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The Significance of Seapower to the United States

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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEAPOWER TO
THE UNITED STATES**

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INTRODUCTION

Geography, it has been said does not argue — it simply is. But physical geography has a different meaning for, and a different effect upon, different peoples at different times. Politico-geographical realities of yesterday may be myths today and, unless the changing relationships of territory and people are re-examined and re-evaluated constantly, national strategies and objectives may become based upon myth rather than fact.

In the last century the creed of American Manifest Destiny apparently was absorbed and readily accepted by the American public generally, and by many persons in positions of power. The new American Republic was to expand over the entire North American Continent, and in fulfillment of that destiny she would become a great and powerful nation! Through the writings of the naval historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan, expansion beyond the seas was added to the credo of Manifest Destiny, for Mahan pointed to the sea as the road to national greatness and to sea power as the means.

Mahan was a spokesman for his times. He brought political and geographic realities of his day sharply into focus. He lifted the doctrine of American Manifest Destiny out of its continental context and gave it new horizons beyond the seas. He accurately defined sea power, demonstrated its significance to the Nation, and reduced its principles to a clearly stated set of rules of naval strategy — all in terms of the politics, economics, and technology of his day.

But political goals, economic relationships and technology change. Strategic concepts have to keep pace if the Nation's strategy is to succeed — if, indeed, there is to be a national strategy at all!

What, then, is the significance of the sea, and of sea power, to the United States in its international relations today?

In order to arrive at an answer to this question, we shall analyze in this paper both the continental and maritime concepts

of power politics, and then present a brief interpretation of United States Navy, Army, and Air Force strategic doctrines in the context of the foregoing analysis. Finally, we shall synthesize from these bits and pieces a sound national strategic concept, stated in the form of broad strategic principles having current applicability to the specific politico-geographical realities which face the United States today.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEA POWER TO THE UNITED STATES

I. THE CONTINENT — BASE OF POWER

A Geographic Concept. An examination of the significance of sea power today may well begin with a brief exploration of its counterpart — the continental power concept — which assigns overwhelming natural advantages to broadly based land power by virtue of its domination of the sea power bases which must be located on the periphery of the land.

To proceed directly to the heart of the matter, the thesis is advanced by advocates of the continental power doctrine that the real ultimate threat to the world's liberty lies in the probability that the great continental land mass of Europe, Asia, and Africa some day will fall under the domination of a single aggressive nation which then will possess the base upon which to establish invincible world political power.¹ This conclusion is not based so much upon an appraisal of the relative military and economic potentialities of the continental land base as upon an interpretation of world history in terms of world geography.

The geographer sees three-fourths of the face of the globe covered by a single body of water, and from this simple observation he derives the concept of the unity of the sea as a fundamental geographic reality. Of that one-fourth of the earth's surface which is land, two-thirds occurs as a single great island lying in the one world ocean. All other land surfaces appear as mere insular satellites of the great continent, or world island, of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Examining the world continent more closely, the geographer perceives that its northern coast is almost inaccessible from the ocean because of its proximity to polar ice, and that therefore the great rivers which flow through Siberia to this northern coast are not part of the world-wide ocean and river navigation system.

¹Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 70.

These rivers thus have not served, as have other coastal waterways, as access routes for penetration from the ocean into the interior of the continent. Contiguous with the basins of these northward flowing Siberian rivers, which comprise the Arctic drainage, is an even larger area which drains into salt lakes and seas having no outlet at all to the world ocean. These land-locked basins of inward drainage, referred to geographically as "continental" basins, when taken together with the Arctic drainage, form a single large region in the north and center of the world continent which is not accessible by navigation from the ocean. From this fact the concept of a *geographic heartland* within the great continent is derived.¹ And since the Baltic and Black Seas can be closed (and historically have been) by the exercise of military land power, a *strategic heartland* can be described as consisting of the geographic heartland plus the Baltic and Black Seas with their respective drainages.

It is in this setting that the concept of the heartland as the ultimate power base for world domination first was derived, through an interpretation of the history of conflict between peoples whom the geographer can classify either as insular, peninsular, or continental.

Islands, Peninsulars, and the Heartland. It is a matter of record that the island of Crete, pre-Greek center of Aegean civilization and sea power, eventually fell prey to a tribe based upon that mainland peninsular which later was to become Greece. The half-barbaric Macedonians, in their turn, based as they were in the root of the Greek Peninsular, were able to conquer the Greek sea base and then march around the Eastern Mediterranean to Egypt, to make that body of water a "closed sea" by depriving both Greeks and Phonicians of their sea bases.

From their peninsular position the Romans similarly made a "closed sea" of the Western Mediterranean when, after the conquest of Carthage in the Third Punic War, all shores of the Western Mediterranean were controlled by Roman land

¹Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, pp. 35-36.

power. Later, when unified Roman power had supplanted that of the Macedonians on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean as well, the entire Mediterranean was maintained as a "closed sea," and for some 500 years Rome controlled that sea by holding the coasts. No battle fleet was needed for, deprived of bases, no sea power rose to challenge the land power of the Roman Empire on the Mediterranean.

The foregoing bit of ancient history seems to hint at a geopolitical principle — broadly based land power is capable of dominating the insular and peripheral bases upon which sea power depends; hence, land power is intrinsically stronger than sea power.¹

A subsequent historic cycle occurred in a larger geographic arena. The land power of Rome eventually waned, and the seas she once had controlled from their shores were no longer "closed." The opening of the Mediterranean, after some five centuries of Roman domination, took place as a vast Mohammedan empire pushed out from the inland capitals of Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. Islamic tribes seized the provinces south of the Mediterranean, one by one, and gained footholds in Spain and Sicily. While Christendom remained contained in the European peninsula, the Mohammedans spread their domination and influence northward to the Continental heartland, eastward into northern India, southward to the African coasts south of the Sahara, and west to Gibraltar and Spain.

In spite of the European Crusaders' sorties against it, this Islamic bid for world empire was not thwarted by any power or combination of powers based upon the periphery of the continent. Its ultimate downfall remained to be brought about by Turkish (Tartar) land power projected from the steppes of the Eurasian heartland!

