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The Anglo-American Way in Maritime Strategy

John B. Hattendorf

Over the centuries, nations have used maritime strategies in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. That statement, simple though it is, runs counter to general wisdom in this country. Far too often one finds in the English language literature on maritime history the assumptions that all nations have shared the same concept of maritime strategy and that particular nations have always had the same maritime strategy. However, a careful look will show that we in the United States have changed our conceptions during our own history, as have the British within the course of theirs.

The maritime strategies of major sea powers have been different one from another. The ancient Greeks and Romans, the Venetians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, the Germans, the Japanese, the Soviets—each has acted with varying ideas in mind. Yet at the same time, there are relationships among these strategies. To find both the differences and the similarities, one needs to look carefully at patterns of thought and at the nature of the circumstances involved in each case. The issues in such an examination revolve around each nation's role within the international politics of its day, the nature of the objectives each sought to achieve, the differing role that each navy served in carrying out national policy and the relative importance of seaborne commerce in each national economy.

Among the various types of maritime strategies, the Anglo-American strand is the dominant one and tends to obscure the others. As a body of theory, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett based it primarily on an interpretation of British naval history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as linked to the events of the period when they were writing (in the years just before the First World War). Mahan was the first prominent writer to show sea power as a basis for national policy, while Corbett made the most effective abstract statement of the theory.

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In this Anglo-American strand, maritime strategy is twofold: first, the establishment of a nation's control of shipping at sea, and second, the use of that control in order to affect events on land. Scholars today have a tendency to divide the naval from the merchant marine, the public from the private, and the civilian from the military. Although there is a reasonable basis for doing that, the tradition of Anglo-American maritime strategy runs counter to this trend. It is an overarching idea that seeks to link national policy to both commercial and naval use of the sea, setting them amongst the wider aspects of relations among nations. In order to understand the concept, we need to identify its elements while showing its relationship to particular ideas, historical situations and national institutions.

The Anglo-American theory is a description of the global international relations of the dominant maritime power and of balance of power politics. In British history, this concept had its first major application in the period beginning in 1688, when King William III brought England into a European coalition against France. From this time forward, the concept can be followed throughout Britain's role as a great power. It entered American thinking through aspirations for great power status about 1890, and became a full feature of American policy when the United States took over Britain's role as the dominant maritime power after the Second World War.

The relationship between British and American maritime power and thought is one of sequential development. There was not a direct collision, as one might have expected from previous historical examples, between the expanding maritime power of the United States and the already established power of Britain. There were crises, certainly, and even contingency plans in the case of war between the two countries, but after 1815 neither power was willing to use force directly against the other. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's naval power, although usable against America's principal coastal cities, was stalemated by America's ability to deploy force against Canada.

During this period America's priorities were regional while Britain's were global. Now, a century later, the roles have been reversed: America's priorities are global and Britain's are regional. The key events of this role reversal can be traced as follows: the Naval and Shipping Acts of 1916, which resulted in a huge expansion of American merchant and naval shipping; the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, which established naval parity between the two countries; the arrangement by which American destroyers were traded to Britain in 1940 for a ninety-nine-year American lease on British land for bases in the West Indies; the American domination of the war in the Pacific overshadowing the British contribution; and finally, the establishment of Nato and other security arrangements in the postwar period by which the United States assumed the traditional British role in a global balance of power.

As a great maritime power in the late twentieth century, the United States has taken on many of the characteristics that marked British power in earlier periods. The conceptual basis on which America has exerted her maritime power in the twentieth century derives from earlier British conceptions of international order and the use of force at sea. Both British and American conceptions of maritime strategy share an interest in maintaining a balance of power, but this interest was and is not an abstract one. Historically, it is an attempt to preserve and expand worldwide patterns of trade and commerce as well as to promote progressive notions of social and political development. These have been the national policy goals, and in this sense, a balance of power is a means to these ends, and not an end in itself.

In examining the Anglo-American tradition of maritime strategy in the twentieth century, one finds three dominating subareas for investigation: first, the institutions of government that formulate maritime strategy; second, the development of theory about maritime strategy; and third, the practice of maritime strategy in both peacetime planning and the actual conduct of war.

