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## Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West

Clark G. Reynolds

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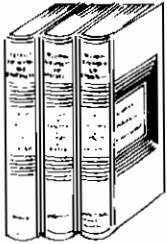
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# PROFESSIONAL READING



“The main strategic aim of the ‘maritime alliance’ must be to keep Russia in the landlocked position that has always handicapped her. This means commanding the sea-lanes of the world, notably the chokepoints through which not only Russian but most major shipping must pass.”

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Clark G. Reynolds

Gray, Colin S. *Maritime Strategy, Geopolitics, and the Defense of the West*. New York: National Strategy Information Center, 1986. 81pp. \$8.95

If Julian Corbett, Herbert Richmond, or even Alfred Thayer Mahan could be restored to life long enough to read this book, they would no doubt simply pass it off as all too familiar stuff (except, of course, for the nuclear dimension). For as strategic pundits of the early 20th century, they spoke and wrote the very same language as Colin Gray. Trouble is, the verities of that exceedingly fruitful era of strategic philosophy have long since been eclipsed by the dramas of two world wars and high-tech weaponry.

Unlike his intellectual forebears, however, Gray does not approach the subject from a historical perspective; quite the reverse. He attacks the problems facing Western strategy-makers on generally contemporary grounds, carefully and painstakingly considering each school of strategic thought, weighing their strengths, illusions, misconceptions, and prospects before tipping his own historical hand at the finish by invoking Corbett’s

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Dr. Reynolds received his doctorate in history from Duke University. He has taught at the U.S. Naval Academy, the University of Maine, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. He writes widely in the fields of strategy and naval history. His books include *The Fast Carriers*, *Command of the Sea*, and *Famous American Admirals*. Dr. Reynolds is currently writing a biography of Admiral John H. Towers for the Naval Institute Press.

treatment of Napoleon and Nelson. Indeed, he argues, correctly in my opinion, "To date there has been too much theory and too little careful historical study or future-oriented middle and end-game analysis of the 'trailing edge' of prolonged conflict on all sides of the seapower-landpower debate."

Conclusion: "Superior seapower, protected by a sufficient strategic-nuclear counterdeterrent, is a prerequisite for the basic national security of an insular contemporary United States, as it was for the Britain of the Napoleonic era and well beyond. Then as now, however, success at sea needs to be married to competence on land."

In making his case Gray restores "geopolitics" as a respectable term—long tainted by the Nazi use of it via Karl Haushofer—in order to identify and explain the United States as a "continental-size" strategic island, whose strengths lie in her geographical position. For America's "oceanic trade (and power projection) routes of the world are the lines of internal communication of the U.S.-led maritime alliance." By contrast, Soviet Russia is a continental state, just as Imperial Russia was when geopolitician Halford Mackinder hailed her "heartland" as the key to control of the Eurasian "world island" and hence of the world.

Such a dichotomy seems almost trite, except that, as Gray demonstrates, it has been oversimplified and thus misunderstood by many recent schools of strategic thought. For example, argue the unilateralists and neoisolationists, the United States would be stronger and safer by acting alone or pulling back to her own shores to be a Fortress America. Instead, says Gray, America is a true world island whose strength and prosperity depend upon a global system of sea-lanes to friends, allies, client states, and markets whose support provides the outer defensive works. The guts of Gray's thesis is that this system will flourish only through the conscious practice of an *active* forward containment policy.

Such a dynamic application of containment is in direct opposition to the *passive*, defensive mind-set which has acted since the 1950s as a doctrinal straitjacket on American foreign and defense policy. Gray's view is a fresh one, articulating the perspective of a new generation of strategic thinkers less inhibited by the historical shock waves generated by Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, McCarthyism, the China tangle, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. To advance his views, however, Gray has first had to "gore the oxen of several schools of thought on U.S. national military strategy."

Most significantly, controlled nuclear escalation and NATO's strategy of flexible response have lost any credibility or military utility they might have once had. Since the prospect of thermonuclear devastation appeals to no one, "strategic air and missile power. . . must responsibly be regarded as a counterdeterrent, not as a reliable equalizer for theater defense deficiencies."

No longer the sword of the Republic, says Gray, nuclear weapons have been

relegated to the status of shield, albeit an indispensable one. He sees vertical escalation following upon reverses in a conventional Soviet attack in Europe as a fictional option that would backfire on the United States and NATO.