After the break-up of the Roman Empire, which had held sway not only over the Mediterranean but over the European peninsular and Britain, and the English Channel as well, fierce Norsemen were able to raid the Atlantic coasts from the North Sea to Gibraltar. Christendom thus was compacted into the Euro-

¹Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, pp. 34-39.

pean peninsular of the world continent, contained between Islam to the south and the pagan Norsemen from the north, and hammered by barbaric Tartar hordes from the Eurasian heartland.

Geographically, there is an unmistakable similarity between peninsular Greece and insular Crete, on the one hand, and peninsular Europe with its offlying insular Britain on the other. But ancient Mediterranean history did not quite repeat itself in Europe.

Crete had been overcome by land power projected from a united power base on the larger Greek peninsular. The Macedonian position, in the broad root of the Greek peninsula, had enabled the Macedonians to conquer Greece. Rome both conquered Carthage and took over the Macedonian conquests on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, thus closing the entire Mediterranean by unifying control of its shores. But with the decline of the Roman Empire, *competing nation states* grew up within the confines of the European peninsula, which therefore did not develop into a *united* power base. Moreover, all the competing states of Europe, so the interpretation goes, were vulnerable to the potentially superior land power based upon that broad root of the European peninsula which is the continental heartland. These circumstances, rather than any inherent strength of insular position, enabled the power balance to pass to the offlying island base — Britain.

The British Isles were conquered and held by Rome when Rome held sway over the European peninsula. It was only because the break-up of the Roman Empire resulted in the fragmentation of the European peninsula into several rival powers (each open to attack from the land behind, even as Athens and Sparta once had been open to invasion by Macedonians from the continental frontier) that Britain faced no united peninsula power base and thus became able to establish an island-based power which, by the end of the Napoleonic Wars, had enveloped and contained the peninsula.

In the middle of the nineteenth century there began the current series of attempts by Teuton and Slav to rule East Europe and the continental heartland, and thereby to establish a base

combining both geographic position and man power requisite to the domination of all of the great continent and, ultimately, the world. While Europe was embroiled in her wars, Britain enjoyed domination over the sea without serious challenge, and employed her sea power to contain whatever continental power threatened to extend its empire to the peripheral lands and combine an effective sea base with the heartland. But if the historic analogies described above are as good as the obvious geographic one, and if the conclusions drawn therefrom are indeed sound, then the European peninsula remains vulnerable to this day to the more broadly based power of the heartland; and the offlying islands remain vulnerable to a unified power having access to the entire European peninsula.¹

Barriers and Gateways to Conquest. While East Asia has felt the same pressures from land power based on the heartland as has Europe, the results have been quite different and the difference is readily explained on the basis of geography. The greatest single continuous lowland on the face of the earth extends from the north, center, and west portions of the heartland to the Volga basin of Europe, and is contiguous with the European Plain. This great lowland has provided invaders with a broad gateway from Siberia into Europe, through the gap between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea. China, India, and Southeast Asia, on the other hand, instead of being joined to the heartland by the greatest continuous lowland on earth, are separated from the heartland by the most massive uplands on the globe.² Thus when, in the course of history, mobile Tartar hordes have fallen upon the agricultural peoples of the Asian periphery, just as they have descended upon Europe, they have come by narrow and difficult routes. Although their invasions have succeeded, the invaders and their new empires have not long maintained political ties with the heartland base. In interpreting history in terms of the continental power concept, great significance is attached to barriers and gateways to conquest — to the intimate physical merging of the heartland with the peripheral lands of Europe and the Middle East, and to the separation of the heartland from the marginal lands of Africa and

¹William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, p. 288.

²Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, p. 37.

the southern and eastern coasts of Asia by such strong natural frontiers as the Sahara Desert, the Tibetan Heights and the arid Mongolian Upland.

The Western Hemisphere. In order to see clearly the significance to the Western Hemisphere of the world continent and heartland concept, it is necessary to view geography in still broader perspective than we have yet attempted. The world continent, in such broader view of the entire globe, appears as a gigantic promontory extending southward from the inaccessible Arctic to the Cape of Good Hope, around which sea lines of communication between East and West must pass unless the Mediterranean and Suez remain open by sufferance of any land power dominant on the great continent. Beside this mighty promontory the Americas assume the proportions of an island base lying off a peninsula — perhaps two rather large islands connected by a narrow isthmus and surrounded by lesser isles, but an insular base, nonetheless, comparable to the island of Crete lying off the Greek promontory and to the British Isles lying off the peninsula of Europe.

By virtue of this geographic analogy, and in light of the foregoing interpretation of insular, peninsular, and continental history, the continental power concept becomes a clear and ominous warning to America. The heartland of the world continent strategically dominates the marginal lands, so the dogma goes. A single unified land power based upon a promontory strategically dominates offlying islands, and can close the intervening waters to sea power merely by exerting this domination to control both shores. Hence, consolidated land power based upon the great world promontory occupies a strategically dominant position vis-a-vis the insular New World, and by extending its control to the American shores of the Atlantic and Pacific could close the entire world ocean to any rival sea power, even as the Romans closed the Mediterranean by exercising effective control over its shores.

Neither the Tartar hordes, which descended from the heartland upon Europe and Asia in the past, nor the Islamic Empire which once bid for world domination were backed by enough man-

power in the home base to make their conquests stick. Today in the continental heartland base there are hundreds of millions of people to threaten all the marginal lands of Asia and Europe — enough so that, once united, they easily could control the continent and reduce the offlying Americas to insular satellites.

An Appreciation of the Concept. This continental concept of power — the heartland thesis of world domination — deserves our critical scrutiny. Its basic tenets have some obvious validity, and do indeed throw interpretive light upon a good many historic events. But in extracting from this geographical interpretation of history a set of timeless principles underlying power relationships between nations — in reducing these principles to a form of dogma — and in extrapolating trends in order to forecast future developments in the world political arena, we are on much less firm ground.