The Machinery of Government for Strategic Decision Making

The machinery for twentieth century coalition warfare has its roots in the British cabinet system of government, as developed through the Committee of Imperial Defence. This is the model for the major international command and organizational structures developed in the twentieth century, including the League of Nations, the allied Combined Chiefs of Staff during the Second World War, the United Nations, and Nato, as well as the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council.

In contrast to the authoritarian system of decision making practiced by the Prussian General Staff, Britain developed during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century a system for interdepartmental cooperation and advice in defense matters. These arrangements became a permanent feature of the British government in December 1902 with the establishment of the Committee of Imperial Defence. This new committee, with flexible membership and direct access to the highest officials, held direct responsibility for defence planning, giving it continuity while coordinating the relations of departments and preventing any one department from prevailing without full consideration of the whole range of national issues. Along with it came a permanent and professional staff to work with the ministerial members of the committee, under the chairmanship of the prime minister.

British experience with the committee system of decision making in the first half of this century showed, as Professor Norman Gibbs has suggested, that the velvet glove of advice works better than the whip of orders.¹ In addition, the system demonstrated that the most effective action came when those who plan are also those who execute the plan. When top officials and

admirals do not have time to think in depth about issues, it merely compounds the problem to separate planning and execution.

While the system has good effects in restraining the untempered use of force by balancing military solutions with further consideration of diplomatic, political, economic and moral judgements, it does create problems in how to distribute funds among rival organizations. Indeed, as defense budgets rose in the years after the Second World War, both Britain and the United States tended to centralize power and authority in higher defense matters as a means to control budgets and rationalize defense requirements.

Despite this trend, the committee system remains the basis for international decision making. As practiced by the United Nations and Nato, the system's variety of national objectives, capabilities and strategies provides a means to give careful attention to the full range of national interests while also coordinating deterrent strength. It serves as a means for international planning in the conduct of war and in collective efforts for peace. At the same time, it provides rational restraint to the use of force.

The British model provides a structure for the thorough consideration of all aspects of maritime strategy, preventing the dominance of any one facet or the isolation of any other. As Sir William Blackstone noted about the English governmental system in the eighteenth century, the varied elements "impel the machinery of government in a direction different from what either acting by themselves would have done; but at the same time in a direction partaking of each and formed out of all."² This system blunts the natural tendency to isolate thoughts and activities in different compartments, and it reinforces the Anglo-American tradition in maritime strategy of linking the commercial and naval use of the sea through the broad understanding of national interests.

Anglo-American Maritime Theory

Theory provides the intellectual framework from which practical activity is planned and understood. As an intellectual study, Anglo-American maritime theory derives from the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan, who studied the period between 1660 and 1815 in European history, deriving lessons from the relationship of British imperial and foreign policy to naval operations in the eighteenth century. Mahan identified sea power with the broad commercial interests of a nation in using the sea; and at one time he even went to so far as to say that without a merchant marine, there was no function for a navy.

Mahan's famous description of the British navy in the Napoleonic wars epitomized his general view of naval strategy: "Those far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world."³ Behind this image lay Mahan's view that

sea power was a decisive factor in history, that a great maritime power's navy must be the superior force at sea, and that it was properly employed near an enemy's coast where it could control, at the source, a threat to its own "command of the sea" (a phrase coined by Mahan). Mahan saw that much of the work of sea power was in "the noiseless, steady, exhausting pressure with which sea power acts, cutting off the resources of the enemy while maintaining its own supporting war in scenes where it does not appear itself, or appears only in the background, and striking open blows only at rare intervals. . . ."⁴ At the same time, he stressed the importance of large, decisive battles between opposing fleets. In making this point, and suggesting that Horatio Nelson and the Battle of Trafalgar embodied the essence of sea power, Mahan contributed to a continuing myth of the Anglo-American tradition. Less appreciated, perhaps, were his complementary points on the role of bases in maintaining control of the sea lanes, the importance of concentration of force, and the relation of strength to geographic position. The key to Mahan's thought is his emphasis on the principle "of being superior to the enemy at the decisive point, whatever the strength of the two parties on the whole."⁵ Through this principle, he promoted the offensive and concentrated use of naval force to achieve command of the sea.