Nor would such miracle technology as promised by the SDI be likely to change the situation—unless, somehow, it “is able to produce some close facsimile of a leakproof ‘astrodome,’ and the Soviet defense network cannot.” This is a welcome position; someone has finally had the intellectual courage to say flatly that SDI is a thinly-veiled scheme to create a defensive deterrent, not unlike the ABM system, or the Maginot Line or even the Great Wall of China; throughout history, defensive deterrents have never really deterred.

This part of Gray’s argument is therefore aimed at the material strategists who see salvation in the high-tech hardware of our times rather than in sound, time-honored strategic principles. The strategic bombing chestnut has finally run its course, “Nuclear deemphasis,” says he, “is no longer a matter of choice.”

Fortunately, and Gray hammers home his thesis, “the global maritime alliance led by the United States has a markedly superior option as an alternative to the nuclear crutch. In principle at least, the West has the political, economic, and geostrategic assets, bound together and sustained by superior maritime strength, to compel the unstable empire of the Soviet Union, with its potentially very fractious minorities at home, and its sullen, even hostile, satellites abroad, to wage a prolonged non-nuclear war that Moscow should not anticipate being able to win.”

What Gray advocates is putting the principle into practice. Instead of contemplating the short war now assumed by many, he believes that Western strategists must convince Russia that any conflict begun in Europe will be both a long war and a global one. The main strategic aim of the “maritime alliance” must be to keep Russia in the landlocked position that has always handicapped her. This means commanding the sea-lanes of the world, notably the chokepoints through which not only Russian but most major shipping must pass.

Conventional American and allied land, sea, and air power should be employed in shoring up the peripheral lands (or Rimland, as Nicholas Spykman called it four decades ago) which deny the Soviet Union control of the Eurasian coastal ports and egress therefrom to the open sea. Holding the northern flank of Norway as set forth in the U.S. Navy’s current Maritime Strategy is one aspect of this. In this way, the West denies Russia the ability to undertake a “maritime siege” of the Americas, launched from captured ports.

The defense of Western Europe remains the primary strategic aim, and for this reason Gray insists that “it is politically essential and militarily efficient for NATO-Europe to provide the overwhelming majority of the ready and

rapidly mobilizable ground forces for local defense." The Western Europeans must not expect to rely on U.S. reinforcements to halt a sudden Russian offensive, a completely unfeasible undertaking. He consequently castigates the U.S. Army for following a doctrine built around the prospect of its fighting on the Central Front; the Army's "forward garrisons located and sized by what amounts to a political gridlock contribute to inflexibility in posture and policy."

Whether or not NATO armies can survive a Russian juggernaut, pro-Western military might must be expected to attack on a global scale, on all Russian flanks "in places and times of its own choosing"—in northern and southern Europe, as well as Africa and especially East Asia. Gray alludes several times to China as possibly contributing to this counterattack, but he does so only half-heartedly and this is the greatest shortcoming of his argument. The 'Mongol horde' which ravaged the Russias many centuries ago remains the greatest immediate fear of the Russian people and government. In my view, that source of immense conventional military force and manpower must be exploited to the full and not merely seen as the "security-tie dalliance" which Gray assigns it.

Gray's program in fact is the resurrected and time-tested strategy of concentration practiced most successfully by Britain during the 18th and early 19th centuries and by the Anglo-American alliances of the 20th. That is, while the navy wins absolute control of the sea—isolating and blockading the continental enemy's homeland (and, in World War II, air forces winning control of the air, for bombing)—a major allied army or coalition of armies invades and defeats the enemy army. Russia today, Gray observes, has assumed the strategic role of Napoleonic France and of Imperial and Nazi Germany (to which I would add Japan, whose main armies were neutralized by the Communist Chinese and Russian Armies in 1944-45). Gray argues that between Hiroshima and the mid-1960s, Western superiority in nuclear weapons provided the substitute for an effective allied continental army. But with the nuclear option now strategically impotent, a superior conventional army (and tactical air force) has again become a fundamental prerequisite for the success of the Western maritime strategy.

Crucial to Gray's grand strategy for the West is his perception of the enemy. He seems convinced—probably correctly—that Soviet Russia is committed primarily to a defensive strategy, i.e., the survival of the Soviet state, the party, and the homeland itself. Hence its reluctance to engage in a mutually-destructive thermonuclear exchange (arguments he could have strengthened by drawing on recent essays by Michael MccGwire). He sees little difference in this respect between tsarist and communist Russia. Arguable, however, is his belief that "the motives for outward pressure [are] endemic in the domestic stability requirements of that system."