Geographically, the great world promontory of Europe, Asia, and Africa set in a single great world ocean is indeed a reality. Geographically, the heartland consisting of combined Arctic and continental drainages is just as real. Strategically, the concept of a continental heartland not accessible to sea power may be less valid. Certainly it is safe to say that the national strategic heartland should have been considerably altered by developments in aircraft and modern integrated systems of transportation on land, to say nothing of the advent of missiles. Access to the geographic heartland is less and less denied by its detachment from the ocean and river navigation system. The strategic heartland concept might prove to be a good deal more transitory than its purely geographic counterpart, perhaps possessing greater validity in interpreting an era which is passing than it will have as a key to future events.¹

Furthermore, the same historic events in the same geographic setting could be used to argue that past attempts to es-

¹Hans W. Weigert, Henry Brodie, Edward W. Doherty, John R. Fernstrom, Eric Fischer and Dudley Kirk, *Principles of Political Geography*, pp. 209-215.

establish world domination from inland power bases have had little more than fleeting success! Historically, conquests of marginal lands from the heartland base actually have not been made to stick, either in Europe or in Asia. Deep penetrations of the marginal lands have occurred, but ultimately they have been contained and detached from the heartland base, and the invaders absorbed or transformed into a peripheral political entity.

Islands have been conquered from nearby peninsular bases, but Britain successfully contained the European peninsular, and it is largely speculation to say that this was possible *only* because the peninsular was occupied by several rival nations all of whom were vulnerable to pressure from East Europe. Even when Napoleon effectively united Western Europe — by conquering Belgium and Switzerland, surrounding himself with satellite kingdoms in Spain, Italy and Holland, and making an alliance with Germany — insular Britain still held the line Portsmouth-Plymouth-Gibraltar-Malta and was able to contain this concentration of power in the European peninsula and eventually see to Napoleon's downfall.

Seas have been closed by land power in control of their shores, but there is a remarkable resemblance between the closed Mediterranean of the Romans and the British-controlled Indian Ocean which, after the Napoleonic Wars, was dominated not by land power on its shores but by *naval power* linking the home base with a *colonial* army stationed in Northwest India!

Perhaps it was, after all, just an ironic twist of fate which resulted in the wholly unlikely alliance between maritime powers and Russia in World Wars I and II, and which thwarted the German ambition to dominate the heartland from East Europe and thence extend domination over the entire continent. But such are the vicissitudes of human history.¹ Whether or not Germany *should have been successful*, on the basis of geopolitical theory, the fact is that the overwhelming advantage which is supposed to accrue to land power rooted in the heartland of the great world continent has yet to be proved. Specifically, history to date leaves some doubt

¹Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, p. 43.

as to the strategically dominant position of the heartland vis-a-vis the entire maritime periphery when these coastal lands are supported by sea power which enjoys bases both upon them and upon offlying islands. Rather than "who rules the heartland commands the world island," might it not be that who rules the periphery of the world island can contain and dominate the power of the heartland? This thought invites an examination of an alternate concept of world power, based upon control of the sea rather than control of the land.

II. SEA POWER — BASIS OF EMPIRE

An Opposing Doctrine. Set against that concept which identifies the Eurasian heartland as the inevitable geographic pivot of world power is the doctrine that true and abiding national greatness rests upon sea power — that national power and wealth ultimately are associated with dependence upon, command of, and exploitation of the sea. This philosophy was crystallized and widely propagated in the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan between 1890 and 1914.

To the advocate of the sea power doctrine, the history of international conflict is largely a narrative of contests between nations to secure, each to its own people, a lion's share of the strength and prosperity which flow from commerce on the sea. Viewed in this light, many of the same historical incidents which have been cited to support the land power concept can be recounted to tell a somewhat different story.¹ For instance, although when once in control, Rome was able to maintain the Mediterranean as a closed sea by controlling its shores, it was first necessary that she emerge victorious on the sea itself, as a prelude to the final defeat of Carthage in the Punic Wars, by which she wrested control of the western shores. And even then, in the following civil war which finally united Roman West with Roman East, and really sealed the Mediterranean, it was the sea fight of Actium which was decisive.

¹James A. Field, Jr., "Origins of Maritime Strategy and the Development of Sea Power," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. VII, No. 7, March 1955, pp. 2-6.

Surely it is true that Islam's bid for world empire finally was crushed by the land power of the Eurasian heartland, but even before this its sea power in the Mediterranean had been countered from Venice and Genoa, and its exploitation of the sea to the eastward had been denied by Portuguese sea power rampant in the Indian Ocean.

Such incidents as those cited above, however, pale to virtual insignificance in support of the sea power thesis when compared to the history of the British Empire.¹ Based upon tiny, insular Britain, founded and maintained solely by the purposeful exercise of supremacy on the sea, this Empire in its history provides the preceptor and expositor of the sea power doctrine with concrete examples of the principles, techniques, and benefits of command of the sea. Speculation as to what *might* have happened, had Europe not been occupied by numerous competing nation states, is counted a weak argument against the events of history as they actually transpired. British sea power did in fact surround and contain the entire Eurasian continent, and Britain was able to wield the balance of power among nations and control the course of events in her favor on the mainland. In the face of British sea power, the world island has been an isolated battleground rather than a bastion of strength. The peaceful transfer of supremacy on the sea from Britain to the United States is regarded as the relinquishing of a priceless heritage by a tired and aging parent to a maturing offspring.

Transcending Concept. The term "sea power" itself does a disservice to the concept by improperly describing the thesis. "Sea Power" is all too easily relegated in the mind to the status of merely one of a triumverate — "sea power," "land power," and "air power" — all too easily related directly to navies, as "land power" is associated with armies and "air power" with air forces. In this narrow sense, the term "naval power" would be more appropriate, although even "naval power" is still too broad

¹Captain John D. Hayes, "Peripheral Strategy — Mahan's Doctrine Today," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 79, No. 11, November 1953, p. 1185.

a term to describe fully the military element of sea power if land and air forces are excluded in the context. The use of air forces as component parts of naval forces has become of paramount importance in modern naval operations, and the use of landing forces to seize and hold naval bases and to project naval power against a littoral is as old as sea warfare itself.