Mahan's work was part of the developing rationale for a new American navy that would come to challenge British power and domination. Although he provided the initial impetus for an abstract understanding of naval strategy, he never gathered his ideas together into a coherent, analytical statement of a complete theory. Sir Julian Corbett took up that task in his book *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, first published in 1911.

Corbett's work deserves far greater appreciation than it has received in America, for it is the most complete and careful summary of the Anglo-American tradition in maritime strategy. In writing it, Corbett had the advantage of following Mahan and could build on his initial work, bringing new insights as well as a deeper knowledge of British naval history.

Corbett argued that maritime strategy should focus on the use of the sea for communications and passage. A navy's role is to guard the communications of its own country and to seize or disrupt those of its enemy. In his mind, the naval function is inextricably tied to the commercial and civilian realm. Thus, the coordination and control of armed force at sea is more properly called maritime strategy than naval strategy, since it is an overarching concept that links the ultimate purpose of the navy to the more extensive and varied scope of general activity at sea.

In discussing the role of navies, Corbett created three general categories: first, methods of securing command; second, methods of disputing command; and third, methods of exercising command.

In examining methods of securing command, he noted that the normal condition of the sea is an uncommanded one—command of the sea exists only

in wartime, and in peacetime one can only discuss the potential for command of the sea. To achieve it in wartime, a navy had two basic options. It could seek a battle which would destroy the ability of the enemy to challenge its commerce on the sea or, alternatively, it could blockade the enemy so that the enemy's ships stayed in port or on the defensive in their own coastal waters.

A nation which concedes mastery to the enemy but still seeks to oppose the enemy at sea may create a "fleet-in-being." By its very existence such a defensive fleet establishes a potential threat, and it may conduct minor counterattacks, carefully choosing time, place and target to achieve maximum effect.

Finally, Corbett turned to the ways in which a nation exercises command of the sea once it has secured it. Here he considered such functions as defense against attack on one's own country, the support of overseas military expeditions, and attacks on enemy commerce as well as defense of one's own.

Experience has modified both Corbett and Mahan's theories. These modifications have come in several areas and have often been associated with changes in naval technology. One of the areas affected by new technology was commerce warfare, in which submarines and aircraft came to play a significant role in the protection and destruction of commerce. So effective did the submarine become in its ability to attack commerce that it moved commerce warfare from a function limited in theory to minor counterattack to one with the potential for major and decisive consequences. Most importantly, however, Anglo-American maritime theory has been modified by consideration of the peacetime and political uses of armed force. Corbett and Mahan examined the use of navies in wartime, not in peacetime. They omitted gunboat diplomacy as a major factor, although it had long played a major role in British imperial history. In the years since the Second World War, the appearance of nuclear weapons and the attention given to deterrence led to detailed consideration of the political role of navies in peacetime. The use of navies for political purposes, linked as it is to special weapons and capabilities as well as high governmental policies, quickly becomes a specialist's subject. But such a use requires free passage on the sea. Through this requirement it makes a link with maritime commerce and connects with the traditional view in Anglo-American strategy by which the superior naval power, be it Britain or America, refuses to allow any nation or law to restrict its freedom in using the sea for its own purposes.

Anglo-American maritime theory has changed, as it should, with new developments and new events. A good theory sheds light and understanding on the issues which it concerns, but it must constantly be reevaluated and modified in the light of new conditions and new insights. This point brings us to the third major area of consideration in analyzing the Anglo-American tradition of maritime strategy: the relationship, or lack of relationship,

between prewar planning of maritime strategy and the actual conduct of strategy in the course of a war.

Prewar Strategic Planning and Maritime Strategy

Prewar strategic planning is not strategy; it is only preparation for it. Strategy itself is the actual use of force. As a function of grand strategy, maritime strategy is the comprehensive direction of power at sea to control a situation. Commonly, the situation is not one isolated at sea, but involves the interrelationship of affairs at sea with those ashore, including the extension of power from the sea to control events on land.

