocket programs, communications systems, satellite programs, and cruise missile programs, to name a few. For readers who are more interested in how space systems support maritime operations, these details prove somewhat distracting.

How, then, should we judge the value of Friedman's work? The overall quality of the research and writing speaks for itself. The chapters are tightly organized and lucid, which reaffirms that the

author is knowledgeable about naval matters. This is a useful work that by contributing to the literature on the relationship between space and naval operations exposes the reader to a wide range of systems and technologies that are fundamental to the capabilities possessed by modern navies and military forces. As a history of space and maritime systems, it contributes new and useful particulars, background, and insights into how space systems help the naval commanders. My only wish is that he could have focused less on programmatic details. That being said, Friedman's work represents an important step toward analyzing how space represents the next set of technologies that will revolutionize naval operations in the future.

WILLIAM C. MARTEL
Naval War College



Lim, Robyn. *The Geopolitics of East Asia: The Search for Equilibrium*. New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003. 208pp. \$90

Kane, Thomas M. *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power*. Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 2002. 158pp. \$55

One of the most intriguing questions about the People's Republic of China (PRC) today is whether its communist government does or does not have the "ambition" to acquire a *blue-water* navy. If building an oceangoing fleet is among Beijing's long-term goals, then China may one day become a dangerous peer competitor of the United States. If so, a future Sino-U.S. maritime conflict is possible; if not, Washington's primarily maritime power and Beijing's primarily continental power need never meet in battle.

The two books discussed here focus on different aspects of China and so answer this question in radically different ways. Robyn Lim examines Far Eastern geopolitics and history to address the issue of Sino-U.S. conflict. Focusing on the numerous twentieth-century wars fought among the East Asian quadrilateral—the United States, China, Japan, and Russia—Lim concludes that a new “great-power war” is “thinkable” and that such a conflict would probably be maritime in nature: “If China, a rising continental power, is indeed seeking domination over East Asia and its contiguous waters, this pattern of conflict is set to continue—because the United States, with its own maritime security at stake, is bound to stand in China’s way.”

The underlying reason for a possible future Sino-U.S. conflict, says Lim, is Japan’s defeat in World War II, coupled with the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. Not only has Russia’s precipitous decline given China “strategic latitude unprecedented in modern times,” but the waning security threat along the Sino-Russian border has allowed Beijing to point “east and south strategically, pressing on the vital straits that connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans.” In light of Russia’s decision to sell massive amounts of military equipment—dominated by ships, planes, and naval weaponry—to China, possible Sino-U.S. flashpoints include a PRC invasion or blockade of Taiwan, international conflict on the Korean Peninsula, maritime tensions with Japan over the Senkaku (in Chinese, Diaoyutai) Islands, and Southeast Asian resistance to China’s self-proclaimed sovereignty over the South China Sea.

To offset such a conflict, Washington must ally itself even more closely with

Tokyo, be prepared to stop a PRC attack on Taiwan, dampen the rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and redirect future Chinese maritime expansion into more peaceful directions. Lim cautions that too strident a policy might push China into a corner, leading to irrational decisions on Beijing’s part—much as Washington’s 1941 failure to deter Tokyo resulted in the miscalculated decision to attack Pearl Harbor. However, Lim concludes that in the coming years a certain degree of great-power conflict will probably be unavoidable, since “when China started to demonstrate blue water ambition, it was certain to collide with America’s interest as the global ‘off-shore balancer.’”

Thomas Kane examines the future of China’s navy in *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power*. Studying the history of Chinese grand strategy, which has most recently included calls for the creation of a “new order” among the world’s great states, Kane concludes that “if China wishes to claim a leading role in international politics, it must become a seapower,” which means, in turn, that “maritime development is one of the most prominent and most challenging goals of the PRC’s [grand] strategy.”

To support his point, Kane argues that for thousands of years the Chinese were among the world’s great practitioners of seapower. From the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century, however, China’s navy stagnated, only to be born anew during the 1950s, when Mao Zedong proclaimed that China should develop a strong fleet. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping helped to make Mao’s dream a reality, redirecting an ever larger share of the defense budget to the People’s

Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Not only was a strong navy necessary to exploit maritime resources in the surrounding seas, including enormous reserves of fish, oil, and natural gas, but “until the Chinese have an oceangoing navy, their freedom to trade will depend upon the goodwill of others. China’s leaders understand this fact, and are determined to remedy it.”

During the twenty-first century, the Chinese navy is bound to grow. It is no match for the U.S. Navy, but Kane cautions that just because “China’s navy remains materially weak does not mean that it is strategically useless.” In fact, the PLAN is clearly “designed to serve a purpose in war,” and if “one reflects upon how China’s navy measures up to the tasks Beijing is putting it to, and combines those reflections with a consideration of how the Chinese fleet may develop over time, the PLAN begins to seem more adequate.”

China’s primary strategic goals include coastal defense, intimidation of Taiwan, and the gradual expansion of Chinese power southward into the South China Sea. In recent years, the PLAN has begun to acquire the naval equipment necessary to achieve these limited goals. In particular, Kane notes the rapid increase in China’s mine warfare capability: “As of the year 2000, almost 90 percent of the major ships in China’s fleet could carry mines as part of their standard armament.” In addition, all newly purchased naval equipment from Russia, including the Kilo-class submarines and the *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, “have integral minelaying capabilities.” Such capabilities may soon grow beyond the point where the U.S. Navy and its Asian allies can easily counter them.

Although the Chinese navy still exhibits serious vulnerabilities, especially in air defenses, air forces, and electronic systems, concerted efforts are under way to correct these problems. In addition, should Beijing ever focus its land and sea forces either on mainland Asia or any of the thousand offshore islands, the “PLA’s assault forces could also prove overwhelming in battles for islands in the South China Sea, and perhaps for attacks on more distant islands as well. China, in other words, is well equipped to use land forces as part of a joint maritime strategy.”

Lim and Kane have approached this question from different angles—one from the field of geopolitics and the other from strategy—but they agree that the PRC’s future ambitions most likely include the construction of a blue-water navy. Until that navy is complete, China cannot hope to fight and win a war at sea, especially against a force as large and sophisticated as the U.S. Navy. However, as Kane aptly suggests, a naval victory may not be part of China’s grand strategy, since Beijing “has reason to hope that it has found limits to Washington’s willingness to intervene.” So long as China keeps its strategic goals small, it may succeed in making incremental gains unopposed. It is perhaps because of this threat of incremental gains that Lim warns, “The need to establish a stable power equilibrium in East Asia is an imperative of international security that the United States cannot afford to ignore.”

BRUCE ELLEMAN
Naval War College