In its true meaning the term "sea power" is a transcending one, encompassing the algebraic total of all the strengths and weaknesses — geographical, political, economic, cultural, military — of a maritime nation. Mahan referred to "sea power in the broad sense, which includes 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."¹ Sea power is "at once an abstract conception and a concrete fact." As an abstract conception it describes the power "personality" which automatically accrues to any maritime nation simply by virtue of its being a maritime nation. As a concrete fact it expresses the degree to which a maritime nation has realized its national power potential, and the vigor with which it applies its national power in the international political arena.

Basic Factors. Several factors were seen by Mahan to influence both a nation's dependence upon and her opportunities to exploit the sea. In Mahan's day, geographical position with respect to other nations and trade routes was of prime importance. The weather and terrain, including the nature of the seaboard, affected both the need and ability to establish intercourse with the outside world, as did the extent of the national territory and length of the coastline. The number of people, and the per cent who "followed the sea" in their normal pursuits, were a strong element of sea power, as was the aptitude of the people for commercial enterprise and for planting successful colonies. Finally, the character of the government, its institutions, and domestic and foreign poli-

¹Captain A. T. Mahan, U.S.N., *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, p. 28.

cies, could operate to stimulate or throttle activities which contribute to the development of sea power.

The doctrine of sea power, as it had evolved and was crystallized some seventy years ago, was widely accepted in the United States, Britain, Germany, and Japan, and has exerted profound influence upon the destinies of these nations in the intervening years. Its wide acceptance, however, is not real proof of its validity.

According to the tenets of this doctrine, sea-borne commerce — with its exchange of finished products for raw materials — makes a nation great. Command of the sea is a prerequisite. A close relation between sea-borne military power and economic health thus is established. The effectiveness of navies is dependent upon far-flung systems of bases, which concurrently may serve as sources of raw materials and as markets. Thus the requirements of the Navy and national economic ambitions coincide, to produce a compelling national interest in the acquisition of overseas territories. Mahan's sea power doctrine and the philosophy of economic imperialism were virtually synonymous in this respect.

The due sense and control of the sea is but one link in the chain of exchange by which wealth accumulates; but it is the central link, which lays under contribution other nations for the benefit of the one holding it, and which, history seems to assert, most surely of all gathers to itself riches.¹

Imperialistic Origins. Sea power doctrine evolved in an age of dynamic power politics, competitive navalism, and rampant imperialism. Mahan's studies of the history of the rise of the British Empire during the years of mercantilistic imperialism offered substantiation of his views that national power, national security, and national prosperity depend upon foreign commerce which in turn demands merchant shipping, colonial markets, overseas bases, and naval protection. His sea power concept thus was basically a philosophy of empire. He viewed the retention of overseas markets

¹Captain A. T. Mahan, U. S. N., *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, pp. 225-226.

as resting upon the political and military power of a nation, rather than upon success in economic competition entered into freely by manufacturers and merchants. The underlying economic philosophy of the day, reflecting historic mercantalism rather than modern capitalism, held that national prosperity and power required an accumulation of precious metals through a favorable balance of trade. From this requirement stemmed the need to increase the value of exports and decrease the value of imports; the need for a merchant marine, to limit the profit from shipping to a nation's own citizens rather than sharing this source of income with others; the need to establish overseas colonies whose trade could be so supervised and regulated as to provide the mother country with inexpensive essential raw materials and with profitable outlets for the surplus capacity of her industrial plant. This economic philosophy, perhaps more than anything else basic to the sea power concept of an earlier day, is outmoded by today's capitalistic finance system wherein profit must accrue to the buyer as well as to the seller in the international market, and wherein other great nations with their own excess production capacity and purchasing power have replaced colonies as the best potential customers.¹

Related Theories. Two other theories became almost inextricably enmeshed in the very warp of sea power doctrine during its evolution and subsequent interpretation. One is the principle of concentration of naval force, which in its applied form becomes the principle of battle-fleet supremacy. The other is the controlling influence of naval operations over land campaigns.² These notions, like the imperialistic philosophy of international economics in these days of revolutionary nationalism, have an archaic tone which cannot help but bring into question the timeliness of the whole sea power doctrine and its applicability to conditions as they really exist today.

The principle of concentration of naval power to achieve battle-fleet supremacy involves more than the mere tactical concentration of capital ships to produce decisive results in battle. It

¹Frederick H. Hartmann, *The Relations of Nations*, pp. 128-136

²William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, pp. 38 and 47.

also encompasses the concentration of national resources, even before hostilities begin, to provide the capital ships needed to command the seas. It warns against squandering potential naval strength on other less essential instruments, whose operations can in no way be decisive in a contest for sea supremacy. This principle certainly proved valid for Britain in World War I, and, with the aircraft carrier replacing the battleship as the capital ship of the fleet, it again proved its worth for the United States in her naval operations against Japan in World War II.¹ But with recent developments in submarine capabilities, in land-based air forces, and in missiles, it becomes fair and indeed prudent to question whether concentration either of resources or of tactical units to achieve battle-fleet supremacy is any longer an effective strategy for gaining command of the sea.

As to the controlling influence of naval operations over land campaigns, this theory too can be substantiated by historical example. But, once again, it is dangerous to assume an immutable principle as applicable to conditions of the future as it has been to events of the past. It is pertinent now to question whether technological developments may make interdiction of critical sea areas possible without recourse to *conventional naval* operations, thus greatly reducing the influence of operations *at sea* upon land campaigns. It is even pertinent to question whether modern weaponry can place the decisive issue, in a general war between continental and maritime nations, completely outside the spheres of both conventional land campaigns and naval operations!

III. SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF OPPOSING THESES

Strengths and Weaknesses. Thus far we have dealt with the continental concept of national power and with traditional sea power doctrine as separate and conflicting philosophies of power politics. Nonetheless, they have a number of common virtues and common faults. Each has found substantiation in scholarly historical analysis, and each focuses attention upon the close relationship

¹William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, pp. 38 and 47.

of historical geography and political geography. This important contribution should not be overlooked in any critique of either the continental or sea power philosophy, for a sound evaluation of politico-geographical factors is impossible without an appreciation of historical factors and events. Whether or not history repeats itself, geography repeatedly influences the destinies of nations as history unfolds. Both continental and sea power philosophies provide useful insight into the manner in which this influence is exerted.