The very idea of planning for a future naval war was new at the beginning of this century. In examining the relationship between prewar strategic planning for the navy in the years between 1898 and 1914 in contrast to the conduct of war in 1914-18, Paul Kennedy has shown that prewar planning was largely irrelevant. Much of prewar thinking assumed that a future war would be a limited conflict, much like the Spanish-American or Russo-Japanese wars. The war that came in 1914 was nothing like them. The British planners based their thinking on a rigid expectation that future naval war would be centered around offensive battleship actions on the open sea or in enemy waters. Kennedy sees the First World War as chiefly a land war in which navies played an indirect, although important, supportive and essentially negative role. As he concluded, "to put it crudely, if the German submarines had been able to interdict the Allied lines of communication in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, they would in all probability have won the land war as well; because they did not block those sea lanes, they lost the overall conflict."⁶

On reflection, the fixation with decisive battleship actions was simpleminded and distracted strategists from seriously examining alternative uses of sea power that were appropriate to the geographical and strategic circumstances of the situation they faced. However, the officers in charge had neither the mental preparation for such flexible thinking nor had they equipped the fleet for such alternative uses.

The Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22 laid the basis for peacetime strategic planning in the wake of the First World War. It combined two major elements: reflection on the experience of the war, and planning for what might happen in the future. It resulted in the elimination of international competition in building battleships (a factor seen by some as a destabilizing element in the years leading up to the war), but it left loopholes for the development of submarines, cruisers, and aircraft carriers. The treaty also marked Britain's agreement to America's rise to naval parity with her, although the United States harbored ambitions for a "navy second to none."

In the subsequent planning, there was a strong element which led to preparations for fighting a future war that would have actions similar to that of Jutland in 1916. At the same time, however, the interwar years saw consideration of new concepts and rapid developments in the use of naval aviation, submarines and amphibious warfare. As Malcolm Murfett has commented, "It is doubtful whether any nation that is neither initiating nor seeking war is ever entirely prepared for it until it happens."⁷ Throughout the interwar period, both Britain and the United States adopted a defensive approach in their strategic planning, and each took a different and inherently fallible approach to predicting the future. This mixed approach made for some success in prewar planning. Among the many ideas and plans that were considered, certainly even the belated and reluctant thought given to preparation for the protection of merchant shipping proved its use for both Britain and America during the Second World War. Many later wished it had been explored more thoroughly. The failure of Japan to examine the implications of the First World War on this point proved to be a fatal mistake. If only War Plan Orange (among the numerous American color plans) proved useful in the actual conduct of war, it was still evidence that improvisation and flexibility of thought remained a paramount aspect of maritime strategy. Experience shows that any nation needs more than one strategy and more than one way of looking at contingency issues.

Careful historical study of the contrast between the preparation for war and the actual conduct of war reveals not only the limitations of planners' abilities to predict the future, it also shows the restraints on them. The peacetime mix of international affairs, national finance, and domestic politics appropriately restrains the creation of an armed force that is capable of meeting the full range of wartime threats. In peacetime it is not only very difficult to foresee the future, it is also difficult to justify expenditures on a force that might or might not be necessary.

In the postwar world, the geostrategic situation of Britain and the United States is much as it was before 1939, even if the power relationship between the two has changed. In the Cold War, a Western maritime coalition has faced a continentally-based Eastern one. The new factor has been the role of nuclear weapons and the question as to what degree they alter the strategic situation for maritime power. Some argued that the new weapons transformed the situation entirely, while others declared that they would be absorbed by the armed forces in the usual way. Certainly the habits of Anglo-American cooperation learned during the Second World War remained in place, despite the stress of crises (of which the worst was Suez).

Sea power as an element of national power has not disappeared in the nuclear age, as some predicted. To the contrary, it has remained an important factor, and a new power at sea has emerged from the Soviet Union. Maritime forces have been key elements in the global balance of power. The United

States has found the need to maintain its naval forces in distant seas to maintain her alliances and to be ready to deal with crises, while also preparing for a possible global war in which commerce requires protection. Maritime strategic planning has come to stress the relationship of sea power to the other elements of national power, thereby reflecting one of the great themes of the Anglo-American tradition.

