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# The Historical Elements of Mahanian Doctrine

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by

Thomas R. Pollock

Sir Walter Raleigh: "Whosoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world, commands the riches of the world itself."

**M**odern American navalism began with the publishing of Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. Mahan's work not only signaled the rise of the "New Navy" but also initiated a whole new school of strategic thought. Until 1890 when Mahan published his epic work, military strategic thought had focused on warfare ashore; very little attention was paid to seagoing strategy. Mahan recognized that there are substantial similarities between the principles of land and sea strategy. Yet, there are important differences, and he established his reputation by delineating the boundaries of the two. His writings on naval strategy reflected the influence upon him of the so-called Napoleonic strategists. Among the writers whom Mahan read and was influenced by were Jomini, Napier, Hamley, and (in translation, for he read no German) Clausewitz. He also read Corbett, although the latter did not begin to publish until Mahan's main work was done.

Mahan fathered modern naval thought. His work was constrained, however, by his choice of evidence. Although he admitted readily that he focused his research on the period of wood, sail, and muzzle loaders, instead of steel, steam, and breech loaders, he maintained that the art of war and thus its underlying principles remained constant.

In all his writings, Mahan was particularly influenced by the works of Henri Jomini, the Swiss theorist. While lecturing on naval strategy at the Naval War College, he said: "From Jomini's 'Art of War,' . . . supplemented by his 'History of the Wars of the French Revolution,' in which he gives history accompanied by strategic and tactical discussion of events, I went on to write the course of historical lectures which subsequently were published under the title 'The Influence of Sea Power upon History.'"<sup>1</sup>

Mahan divided his analysis of naval strategy into four areas: (1) concentration of force; (2) the necessity of central positions or lines; (3) the necessity of interior lines of movement relative to central positions; and (4) the bearing of communications upon a force's ability to maintain itself and to operate.<sup>2</sup>

Jomini's writings were solely concerned with the principles of warfare determined by the Napoleonic wars. He articulated the principles of warfare; he never thought of applying them to the sea because at his time, military strategists considered warfare ashore, or more appropriately, continental warfare, as preeminent, and only viewed events afloat as a secondary consideration. Jomini wrote that strategy embraces:

1. Selection of the theater of war, and the discussion of the different combinations which it allows.
2. Determination of the decisive points in these combinations and the most favorable direction for operations.
3. Selection and establishment of the fixed base and of the zone of operations.
4. Selection of the objective point, whether offensive or defensive.
5. The strategic fronts, lines of defense, and fronts of operations.
6. Choice of lines of operations leading to the objective point or strategic front.
7. For a given operation, the best strategic line and the different maneuvers necessary to embrace all possible cases.
8. The eventual bases of operations and the strategic reserves.
9. The marches of armies, considered as maneuvers.
10. The relations between the positions of depots and the marches of the army.<sup>3</sup>

Mahan's genius may not be in his theories of naval strategy but rather in his insight into the similarities between the principles of warfare ashore and that at sea. He redefined, rather than initiated, strategy in terms of naval warfare.

J.D. Hittle's introduction to *Jomini's Art of War* points to the fact that "out of the Napoleonic era came a new and stronger appreciation of the concentration of force upon the decisive point of battle." Jomini, says Hittle, felt that within this principle was "the key to all the science of war." Military strategy, then, according to Jomini, is concerned with bringing preponderant force to bear "upon the decisive points of a theater of war, and also upon the communications of the enemy as much as possible without compromising one's own." This fundamental principle became the foundation of Mahan's theory of naval strategy. In his opening remarks on naval strategy at the Naval War College, Mahan said that "like the A, B of the Greeks, which gave its name to the whole of their alphabet and ours, concentration sums up in itself all the other factors, the entire alphabet, of military efficiency in war."<sup>4</sup> As he developed his theories during the lectures, his reliance upon the Napoleonic writers became more obvious.

Mahan learned from Jomini and Napier that every theater of operations contains definite strategical points. These points control the field of operations and it is against these points which a concentration of force must be brought. Because warfare on land and at sea are in this regard somewhat different, consideration must be given here to determine what exactly constitutes a strategic point at sea. This understanding can be obtained by first recognizing what a decisive point is in relation to warfare on land.

On any given battlefield there exist certain geographical points, the control of which gives the possessor full or at least majority control of the battlefield. On land this may be a patch of high ground, a river bank, a mountain pass, a forest, or any place which limits or affects the field of battle. At sea, there are two types of decisive or strategic points.