Both philosophies, however, originally were related to the realities of a particular point in time and their validity was manifest in particular politico-geographical frames of reference. Often their disciples have been led astray by an unwillingness to recognize the factors of time and change which erode any concept in the fluctuating realm of political geography. Furthermore, both these concepts of national power politics stem from the school of "geopolitical" thought which goes beyond *objective* study of political and geographic factors and is an applied pseudo-science with an axe to grind! The geopolitical school of thought implies that geographical factors so completely determine the destiny of states that no room is left for courses which contradict the dictates of the geographical environment. From this it is but a small step to a philosophy which claims for itself the right to predict the course of political events, and thus dictate to statesmen and soldiers alike their strategic decision. Both concepts have used environmental factors for the justification of power-political and expansionist aims.

To present the foregoing criticism of the philosophies underlying both the doctrine of sea power and the continental concept of national power is not to say that the conclusions derived from geopolitical thinking necessarily are erroneous within the framework of any particular set of politico-geographical realities. It is to say that such conclusions should be accepted as immutable principles with utmost caution, and that their currency and validity should be re-evaluated constantly in the process of strategic decision-making. In the light of the hard realities of the world as it

exists today, the current validity of both the sea power and heartland theses is open to legitimate question.¹ Let us summarize the specific weaknesses which we now find in each.

Validity of the Heartland Thesis. The notion of a *strategic heartland* not accessible to sea power no longer is valid. Sea power, in its broad and true sense, is not confined to the limits of ocean and river surface navigation. Strategically, East Europe may be more accessible from Washington than was the Mediterranean at the beginning of the century.

The strategically dominant position of the heartland vis-a-vis the maritime periphery of the Eurasian land mass is not proved, historically, but rather is surmised from the fact that the heartland has served as a base for numerous successful but rather localized incursions in the direction of the seacoast.

The advantage of "interior lines" radiating out from the heartland could be illusory.² In a contest between continental land-based power and sea power, such "lines" represent a dispersal rather than a concentration of strength, whereas converging "lines" of maritime power directed toward the continent from the surrounding ocean represent a progressive concentration of force as they approach the heartland. The relative advantage, if any, inherent in such an array of opposing forces on a world-wide scale is not clearly established, and should be regarded more as a function of current technology, weaponry, and strategic initiative than as a fixed strategic factor.

There is little common ground on which to dispute the contention that if a single great nation should achieve domination over the entire world continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa, that nation would then have the best geographic position combined with the greatest manpower pool and wealthiest resource base that ever has been in the hands of a potential world conquerer. It is the *second* proposition of the Mackinder thesis — "Who rules the

¹Ernst B. Haas and Allen S. Whiting, *Dynamics of International Relations*, p. 84.

²Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, p. 40.

Heartland commands the World-Island"¹ — whose validity is belied both by historic and current results of the impinging of sea power and continental power upon the periphery of Eurasia!

Validity of Sea Power Philosophy. Sea power doctrine, as it so often has been presented in the past, has its soft spots too. It is not inevitable that sea power will have the last word in its rivalry with continental land power. A national posture closely tied to a policy of imperialism, and the exploitation of colonial markets and resources, clearly is incompatible with the international political realities of today,² even though the utility of bases and the requirement for markets and materials remain undiminished.³

Command of the sea by battle-fleet supremacy also is an outmoded concept. The time has arrived when command of the sea is no longer the exclusive province of battle fleets, nor even of navies. To deny sea lines of communication to the enemy, and to exploit them to its own advantage, a nation now must control the air and space above the sea and the water below the surface as well as the surface of the sea itself. Because of the speed, range and destructiveness of modern aircraft and missiles, and because of the ability of the submarine to avoid detection, reliance cannot be placed upon interception of these vehicles over or under the surface of the sea. Command of the sea requires control of the shores, or the denial of these shores to the enemy, as well as supremacy on the sea itself. To "close" a sea area by controlling its shores and thus denying an enemy bases thereon, makes command of that sea area easier to establish and more effective as well. Sea power, in its true sense, always has transcended pure naval power. But now, even the military component of sea power must consist of a team of land, air, and naval forces whose task of first priority is to command the sea — that is, to deny to the enemy in time of war, and to exploit in the national interest at

¹Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 150.

²Dean Acheson, *Power and Diplomacy*, pp. 116-118.

³Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., and Richard C. Snyder, *An Introduction to American Foreign Policy*, pp. 128-130.

all times, the sea including the waters below its surface and the air and space above.

With the foregoing description of the military component of sea power in mind, we might look again at another questionable tenet of traditional sea power doctrine: the controlling influence of naval operations upon land campaigns. When command of the sea rests upon supremacy above, on, and below the surface, and upon control of the far shore of the sea as well, it seems axiomatic that the exercise of this degree of command of the sea *will* continue to exert a controlling influence upon land campaigns, at least in land areas contiguous to the sea, whether the assumption that pure naval operations alone could continue to exert such influence upon land campaigns is valid or not

So far we have examined, rather sketchily to be sure, the heartland thesis and the traditional doctrine of sea power. Comparing the two, we have probed some of the apparent weaknesses of each. We have seen that the doctrine of sea power must be updated if it is to have meaning and validity for the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. Now we should turn our attention to some strategic philosophies enjoying current advocacy in the United States today.

IV. CURRENT UNITED STATES STRATEGIC DOCTRINE

Development. Strategy aims at developing and utilizing material and human resources so as to maximize a nation's total effectiveness in the pursuit of its own national interests, in its dealing with other nations.

In the United States, the Army, the Naval Services, and the Air Force all have developed bodies of strategic doctrine. Each Service has tended to develop its own somewhat independently of the others, for the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff are, after all, relatively recent phenomena. Each Service has taken a somewhat parochial approach, tending always to assign greatest import to those strategic tasks which it can perform best or to which it can contribute the most. This has

had the one distinct advantage, at least, that no military task — land, sea, or air — is likely to have been overlooked. Let us be somewhat pragmatic, then, and test the current validity and applicability of modern sea power doctrine by laying alongside it the strategic doctrines advocated by the several Military Services.