If he means that Russia entertains an inevitable quest for territory, he contradicts himself. Beyond filling out the occupation of her continent to the eastward in the same manner as the United States did to the westward, both during the last century, Russia has never aspired to the complete conquest of the Eurasian landmass or to overseas colonial expansion. The use of foreign ports of call or even having minor allies like Cuba does not an empire make. What is different about the present Communist police state is that it has sought buffer zones—Eastern Europe, North Korea, (North) Vietnam, Afghanistan—to insure both external and internal security.

To be hostile to the United States does not mean, inferentially, that expansionism is endemic to the Russian system. *Drang nach Osten* and *Lebensraum* were the “geopolitical excuses of a constricted German state for which time was running out as Russia finally matured into the colossus which, unless stopped by Germany, would supplant her as the major continental European superpower. By contrast, Russia, by gaining Eastern Europe, eliminated the German menace and is determined to maintain her dominance there. The overrunning of the rest of Europe is not the cornerstone of Soviet strategy, although, as Gray admits, Russia would certainly welcome Western Europe into her political-economic sphere.

The suspect reliability of the buffer states and subject peoples, Gray strongly infers, is a distinct weakness in the Soviet security system and therefore an asset to a Western strategy of a prolonged war. This is a highly questionable assumption in that it is devoid of solid historical precedent or contemporary evidence. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan provide dramatic examples of just how effective absolute police controls over native as well as subject peoples can be during a long war and in spite of serious economic deprivation, social disruption, and aerial bombardment. Even the avowed American war aim of unconditional surrender played into the hands of Herr Goebbels in convincing the people to fight to the death for “the Fatherland.” So too did Stalin recast World War II into the “Great Patriotic War” for “Mother” Russia. Authoritarian ideology, that rhetorical facade of modern tyrants, is easily laid aside in the sacred cause of “home” defense.

The question is a major one addressed by neither Gray nor the other schools of strategy that he “gores.” What would the war aim of the West be? Should it be announced now, in order to enhance our deterrence credibility? And what reaction would it generate among our allies and enemies?

If past American practice is any guide, that war aim will be the elimination of the Communist system in Russia. Woodrow Wilson insisted on, and got, a democratic revolution inside Germany before he would negotiate an armistice (surrender) with any German government in 1918. So too the defeated Fascist regimes of the 1940s were dismantled and supplanted by American-style democracy. Such an avowed goal might stiffen police control inside Russia, or it might have the Wilsonian effect of rallying the people of

Eurasia to our side. These are matters so essential to the shaping of Western strategy that they must be addressed directly.

The notion of controlling and stopping a Russo-American ground war in Eurasia is an extremely doubtful possibility. A limited war for short-term gains cannot be reconciled with the mortal animosity between two foes battling for the minds of men. Furthermore, high-tech weapons, conventional as well as nuclear, have a momentum all their own. Decades of "cold" warring, dating at least from the Red scares of 1919, have accumulated deep frustrations on both sides that, once unleashed, will simply disallow compromise.

Yet, the greatest weapon of superpower America is its eminently-exportable liberal-capitalistic ideals with their universal appeal to individualism and the human spirit. These can and do work over time in reshaping global attitudes just as they did in creating the American Republic. The most viable strategy for realizing this long-term goal is the very maritime strategy advocated by Colin Gray. His monograph should be mandatory reading for any intelligent discussion about Western strategic options for the foreseeable future.

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Gregor, A. James. *The China Connection: U.S. Policy and the People's Republic of China*. Stanford, Calif.: The Hoover Institution Press, 1986. 280pp. \$7

Since the early 1970s, enthusiasm for the "China connection" in the United States has taken on the proportions of a growth industry. Entrepreneurs expect access to the world's largest single market; practitioners of academia establish exchange programs with a gusto that rivals an NFL linebacker blitzing a quarterback; America's farmers see China as a relief valve for their burgeoning surplus; and U.S. soldiers, sailors and airmen have entered into sustained contact with the world's largest military establishment. However, the mismatch between our expectations of what an abiding

relationship with China will yield and what we have realized to date, is perhaps even larger than it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps it is for this reason that The Hoover Institution selected the U.S.-China "connection" as the subject for the first volume in its U.S. Foreign Policy Series. The goal of this endeavor is a "clear, cogent analysis" of U.S. interests and involvement in key countries and regions of the world. It is against this yardstick as well as that of the mismatch between expectation and realization that Professor Gregor's work should be measured.

His monograph is organized and informative for the reader who is not familiar with the subject. After a brief overview of China's land and its people, Gregor sketches the history of