The first of these is a base, the possession of which gives a fleet the ability to launch an offensive operation or provides it with logistical support and, in case of a reverse, protection. Gibraltar is a classic case in point for not only does the Rock dominate the western entrance to and exit from the Mediterranean but it also makes possible actions by the Royal Navy (or any ally of Britain) in that sea, serving if necessary as a base of operations. Recently, Gibraltar was used as a forward supply base for operations by the Royal Navy in the South Atlantic. The extreme distance between the Rock and the Falkland Islands underscores the importance of possessing forward bases in areas to which a nation must project force to protect its interests.

The second kind of strategic point is that place which a fleet occupies. Mahan believed that an admiral must bring superior force to bear upon an opposing force at the point and time of engagement; that is, he must concentrate all his force against an enemy's. Because the ocean does not often have geographical constraints such as defiles, forests, or swamps, it is crucial in naval war to bring concentrated force upon the enemy.

In regard to the first consideration, Mahan wrote: "Notwithstanding the difficulty of maintaining distant and separate dependencies, a nation which wishes to assure a share of control on any theater of maritime importance cannot afford to be without a footing on some of the strategic points to be found there. Such points, suitably chosen from their relative positions, form a base; secondary as regards the home country, primary as regards the immediate theater."<sup>5</sup> In regard to the second consideration, Mahan said: "The principle . . . is that of keeping a superior force at the decisive point; expressed in the homely phrase of getting there first with the most men."<sup>6</sup>

After establishing the theories and principles behind naval concentration, Mahan followed Jomini's prescribed outline and examined how one maintains a fleet in a theater of operations. Jomini asserted that the term strategic lines applied to those lines which connected the decisive points of the theater of operations either with each other or with the front of operations. Mahan, within the framework of his previous discussion on naval strategy, delineated two types of strategic lines: those which affect communications (which are defensive in nature) and interior lines (which are offensive in nature).

Mahan felt that the most important of strategic lines are those which concern communications. He stated that "Communications dominate war." To demonstrate the importance of lines of communication, Mahan referred to Napier's analysis of Sir John Moore's maneuver at the opening of the Peninsular War. Moore, realizing that the fall of Spain to Napoleon was imminent after the fall of Madrid, determined to maneuver his army in such a way as to threaten Napoleon's communications. "The object of my movement," said Sir John, "is to threaten the French communications, and attract their attention from Madrid and Zaragoza, and favour any movement which may be made by the Spanish armies forming to the south of the Tagus."<sup>7</sup> Napier argued that it was this maneuver which necessitated a complete revision of Napoleon's strategy during the Peninsular War. Napier wrote happily that "the whole plan of his (Napoleon's) campaign was overturned!" Mahan's remarks on this maneuver closely paralleled Napier's: "The threat to the French communications arrested Napoleon's advance, postponed the imminent reduction of Spain, gave time

for Austria to ripen her preparations, and entailed upon the emperor, in place of a rapid conquest, the protracted wasting Peninsular War, with its decisive ultimate effects upon his fortunes. Napier shrewdly said that his own history might never have been written if Moore had not made the move he did."<sup>8</sup>

Lines of communication, Mahan held, are defensive in nature because they concern the ability of a nation to maintain a military force in a theater of operations. Compared to almost anything else they are, or should be, safe, and therefore represent the most likely line of retreat a force may take should a reverse be experienced. In a direct application of this principle to naval strategy, i.e., that one must always guard one's lines of communication, Mahan determined that secure communications at sea depend on naval preponderance, especially if the distances between the home and the advance bases are great.

Interior lines, according to Mahan, enable a belligerent to "attack in force one part of the hostile line sooner than the enemy can reinforce it, because the assailant is nearer than the friend."<sup>9</sup> Mahan drew heavily from Jomini in regard to interior lines. Jomini asserted that "simple and interior lines enable a general to bring into action, by strategic movements, upon the important point, a stronger force than the enemy."<sup>10</sup> But from this point, Mahan further articulated and expanded upon this principle in a manner which had not been undertaken before. He defined interior lines in such a manner: "The characteristic of interior lines is that of the central position prolonged in one or more directions, thus favouring sustained interposition between separate bodies of an enemy; with the consequent power to concentrate against either, while holding the other in check with a force possibly distinctly inferior. An interior line may be conceived as the extension of a central position, or as a series of central points connected with one another as a geometrical line in a continuous series of geometrical points."<sup>11</sup> Interior lines must be thought of in relation to time. Possession of interior lines during battle enables a belligerent to reach a decisive point on a battlefield sooner than his opponent. When this principle is developed one step further as Corbett suggested,<sup>12</sup> a commander can forgo strict concentration in favor of flexible deployment and response as long as secure interior lines are maintained so that he may concentrate his forces faster than his enemy can. However, as Mahan pointed out, "the interior position will enable you to get there sooner, but with that its advantage ends. It does not give also the most men needed to complete the familiar aphorism."<sup>13</sup>