Air Force Doctrine. Advocates of Air Force doctrine contend that technological developments have added a third dimension to military conflict and that military operations on the surface of the land or sea cannot succeed in a hostile aerial environment. On this basis, proponents of air power argue that the primary protective shield available to the United States is supremacy in the air around and above the approaches to the United States, for without control of the air no hostile nation could conceive of a naval or military invasion. The security of the nation is seen to rest upon the state of its air power relative to that of other nations.¹

Air forces are seen as much more than defensive instruments, however, for only through the air can the United States strike directly at a nation in possession of the Eurasian heartland and surrounded by a cordon of buffer states. Air Force doctrine thus inexorably leads to concentration on long-range strategic air capability, and a "counter-force" strategy designed to deter rival nations from taking hostile action against the United States and to project United States military strength across the sea if war should occur. The need for bases overseas is inherent in the doctrine, both to improve the effectiveness of air striking power and to achieve dispersal as passive protection against surprise attack.

Army Doctrine. The basic proposition advanced by Army strategic doctrine is that only military land forces can seize and hold territory. Air and sea forces can protect friendly territory by interdiction, and can inflict damage upon enemy-held territory, but neither can win a decisive victory over land power. Particularly

¹Colonel Jerry D. Page and Colonel Royal H. Roussel, "What is Air Power," *Air University Quarterly Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, Summer, 1955, p. 7.

in limited war, the deployment of land forces can be opposed effectively only by other land forces. The very existence of long-range strategic air capability on both sides increases the probability that the balance of military power ultimately will be determined by the effectiveness of other military forces, whether unlimited strategic air strikes on the respective homeland occur or not.

Army strategic doctrine does not advance as the only possible strategic objective those enemy military forces stationed in the Eurasian heartland. On the contrary, likely physical objectives are seen to lie in localities on the periphery, where indigenous forces are unable to defend successfully by themselves, but where they can put up enough of a defense so that the interposition of United States ground forces need not come too late to be decisive. Thus Army doctrine emphasizes powerful, highly mobile ground formations, supported by adequate air and sea lift in being, as an essential instrument of national policy in peacetime and as the most likely *ultima ratio* in war. Required military task forces will include elements of all Services, but the Army's contribution will be paramount.¹

Naval Doctrine. The foundation of naval strategic doctrine lies in the assertion that in neither time of peace nor of war can the United States live in and of herself, but that she is dependent economically and militarily upon maritime transportation for which the protection of sea lines of communication is a prerequisite. Close ties with friendly maritime nations throughout the world is considered essential. United States national strategy must be a maritime strategy. Naval defense, to prevent invasion, and a naval counteroffensive capability to strike an enemy's home bases are imperative. A formidable fleet is a strong deterrent to war. It also is insurance against disruption of essential maritime commerce.

The Navy assigns itself the primary strategic mission of gaining and maintaining command of the sea.² It has four es-

¹"Mission for the Army: The Winning of World War III," *Army Combat Forces Journal*, Vol. VI, No. 7, February 1955.

²*Naval Orientation*, NavPers 16138-C, 1955, p. 13.

sential tasks to perform. *First*, it must maintain the security of important materials entering or being exported from the United States. *Secondly*, in time of war, it must assure the safe transport of ground forces to theaters of operation overseas. *Thirdly*, it must maintain sea communications among friendly and allied nations. And, *fourthly*, it must be prepared to contribute directly to the destruction or defeat of enemy forces within range of naval power projected from the sea.

According to naval doctrine the main role of the Navy, stated in its simplest terms, has been and still is to control the sea — to be able to use those ocean areas needed by the United States and her allies, and to deny to the enemy those ocean areas of critical importance to him.¹

Collation. As might be expected, the several Service strategic doctrines have much in common. They may seem somewhat parochial, to be sure, but each represents a distillate of the results of serious study, by dedicated officers, of the capabilities, limitations, and missions of separate Services, all of which are charged with the security of the United States as their supreme responsibility. None of these doctrines, at least as stated in the foregoing paragraphs, presents a complete and balanced national military strategic concept. Each, through its own emphasis, calls attention to a facet of over-all strategy which is not fully developed in the others. Yet, there is a thread of consistency and continuity running through them all.

Not one of the Service doctrines questions the need to prevent hostile use of the approaches to the United States, whether above, on, or under the surrounding ocean. All agree on the need for maintaining close ties with friendly maritime nations on the periphery of the Eurasian mainland, whether for bases, or to sustain commerce, or to deny these peripheral lands to a hostile power.

¹Admiral Robert B. Carney, "Role of the Navy in a Future War," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. VI, No. 10, June 1954, p. 5.

All Service doctrines agree on the need for a posture of strength as a deterrent to war. Although the emphasis may vary as to means, all agree that there is a requirement for being able to project United States power beyond the sea — through the air above the sea, from the surface or from below the surface of the sea, or by ground forces transported safely across and landed from the sea.

Thus the strategic concept which emerges does not deny, but rather substantiates entirely, the applicability of a modern sea power doctrine to the strategy of the United States today! Friendly nations have long since supplanted colonies as markets, suppliers of imports, and bases from which United States military strength can be supported overseas. Battle fleets alone no longer can command the sea, when technological developments have made the space above the surface and the waters below it as much a part of the sea as the surface itself. Speeds attainable above the sea, and the detection problems encountered below its surface, are making command of the sea more and more dependent upon controlling the far shore and upon denying any hostile power the bases from which to challenge supremacy on the sea. In light of these developments, that which each Service can do best, as reflected in its own strategic doctrine, becomes a major contribution to the military element of the sea power of the United States.

Command of the sea may no longer be exclusively a Navy task. Perhaps it really never was. But sea power still depends upon command of the sea, and the exercise of dominant sea power in its most modern and highly developed form is implicit in the strategic doctrine of each Military Service. Indeed, this is the thread of continuity which binds together and provides a basic compatibility to these superficially conflicting dogmas.