In the twentieth century, both Britain and America have used maritime strategy as a subset of grand strategy in order to deal with balance of power issues. In regard to Europe, Britain was the traditional balancer who allied herself with the weaker powers threatened by continental land powers. Maritime power was always a key element of British policy, but it was rarely if ever used successfully without reference to the diplomatic, financial, commercial, and military factors of power. Thus, current practitioners in the Anglo-American tradition of maritime strategy have come to understand that sea power does not stand alone among the factors which may be employed to achieve a balance of power, yet it is significant enough to deserve separate in-depth analysis.

The influence of British thinking on twentieth century coalition warfare, on the development of the machinery of government and on concepts of maritime power has been profound. British experience has illustrated, too, the fundamental debate about the appropriateness of balance of power politics. In nineteenth century Britain, balance of power proponents contended that national security depended on European equilibrium. They insisted that Britain should intervene in various situations in order to prevent a rival from gaining dangerous power. Their political opponents were convinced that Britain's welfare had nothing to do with the balance of power. They believed that intervention was appropriate only when national interests were threatened directly. The balance of power proponents rested their case on traditional European power politics; their opponents rested theirs on Christian morality. The resulting political battle was between those who wanted to control the existing international political system and those who wanted to create a new order among nations. These same conflicting views have been a characteristic part of the American political tradition.

In the Anglo-American democratic tradition, there is an inbred suspicion of standing military forces. During peacetime, domestic public opinion may not be willing to accept the cost of wide-ranging, flexible preparations for war. Naval leaders have thus been caught in a dilemma: they must meet the immediate needs of peacetime naval operations, including crises; they must prudently predict what a future war may look like, in order to prevent it from breaking out; and they must provide an assessment of the most probable future war to persuade legislators to finance the basic long-range needs for equipment, training and men. These are diverse efforts which do not always yield the same naval requirements. The Anglo-American experience shows

that, in peacetime, the stress among such conflicting views can result in either an inappropriate compromise among them or an overemphasis on one aspect at the expense of another.

In the twentieth century, Anglo-American maritime strategy has evolved with change and experience, but it is still linked with the dominant naval power and with balance of power politics. It continues to embody a broad concept that ties together the control of shipping at sea and the use of that control to affect events on land. At the same time, as naval leaders prepare for future contingencies with the most modern equipment, one can discern traditional critics and traditional dilemmas.

While these stresses will always be present, they need not be as difficult for American naval leaders as current trends may suggest. The public discussion of the U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy in the mid-1980s left the mistaken impression in the popular imagination that American maritime power is formed around a strategy of aggressive power politics. While that impression may have been useful in rationalizing the navy's force structure at that particular phase in America's international relations, it could well be counterproductive for the future. As American naval leaders begin to contemplate this future and to look at possible arms control agreements, they need to keep in mind the fundamental concept of maritime strategy which links commercial and naval affairs in the broad context of international relations. It is this broad concept upon which American naval strategy is based, not the mistaken notion of aggressive attack.

Notes

This paper is the text of a contribution to the 1989 Williams College—Mystic Seaport Symposium on "The Atlantic Maritime World." It is the author's selection of some of the themes he finds in a book of essays he coedited with Robert S. Jordan: *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power: Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Macmillan Press in association with St. Antony's College, Oxford; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). The contributors to that book are Norman H. Gibbs, Eric Grove, John Gooch, Hattendorf, Barry D. Hunt, Paul M. Kennedy, Robert S. Jordan, J. Kenneth McDonald, Marc Milner, Malcolm H. Murfett, Joel Sokolsky, Geoffrey Till, and Robert S. Wood. While their detailed essays are the source of this article, the individual contributors may or may not agree with the general interpretations presented here.

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6. Paul M. Kennedy, "The Relevance of the Pre-War British and American Maritime Strategies to the First World War and its Aftermath, 1898-1920," in *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power*, p. 183.
7. Malcolm H. Murfett, "'Are We Ready?' The Development of American and British Naval Strategy, 1922-39," in *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power*, p. 238.