Mahan's analysis of strategy can be summarized by Napoleon's saying that "war is a business of positions." The relative positions of bases, armies, fleets, and strategic lines all have a bearing on the outcome of any battle. Having examined the principles affecting the functioning of war in general, Mahan turned to interpreting these principles in relation to naval strategy. He felt that it was "of little use to have a central position if the enemy on both sides is stronger than you." He argued that "it is power plus position that constitutes an advantage over power without position; or more instructively, equations of force are composed of power and position in varying degrees, surplus in one tending to compensate for deficiency in the other."<sup>14</sup> According to Mahan, naval positions could be judged by "the amount of trade that passes (nearly) . . . as well as the nearness of the port to the route."<sup>15</sup> As long as all the earth's great powers were European, England's dominant position in relation to the Channel gave her the ability to control the world's seas by controlling that body

of water. In a similar application of this principle, that power which controls the Strait of Hormuz controls the world's main source of oil.

As Mahan continued to read other sources of military theory later in his life, he realized that he had to revise his theories to include those points to which he had not previously given consideration. He was able to absorb Clausewitz' writings and apply the most salient points which the German makes: that war is an extension of national policy and that a nation's reserves, not its immediate strength, win a war. In regard to the former, Mahan, Jomini, and Clausewitz were all in close agreement. Mahan related to his students during a lecture: "I have just stated a principle, namely, the necessity of including political-international conditions in military projects." In reference to the latter factor, Mahan applied Clausewitzian theory to naval war: "The last expression of foreign professional opinion, concerning these so-called obsolete ships, is that, in the later stages of a war, when the newest ships have undergone their wear and received their hammering, the nation which then can put forward the largest reserve of ships of the older type will win."<sup>16</sup> Mahan perceived this principle to have a bearing on that part of national policy which concerns naval strategy (i.e., how many ships a nation should have) and therefore was careful to separate this principle from those which have a direct bearing upon the operations of a fleet within a theater of operations.

After considering all the elements which comprised naval strategy, Mahan concluded that "the proper main objective of the navy is the enemy's navy."<sup>17</sup> This theorem is the foundation of his strategy. He felt that in order to assure oneself of free communications (i.e., the use of the sea) the destruction of the enemy's fleet must be attained. He wrote: "A crushing defeat of the fleet, or its decisive inferiority, when the enemy appears, means a dislocation at once of the whole system of colonial or other dependencies, quite irrespective of the position where the defeat occurs."<sup>18</sup> To administer such a crushing defeat upon an enemy necessitates, of course, a fleet superior to any forces it has to face. Mahan stood by his doctrine of preponderant naval power, even when criticism that it was too inflexible began to arise later in his life. He pointed to the necessity of maintaining concentrated force to insure naval superiority. If you possessed preponderant strength, he argued, that would either drive the enemy from the seas or force him to face you in battle. Although Mahan died in 1914, his doctrines were justified by the German High Seas Fleet's incapacitation during World War I. The maintenance of superior strength essentially forces an enemy's fleet to decline battle and thus gives the possessor the free use of the seas.

An analysis of his principles of naval strategy reveals that Mahan only redefined strategy in terms of naval warfare. By himself he did not determine those principles. Clearly, he realized the validity of applying the principles of strategy ashore to the conduct of naval warfare.

## NOTES

Sir Walter Raleigh's quote was taken from Raymond O'Connor's "Naval Strategy in the 20th Century," *Naval War College Review*, February 1969, p. 4.

1. Alfred T. Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 17.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

3. Quoted in J.D. Hittle, *Jomini's Art of War* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Telegraph Press, 1947), pp. 66-67.
4. Mahan, p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
7. William Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsular* (Brussels: Meline, Cans, 1839), p. LVI.
8. Mahan, p. 241.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
10. Hittle, p. 80.
11. Mahan, p. 31.
12. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), pp. 131-132.
13. Mahan, p. 55.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

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