V. PRINCIPLES OF MODERN MARITIME STRATEGY

Maritime Coalition. Politically, the dominant sea power normally attracts into its orbit virtually all the maritime nations not in direct conflict with it — both allies and friendly neutrals whose maritime interests are subject to the dominant sea power.

The United States is, and for the foreseeable future must continue to be, the dominant maritime nation of the world. This is a novel peacetime situation, historically. Until recently, the United States was content to pursue her foreign policies against an accepted background of British domination of the sea¹ — a domination at once dictated by the interests and made possible by the resources of the far-flung British colonial empire. Now a prostrate victor of two world wars, Britain is deprived simultaneously of much of her incentive as well as the resources required to maintain her dominant position among maritime world powers.

Opposition to expansionist ambitions of the current occupants of the Eurasian heartland must be built around a coalition base of maritime resources.² Any deterioration in United States domination of the sea will cause a deterioration in her influence and in the maritime power alignment.

In the face of modern political nationalism throughout the world, the fostering of interdependence and economic internationalism among maritime powers is highly desirable. This is indeed power doctrine of an earlier day was based!

Command of the Sea and Marginal Utility. Nations depending upon the use of the sea for their economy and security must insure to themselves that measure of control of the sea which is commensurate with their need. Complete control of the sea is a rarely attained ideal in times of conflict,³ as surreptitious use of localized sea areas is possible even by nations vastly inferior in total sea power. With modern developments in aircraft, submarines, and missiles, this limited use of sea areas by inferior maritime powers will become of greater and greater significance.

Control must be maintained over areas dictated by the strategic concept that generates the requirement, and over areas wide enough to prevent projection of enemy military forces from areas

¹George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*, pp. 4-5.

²William W. Kaufmann, ed., *Military Policy and National Security*, Chapter 6, "Coalitions and Alliances," by Roger Hilsman, pp. 162-193.
a far cry from the philosophy of imperialism upon which the sea

³Admiral Robert B. Carney, "The Principles of Sea Power," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 8, August 1953, p. 823.

in which firm control is not maintained by friendly forces. But it must be recognized by the strategist that combined naval, air, and land forces, from a geographically advantageous position, can achieve control of local areas for an inferior sea power, or exact a great price from the dominant sea power which chooses to challenge in these restricted areas. A dominant sea power must concentrate a great force, and accept severe losses, to wrest local sea control in areas where the opposing forces enjoy great natural advantages. This is no less true in limited war than in global war, and the significance may be much greater in limited war when the entire issue may be decided precisely in the localized area chosen for its advantages by the inferior maritime power.

These practical "facts of life" bear heavily upon the applicability of the principle of concentration of military force to achieve command of the sea in any specific situation or locality. Practicable control of the sea is limited to that degree of control required by over-all strategy. The concept of *marginal utility* must be always a guiding principle in strategic planning for control of the sea.¹

The Strategic Objective. Strategic objectives are, of course, dictated by national aspirations. Sea power, as far as the United States is concerned, is a means to an end. Likewise, domination of the entire Eurasian continent by land power based in the heartland is a means to an end — world domination.

In its present phase the contest between continental and maritime powers is not a direct conflict over command of the sea, but is rather a contest for control of the periphery of Eurasia. Just as the means of gaining control of the peripheral lands by a heartland nation is land power, so the means of retaining control of these vital territories by maritime nations is sea power.

If the periphery of the continent is controlled by maritime nations, the heartland is encircled and contained — perhaps even dominated. What is not so obvious is that if this same Eurasian periphery should fall under the control of the heartland, the pres-

¹Bernard Brodie, "Strategy as a Science," *World Politics*, Vol. I, No. 4 July 1949.

ent great world sea power base — the United States — then would be encircled, contained, and probably dominated by a continental power which itself could be a great maritime power as well.¹ We are used to thinking in terms of plane surfaces, but such thinking is not applicable to global strategy. It may seem strange that the line inscribed by the periphery of the world island can encircle the lands on either side of it, but while such an assertion may not be absolutely accurate from the standpoint of geometry it is nevertheless quite true as a strategic principle. The seas which wash the Eurasian coasts bound the Americas. Dominant Eurasian sea power in the East could close the Pacific, just as dominant sea power based on the shores of Europe could deny the Atlantic to nations of the Western Hemisphere.

The strategic key to world domination is not the Eurasian heartland, nor is it sea power based upon a mighty offshore island. The key is possession or control of the Eurasian periphery, in conjunction with either of the other two.² Captain B. H. Liddell Hart has observed that "the true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this."³ In the contest between heartland and maritime powers, the side which establishes undisputed control of the maritime periphery of the continent will have achieved this aim.

The physical objective of United States strategy is clearly discernable. It is the maritime periphery of the Eurasian continent. The most fundamental national interests of the United States depend for their attainment upon the control of these peripheral lands by friendly maritime nations.

Significance. Recognition of the true nature of United States strategy, of its objective, and of its fundamental principles and

¹Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, pp. 194-195.

²Hans W. Weigert, Henry Brodie, Edward W. Doherty, John R. Fernstrom, Eric Fischer, and Dudley Kirk, *Principles of Political Geography*, p. 227.

³B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy, The Indirect Approach*, p. 339.

requirements can do much to insure the success of that strategy. Not only a maritime strategy but any strategy can be pursued most effectively when it does not have to compete with rival strategic concepts for available national resources — material, technological, manpower. Indeed, Mahan warned that even in his day of relatively inexpensive instruments of national power no nation could afford to support contending strategic philosophies when “the contents of the National purse are distributed, instead of being concentrated upon a leading conception, adopted after due deliberation, and maintained with conviction.”¹

Sea power can be a mere abstract conception. For the United States it also can be a unified guiding strategic doctrine, focusing attention and effort on the most rewarding means of pursuing national interests and achieving national goals. But when sea power is equated with the size of the Navy (or, worse yet, with the relative size of a single component of the fleet), when continental strategy becomes linked with the capabilities of the United States Army, and when strategic bombing or massive retaliation delivered by air forces is assigned the stature of a third strategic concept and proposed as a possible substitute for the other two, then indeed is the true meaning of sea power lost and the Nation saddled with competing and ineffectual fragments of strategic philosophy which it can ill afford!

The sea power concept of national security is a great deal more than the mere product of an exercise in abstract thinking. Its practical utility can be demonstrated by reference to a recent specific case in which its implications either were not understood or were overlooked entirely. Victory in World War II brought the United States to a commanding position in world affairs. Within five years thereafter China had been lost and, with it, a large segment of the key physical objective of maritime strategy. As an alternative to this loss, continental strategy offered an unacceptable land war waged on the Chinese mainland. Strategic bombing of the Chinese, whose domination by an unfriendly regime the United States sought to prevent, offered no solution to the

¹Captain A. T. Mahan, *Interest of America in Sea Power*, p. 175.

problem. A mighty deep-water Navy had no means of defeating the Chinese Communists or of taking their territory.

The China coast went by default, and the whole power alignment of maritime nations deteriorated markedly, because strategic decisions had to be made without benefit of a comprehensive strategic doctrine. No Service doctrine focused attention upon the strategic significance of the China coast by permitting its identification as an important segment of the real physical objective of national strategy. No single Service doctrine provided an acceptable concept for retaining control of the China coast. In the absence of any doctrine providing either the reason or the means to hold it, an important position on the periphery of the continent was abandoned without a contest.

The Chinese coastland need not have been lost. An appreciation of the principles of maritime strategy as set forth in the foregoing paragraphs, including a recognition of the true physical objective of such a strategy, would have dictated that the Chinese seacoast should not have been relinquished. At the same time it would have showed the way in which it might have been held.

The real issue was not whether Nationalist China could defeat the Communists, and reunify the Nation, with or without United States intervention. Yet, it was precisely upon a negative determination as to this issue that a momentous strategic decision regarding China was made.¹

The pertinent question — the real issue — was whether the free coalition of maritime nations should, and whether they could, retain control of the China coast. Since control of all of China was not essential to the United States' interests, no "all or nothing" choice need have been made. Major rivers and ports could have been held by relatively limited land, sea, and air forces supported from across the sea — in other words, by sea power. Friendly sea power could have been maintained on the coast of China indefinitely, sustaining a friendly maritime nation extending from

¹Dean Acheson, "American Policy Toward China," *Department of State Publication* 4255, p. 48.

Shanghai to Canton with its capital on Formosa. The effort would have been a mere fraction of that soon to be required to restore the balance in Korea, and certainly no greater than the continuing effort which "neutralization" of the Formosa Straits has demanded ever since.

The loss of the China seacoast came about by strategic decision, not by defeat or any real threat at that time from superior land power. Such are the costly mistakes which result from failure to appreciate the significance of sea power to the United States, failure to understand its principles and to be guided by them in the formulation of strategic doctrine, and failure to apply these principles in making strategic decisions.

VI. SUMMARY

Of the various politico-geographical theories that have developed out of studies of history, international politics, and geography, those which undertake to assess the relative national power which is inherent in maritime and continental positions, respectively, have been among the most intriguing. From them have grown conflicting doctrines explaining, justifying, and predicting events in international power politics upon the basis of geographic environment, especially upon the factors of location and space. Serious and critical analysis of these doctrines clearly shows that, while they are of value in providing an insight into the interplay of geographical and political factors, they include speculations and assumptions which are not borne out by objective research. Particularly dangerous to the strategist is the element of environmental determinism inherent in such geopolitical manifestoes as American Manifest Destiny, the Heartland Theory of World Domination, or the Ultimate Ascendancy of Sea Power Over Land Power. Time and technology continuously reshape the tools and the environment of power politics. The strategist who accepts any concept of environmental determinism, which cannot be demonstrated in a relatively stable environment, comes perilously close to the fatal error of assuming the very point at issue between his nation and her antagonists.

The several strategic doctrines developed by the Military Services of the United States reflect a high degree of parochialism, and are superficially conflicting. Basically, however, they are complementary rather than conflicting, each highlighting the contribution to overall strategy which a single Service is most capable of making. Taken either individually or collectively, they are inadequate to the task of national strategy in that they focus attention on bits and pieces of an overall strategic concept rather than upon the whole.

The security and well-being of the United States, as is the case with any maritime nation, depend upon the exercise of a degree of control over her lines of communication and the avenues of approach to her borders. These critical lines of communication, and avenues of approach, are to be found above, below, and on the surface of the sea. The degree of control required is not absolute, but varies as to time and locality. It is that degree of control consistent with the fundamental national interest — that which will permit the use by the United States and her allies of critical sea areas, and deny to an enemy the use of those areas critical to him.

Because complete control of all the sea will be an unattainable ideal even in a conflict with an inferior maritime power, the allocation of available resources for the task of controlling the sea at specified times and places is a function of greatest strategic importance. The probable utility of any additional increment of sea control always must be weighed against the utility which the additional increment of resource or effort would have if it were applied to another essential strategic task or toward attainment of another national objective. This principle applies to the allocation of available means at all stages — from decisions concerning the peacetime national budget to decisions concerning the deployment of available military forces in being in time of conflict.

The most serious threat to exercise by the United States of that degree of control of the sea requisite to the pursuit of her national interests lies in the possibility that a nation or coal-

tion, broadly based in the Eurasian Continent, will seize control of the maritime periphery of the World Continent and become dominant on the sea as well as on the Continent. The primary politico-geographic objective of United States national strategy thus is clearly defined — it is the control, by the United States or friendly maritime nations, of the entire maritime periphery of the Eurasian land mass, in order to assure to the United States and her allies the economic, political, and military bases from which the requisite control of the sea can be achieved, and to deny to any heartland power the geographic positions upon which the construction of such sea power bases could be accomplished.

The effective and prudent use of United States' dominant sea power is the only way of preserving the foundations upon which that very sea power rests. History teaches that once sea power is lost by a maritime nation, it is seldom regained. Carefully cultivated and wisely used, sea power in its broadest sense can be the self-sustaining means by which the United States may achieve its national goals of security and prosperity in a relatively orderly world.

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